



# Online Finding Aids Reveal Genealogical Gems

Diane L. Richard looks at some lesser-known resources found in manuscript & archival collection holdings

## Introduction

Finding previously unpublished content for a genealogical journal and in support of our research is like hunting for gemstones. The holdings of archives and repositories include some real gems of unpublished, invaluable, and often overlooked records. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ledgers (business, physician, etc.), petitions, treasurer's & comptroller's records, poor records, election records, Red Cross membership rolls, and stock marks are just a few of the discovered treasures.

Researchers less frequently look at such records because they often are NOT indexed nor arranged alphabetically; most of these are presented chronologically. Sometimes we find mentions of women and children – family members not as likely to be documented historically.

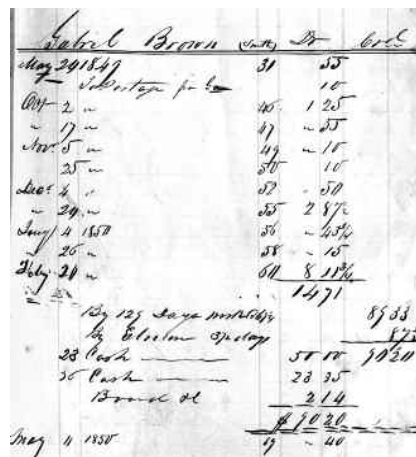
Besides mentioning those often underrepresented in the records, sometimes disasters have befallen a community or a building (e.g., courthouse) and official records have been destroyed. The materials held in archives, regardless of who created, if they exist for a particular county at a particular time where record losses are widespread, they might help fill in some gaps. They might document who was living in the community, with whom were they interacting and conducting business, the newspapers they read, the churches they attended, and much, more! These often include details that are always cherished in our research and which are even more important when little official documentation is found.

As the editor of two genealogical journals, I have fallen in love with seeking out material unfamiliar to most researchers and yet invaluable. Let's explore ledgers (aka account books) as a type of record where I have found gems that genealogists will want to explore! I will also mention a few other types of documents that you will want to seek out.

## Value of Ledgers

Ledgers are a type of document not often examined by researchers. Let's talk about why ledgers can be indispensable to your research.

Have you explored ledgers? You can learn so much about your family and the neighborhood through these records. Store, business (e.g., hotels, livery, stable, distillery, blacksmith, etc.), and health-related (e.g., Physician, Insane Asylum, etc.) ledgers can link family members and provide many interesting details invaluable to your family history narrative. Relationships are sometimes noted – e.g., Tom son of William. Slaves (and location) are sometimes called out in physician's ledgers



Entry from Stowe Family Ledger (Stowe Family Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC) – entries mentioned occupations, whether a widow or not, where lived, etc.

as they were treated. Deaths or weddings might be noted in a livery ledger as a horse is rented. Distillery ledgers show that everyone seemed to buy whisky – including preachers and physicians. Depending on where you lived and when, different types of goods were bought and sold at the local stores.

Though many ledgers are only available off-line, you can determine their existence online! You won't regret looking at a ledger. Even if you don't find entries for your family, you'll certainly gain some perspective on the community in which they lived. And, don't assume that everyone



just transacted business in their county or state!

Besides placing in space and time, what might you discover?

- Relationships (children to parents)
- Hired hands
- Slaves
- Records of deaths and marriages
- Nature of a business endeavor
- Religious and political beliefs

### Select Ledger Types

Some ledger types that have proven to be useful in recent projects include:

- **Physician** – slaves & location, deaths in a family
- **Livery** – attending weddings, funerals, church, etc.
- **Blacksmith** – purchases/services made
- **Distillery/General Store** – connections to family members; possibly hired hands and slaves also listed
- **Hotel** – individuals who lived nearby and far stayed at hotels (as day-tripping was much more of a challenge)
- **Insane asylum** – linking patients to family
- **Post Office** – based on subscriptions, you might learn religion, politics, other locales connected

to, interests, etc. [Researching Postal Records, Diane L. Richard, *Your Genealogy Today*, November/December 2017, goes into these records in some detail.]

- **Insurance Company** – details on businesses/structures that are insured and individuals insured; can include records of slaves (as insured or as claims made upon death) [Slave Insurance Records, Diane L. Richard, *Internet Genealogy*, September/October 2017, goes into the latter records in some detail.]



Ledger (Benjamin Austin and Henry Reid Papers, 1758-1870 and undated, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC) where relationships (especially "son") are explicitly mentioned.

### Select Other Record Types Containing Gems

Ledgers aren't the only types of records found in manuscript and archival collections that you might find helpful! Here are a few other types of records that can provide gems. We don't have the space to explore each of these and how they might be important to your family history research, in any depth, but keep them in mind.

- **Petitions** (often presented to legislature, government, or other entities)
  - Divorce
  - Revolutionary War
  - Roads, Mills, etc.
  - Name Changes
  - County border changes
- **Poorhouse records** – relationships, casket making, funeral, and death dates
- **Treasurer's and Comptroller's records** [NC entities that handled money, aka track the money!] – insolvents, sheriff's records, spirituous liquor licenses, court suits
- **Civil War** – many records including appeals for provisions for indigent families of currently serving soldiers

- **Red Cross records** [for WWI and other time periods] – underrepresented in the records women & unable to serve men

- **Road, Mill & Bridge records** – it took a community to create & maintain

- **Divorce records** — divorce in the early 18th century and earlier was not the "no fault" version we are familiar with. Many in a community might petition their support of the dissolution of a marriage.



Insane Asylum Patient Ledger documenting that Elizabeth D. Suit of Vance County died 8 May 1888 (Eugene Grissom Papers, 1875-1887, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC). Death certificates in North Carolina did not start until 1913 making this entry very valuable.

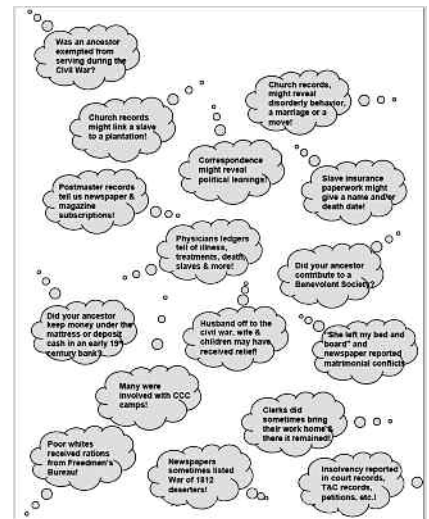
- **Church records** – membership lists, minutes, birth/marriage/death notices, etc.
- **School records & apprentice records** – children linked to individuals who are not their parents
- **Private correspondence** – mentions of the community
- **Bank Records**
- **Business Records** Officials who “took work home” and it stayed with the family
- **Service & Fraternal club records** – death notices with varying details
- **Newspapers** – murders, runaway slaves, marital issues (spouses discounting one another), lost items, court suit announcements, etc.
- **Institutional records** (e.g., Insane Asylum) link

patients to family and often reports their deaths

- **Benevolent Society Records**
- *And so much more!*

## How to Locate Manuscript & Archive Collections

Now that we’ve talked about how great manuscript collections can be and the gems to be found in them, we need to discuss how you discover where they are located. This is about using online resources to discover what on-the-ground physical archives are available to us. Often, online finding aids will indicate if material has been digitized. Exhaust what you can do online before visiting an archive. This way, when you do visit, you can focus on the material where your options for acquiring it are limited to on-the-ground research, whether by you or your proxy.



LEFT: The signatories on a 1786 road petition. (Lincoln County, Misc, Road Orders, Petitions & Overseers, 1781-1809, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, NC) Robt Abernathy identifies himself as a hatter and we also find Robt Abernathy Senr and Junr also listed [a family affair!] RIGHT: A page from a divorce petition filed with the NC Legislature in 1810 from Martin County that goes on for 4 pages! (General Assembly Session Records, Nov-Dec 1810, Box 3, Folder: Petitions – Divorce, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, N.C.) Many individuals from the community signed in favor of this divorce. Its value is that it documents a county which suffered a courthouse fire in 1884 which destroyed many records.

## Concluding Thoughts and Rules of Thumb

There are many more different types of records than most researchers look at regularly, especially if they are relying on Ancestry.com, FamilySearch, and other online sources of information. Many individuals and enterprises and organizations created ledgers and maintained account books. We have often heard it said, “follow the money”, and that is definitely true when researching our ancestors. The surviving paperwork often deals with financial matters.

Just learning that your ancestor shopped at a certain store, engaged the services of a certain blacksmith, signed a petition in support of someone’s divorce or to get a new and more convenient road created, received certain newspapers, will (1) place your ancestor in place and time, (2) tell you something about interests, occupation, etc., and (3) may lead to new avenues of discovery.

### My rules of thumb are:

- (1) If records exist for a certain time and place where/when I know or suspect my ancestors lived, they could have relevance! They are worth exploring.



## Useful Links to Locating Online Manuscript and Archive Collections

(1) Archivegrid, <http://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid> — think of it as a catalog for archival and manuscript collection finding aids. NOTE: Not all repositories have their holdings catalogued in Archivegrid, but it is an excellent place to start as many do.

### Select US Federal Records

- (1) National Archives (NARA), [www.archives.gov/research](http://www.archives.gov/research)
- (2) Library of Congress (LOC), [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)
- (3) Smithsonian Institution Archives, <http://siarchives.si.edu>

### Select Virginia Records (example of state repositories)

- (1) Library of Virginia, [www.lva.virginia.gov](http://www.lva.virginia.gov)
- (2) The Virginia Historical Society, [www.vahistorical.org](http://www.vahistorical.org)
- (3) Virginia Theological Seminary, [www.vts.edu/page/Resources/Seminary-Archives/Archives](http://www.vts.edu/page/Resources/Seminary-Archives/Archives)
- (4) Germanna Foundation, <http://germanna.org>
- (5) John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg, <http://research.history.org/library>
- (6) University of Virginia Library, [www.library.virginia.edu](http://www.library.virginia.edu)
- (7) Earl Gregg Swem Library, The College of William & Mary, <http://libraries.wm.edu/research/special-collections>
- (8) Thomas Balch Library, [www.leesburgva.gov/government/departments/thomas-balch-library](http://www.leesburgva.gov/government/departments/thomas-balch-library)
- (9) The Mariner's Museum Library, [www.marinersmuseum.org/library](http://www.marinersmuseum.org/library)
- (10) Library of Congress, Religion Collections in Libraries and Archives; A Guide to Resources in Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia – the Virginia page, [www.loc.gov/rr/main/religion/virginia.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/main/religion/virginia.html)
- (11) Check out the Virginia Genealogical Society list of Libraries, Special Collections, Archives and Repositories, [www.vgs.org/research-aids/miscellaneous/ra-repositories#](http://www.vgs.org/research-aids/miscellaneous/ra-repositories#)

### Select Canadian Records ...

- (1) Library and Archives of Canada/Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, [www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Pages/home.aspx](http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/Pages/home.aspx)
- (2) Archives of Ontario, [www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/index.aspx](http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/en/index.aspx) (other provinces also have archives)
- (3) Archives de Montréal, <http://archivesdemontreal.ica-atom.org> (other cities also have archives)
- (4) Royal Canadian Mounted Police/Gendarmerie royale du Canada, [www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/genealogy-and-archival-research](http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/genealogy-and-archival-research)
- (5) Canadian Council of Archives, [www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/cain.html](http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/cain.html)

- (2) Just because a record is not indexed or transcribed does NOT mean it's impossible to look at and use. Once you figure out the system used by the author, most records are organized in a certain fashion and you can often skim them. Many volumes DO have indexes and that can greatly speed up determining whether your family is listed.
- (3) Many records were created by the members of a community. When you limit your research to federal, state and local repositories, you are ignoring all the records created which just might have found a home outside the state or county of interest.
- (4) Increasingly, repositories are digitizing their manuscript materials. We can do more and more research in our jammies.
- (5) Even if records are not digitized, just knowing that they exist puts you in a position where you can travel to the repository or hire someone to access the materials on your behalf.

Go hunting for gemstones in archives and manuscript collections! I think you will be amazed at the types of records you might find, the stories they tell, and possibly find some unexpected minutiae about your ancestor's lives. ☺

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