

“Shhhh! I’ll Let You In On a Secret: Our Female Ancestors Are Found in Ledgers” — Part 1

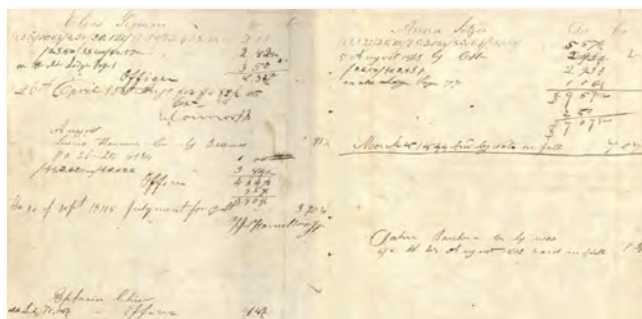
By Diane L. Richard

Introduction

It is easy as a researcher to overlook our female ancestors. Many records do mention them, more than most researchers realize. We are not talking birth, marriage, and death or records linked to their parents, husbands, and/or children, and records where they are documented in their own right. We are NOT talking about official and government-created records where women are typically underrepresented; the “men” in their lives are reported in these record types. We DO find women mentioned in the ledgers and account books associated with businesses and organizations, so those will be our focus.

Part one of this two-part article picks up where “Online Finding Aids Reveal Genealogical Gems” by Diane L. Richard, *Internet Genealogy*, December/January 2018, starts. The mentioned article explores private collections, including ledgers, talks about various ledger types and the useful information found in them, and shares a few examples. Now we’ll talk specifically about the women mentioned in ledgers.

First, let’s talk about why ledgers can be invaluable to researching anyone, including your female ancestors! 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, Midwife, Insane Asylum, etc.) ledgers can link family members and provide many interesting details invaluable to your family history narrative. Sometimes relationships are noted – e.g., Elizabeth, mother of Ann & David. Treated enslaved (and location) are sometimes called out in physician’s ledgers. Deaths or weddings might be noted in a livery ledger for a rented horse. Distillery ledgers show that everyone seemed to buy whisky – including preachers and physicians. Depending on where you lived and when, different goods were bought



A selection from Younts General Store, 1843-1845, NC, for Anna Setzer showing a simple entry.

Date	Amount	Balance
May 29 1849	32	20
Sept 10 "	43	1 50
" 19 "	45	2 18 1/4
Nov 23 "	48	9 11
July 17 1850	58	3 67
" 26 "	"	1 02
Aug "	51	9 11

A selection from Stowe Ledger, Stovesville, south of Belmont, NC, showing entry for “Widow” Ann Hijer, though notice the lack of details.



Ledgers do not always contain just transactions! This doodle from Yount’s Mercantile ledger was not uncommon.

Some aspects of ledgers to keep in mind:

- (1) How is the ledger organized? Chronological, customer accounts, summary lists referring to predecessor ledgers, or other.
- (2) What type of ledger is it? Customer accounts with credit (Cr) and debit (Dr) columns often on two facing pages though sometimes on just one page, or cash-in-hand type account (usually chronological across all customers)
- (3) Ledgers with customer accounts are more likely to have an index, not always complete, at the front (or back), or group accounts by the 1st letter of the surname. DO check for an index before you start exploring any ledger.
- (4) Because cash accounts are typically just grouped by "day," no customers' index is included.

It is not unusual for a general store ledger to also reflect sharecropping arrangements, renters and their payments, post-office-related activities, payments for labor/services performed (as an account credit against goods purchased), and more. In fact, a Burke County, NC, liquor ledger frequently linked family members to one another, as in sons to father. These same records also reflected that the father hired his sons out to the proprietor, which was credited to his account. So, do not assume what you may find in the ledger for a general store. It might also include doodles, hand-writing practice, homework, genealogy details, etc.

As part of a study into a ledger of William Ramsay, Alexandria, VA, 1753-1756, <https://tinyurl.com/457b6das>, a list of "departments" was created to reflect the goods sold at his store. This list gives

you a sense of the breadth of what a general merchant's store may have handled. There is also a "women's dataset" in excel format, <https://tinyurl.com/5ex5nzw>, which lists all the women customers. The Smithsonian separately created a fascinating exhibit revolving around his store and some things to consider as you explore store ledgers, <https://tinyurl.com/4fwb6p52>. Lastly, there is an article, Baddledors, twig whips, and yards of thunder and lightning: Decoding a colonial ledger,"

Shop by Department			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Handkerchief ◦ Ivory Comb ◦ Ivory Fan ◦ Knee Buckles • Agricultural: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Sabletree ◦ Scythe • Alcohol: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Rum • Building: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Glass Pane ◦ Hinge ◦ Latch ◦ Lock ◦ Nails ◦ Rope ◦ Steel ◦ Tar • Clothing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Child's Stays ◦ Cotton Gown ◦ Cravat ◦ Garter ◦ Hose ◦ Leather Braces ◦ Small Cane Hoon ◦ Waistcoat ◦ Woman's ◦ Petticoat ◦ Woman's Spurs • Craft: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Chest Lock ◦ Indigo ◦ Lead • Entertainment: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Cards ◦ Violin • Foodways: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Bacon (Bacon) ◦ Coffee Pot ◦ Decanter ◦ Dessert Spoon ◦ Dish ◦ Fork & Knife ◦ Half Gallon Measure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Iron Pot ◦ Mortar and Pestle ◦ Powder Quartz ◦ Plates ◦ Punch Bowl ◦ Stoneware Mug ◦ Tea Kettle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Bible ◦ Blank Book ◦ Ink Pot ◦ Inkpowder ◦ Mathematical Instruments ◦ Paper ◦ Pencil ◦ Penknife ◦ Royal Primer ◦ Ropes ◦ Sailing Wax 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Ribbon ◦ Silk Fringe ◦ Small Scissors ◦ Thimble
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Footwear: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Best Steel Shoe ◦ Buckles ◦ Shoe Buckle ◦ Woman's Best Shoes • Grocery: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Alcohol ◦ Butter ◦ Cheese ◦ Cinnamon ◦ Clove ◦ Coffee ◦ Ginger (Rice) ◦ Molasses ◦ Nutmeg ◦ Pepper ◦ Salt ◦ Sugar ◦ Tea ◦ Vinegar • Household: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Box Iron and Heaters ◦ Brass ◦ Candlesticks ◦ Broom ◦ Brush ◦ Chamber Pot ◦ French Carpet ◦ Large Rug ◦ Small Kniving Glass ◦ Striped Blankets • Hunting: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Gunpowder & Shot • Literacy: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Local Payments ◦ Onions ◦ Peas ◦ Verison Ham 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outerwear: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Gloves ◦ Mens Fine Hat ◦ Scarlet Cloak ◦ Silk Cap ◦ Valvet Hood ◦ Women's Felt Hat ◦ Women's Miss Cloak ◦ Women's Scarlet Cloak • Personal: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Baby Doll ◦ Pipe ◦ Snuff ◦ Snuff Box ◦ Spectacles ◦ Watch Spring • Saddlery: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Half Curb Bridle ◦ Spring Spurs • Sewing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Nine Colored Thread ◦ Fine Lace ◦ Fine Silvered Coat Buttons ◦ Needles ◦ Pair of Knitting Needles ◦ Pins 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Textiles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Bombazine ◦ Broadcloth ◦ Buckram ◦ Canvas ◦ Carman ◦ Canvas ◦ Check ◦ Chintz ◦ Cotton ◦ Crap ◦ Damask ◦ Dimity ◦ Drab ◦ Fine White Linen ◦ Hank of Silk ◦ Musar Plush ◦ Lawn ◦ Mohair ◦ Muslin ◦ Nankeen ◦ Quilted ◦ Persian ◦ Turbed Russian ◦ Velvet • Tools: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Axes ◦ Awd ◦ Compass ◦ Hand saw ◦ Shears

A list of "departments" constructed from the goods sold at William Ramsay's general store, Alexandria, VA, 1753-1756, <https://tinyurl.com/m6craebw>, showcasing the breadth of what could be carried/handled by a general store.

A key for finding women in ledgers and other private manuscripts is to think about their lives. Try and put yourself in their shoes for a day, a week, a month, or longer. Who might they need to interact with and why and whether records would have been created and might survive? Then consider who they might want to socialize with and whether records survived for their book club, charitable organization, church, and beyond. Each of these entities possibly created records, and if you are lucky, some will survive!

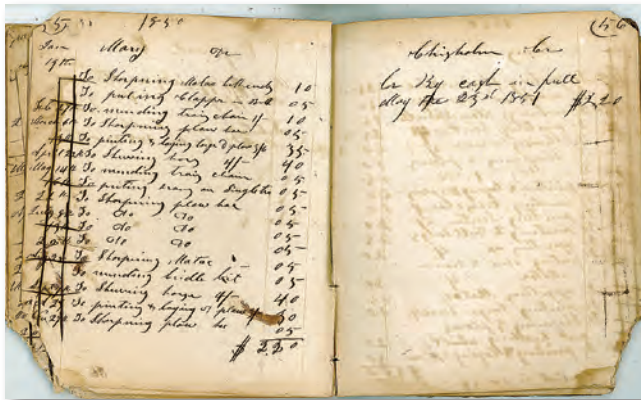


Based on William Ramsay's ledger, the Smithsonian created a really neat visual exploration of the significance of some of the material included [see [body for link](#)].

<https://tinyurl.com/y2bvpwf3>, which further explores Ramsay's ledger. Most ledgers have not been studied to this degree, and it does help provide us with a general historical context for colonial-era ledgers.

Blacksmith

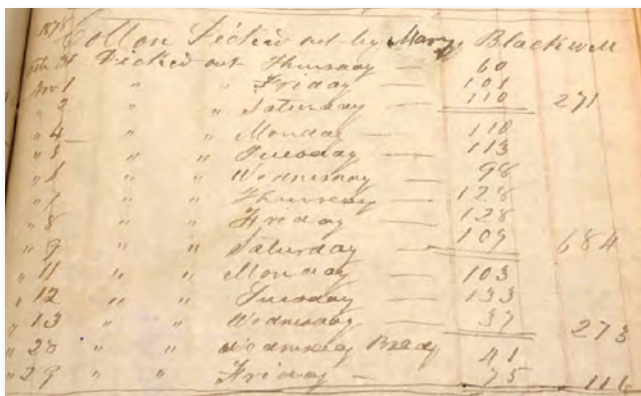
With so many women living on farms and working the land, sometimes as widows, we find women listed in surviving ledgers for Blacksmiths. The entries for Mary Chisholm, in an unnamed Blacksmith Ledger, 1849-1850, Montgomery Co, NC, via DigitalNC, <https://tinyurl.com/fs5kvpt6>, has numerous entries for sharpening, mending, and "putting & laying large plow" as well as other services. If there wasn't an adult male to assist you, then you would hire someone. Notice that she had no charges for the fabrication of items, which is often what we think of blacksmiths doing and other customers had charges for made items.



Page for Mary Chisholm, Blacksmith Ledger, Montgomery Co, 1850 reminds us that women also had needs for blacksmith services.

Cotton Picking

Sometimes the women we are researching were not property owners, either independently or via their



Entries for Mary Blackwell for payments made to her for picking cotton, 1878, Northampton Co, NC.

spouse, and were seasonal day laborers. The economy of the south and elsewhere often relied on paying others to pick their cotton, tobacco, or other labor-intensive crops, at a time when machinery was not employed; some crops still require hired labor to harvest. Might your ancestor have done this? Many women are listed in the "Accounts with Agricultural Laborers & Records of Cotton Picked, 1870-1882, Seaboard, Northampton Co., NC, John D. Ramsey, Duke University, NC, <https://tinyurl.com/jre4buh7>. Renters at a Dairy Farm, see the section on Renters, also apparently worked at picking cotton.

Besides placing in space and time, what might you discover about women via ledgers?

- Nature of household activities
- Relationships (children to parents)
- Hired hands
- Slaves
- Vital events – records of deaths and marriages
- Nature of a business endeavor
- Religious and faith-related pursuits
- Political beliefs
- Hobbies and extracurricular activities
- and much more ...

Livery Stable

At a time when not everyone owned horses or buggies or surreys or other vehicles or were capable of maintaining such, they used the services of a livery stable. Even if they owned horses, they sometimes boarded them at a livery stable or rented vehicles to hitch their horses to. We see from the entries for Miss McCulloch, Livery Ledger, Haywood County (NC) History Collection, <https://tinyurl.com/dxk3arn>, that she most often rented horses, buggies and surreys. In other livery ledgers I've seen, individuals actually hired someone else to deliver them and their luggage to the train station, bring them to church services, transport them to a wedding, and much more. Do not underestimate how many individuals, including women, used the myriad services of a livery stable.

A great article, Rescue of a relic: Ledger tells stories, hints at more, Kathy Ross, *The Mountaineer*, October 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/wehj6cs3>, gives some contextual history about the ledger in which Miss McCulloch was listed as well as some interesting trivia from the found ledger.

Miss McCulloch.		Page	
1914			
May 28	to trunk	25	
" "	to Hauling box	25	
May 29	to two trunks	50	
	By cash		1 00
July 22	to H & B.	1 00	
July 27	by cash		1 00
1916			
April 26	horse & buggy	1 50	
April 30	" " "	1 50	
May 11	" " "	1 50	
May 22	short survey	2 00	
" 25	horse & buggy	2 00	
June 7	horse & buggy	1 50	
" 27	" " "	1 50	
July 1	horse & buggy	1 50	
" 1	" " "	1 00	
" 3	short survey	2 50	

Miss McCulloch frequently used the services of the Waynesville Livery and Transfer Co, NC.

Attorney/Lawyer Ledgers

An exploration of the ledger of John Williams, 1770-1803, Williamsboro, NC, Southern Historical Collection, UNC, Chapel Hill, <https://tinyurl.com/9wd22tkw>, who provided legal services to clients across NC and into VA and SC, reminds us how many women would have been in need of his services, whether they remained unmarried or became widowed. Mrs. Rebecka Wall was one such client who regularly used his services between 1767 and 1772. We see mention of the Bute Court, bonds, estate administration, and other activities.

1767	To Rebecka Wall	10	
1768	To Rebecka Wall	10	
1769	To Rebecka Wall	10	
1770	To Rebecka Wall	10	
1771	To Rebecka Wall	10	
1772	To Rebecka Wall	10	

Mrs. Rebecka Wall frequently used the legal services of John Williams.

Physician Ledgers

Besides a general store, once home remedies were exhausted, many turned to a physician, assuming availability. The ledger of Physician Matthew Cary Whitaker, Halifax County, NC, 1820-1827, UNC Southern Historical Collection, <https://tinyurl.com/6x7a6937>, includes many mentions of women. Some of these are for wives and others are for female-led households. The entries for Mrs. Mournig Etheridge are interesting as she identifies

Mrs. Mournig Etheridge		Dr	Cr
Sept 20	To visit son Sam	4 75	
25	" do do	5 50	
24	" do do		10 00
1833	7 By cash		10 00
1834	10 " do		10 00
1835	28 To visit son Miles	5 25	
30	" do do	3 50	
"	" Experiment mixture of salts	1 00	
"	" visit negro Ishmael	2 00	
1836	10 By cash		15 75
			15 75

Mrs. Mournig Etheridge, her two sons, Sam & Miles, and negro Ishmael were all patients of physician Matthew Cary Whitaker in the early 1830s.

two of her sons, Sam and Willis, and a negro (probably enslaved) Ishmael.

Druggist/Drugstore/Pharmacy

Though the above-discussed physicians often prescribed and provided medicines and remedies, sometimes patients, either under a doctor's orders or on their own, sought products from a pharmacist or similar. An unidentified pharmacy ledger, 1852-1866, from Fayetteville, NC, <https://tinyurl.com/yeh9tp>, mentions women like Mrs. Mary Rives, Mrs. McGuire, Mrs. Mary Mitchell, and others.

Dr. Mrs. Mary Mitchell		Dr	Cr
June 21	To Mrs. Mitchell	7 90	1 62
July 1	" "	1 00	81
" 29	" "	10	68
Aug 5	" "	86	50
" 29	" "	80	58
Aug 6	" "	80	44
" 13	" "	80	44
" 19	" "	80	52
Sept 8	" "	80	71
" 29	" "	80	44
Oct 7	" "	80	44
Nov 11	" "	111	50
Dec 24	" "	233	233
		7 90	7 90

1852	To John Johnson	1 50	
June 22	To Mrs. Mitchell	1 50	
July 7	By cash		1 50
1857	To John McLaughlin		1 60
Aug 28	To Mrs. Mitchell	2 91	
1 60	Sept 28	By Cash	1 60

Though an 1852-1866 pharmacy ledger entry for Mrs. Mary Mitchell, Fayetteville, NC, is not very informative, it does tell us that she made regular purchases from it.

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Private Education

Though not as prevalent, many women were educated and often at a private school, some local and some were boarding schools. A ledger for a Boarding School for Female Education at Salem, NC, 1805-1809, <https://tinyurl.com/a83amb7e>, lists fathers and guardians paying for the education of young ladies interspersed with school business expenses. We find mention of Gotlieb Shober for his daughter Pauline, Wm Kirkland for his daughters Ann and Elizabeth, Duncan Cameron Esq for Mary Philips (relationship not stated), James Gordon for Nancy & Felicia Norfleet (relationship not stated), and many other similar entries. As hoped, I also found an entry for Mrs. Nancy Smith for her daughter (unnamed), reminding us that it wasn't just males who paid for their daughters to attend, but mothers also. ☞☞

Date	Description	Amount
April 30	By Cash rec'd of Gotlieb Shober for his Daughter Pauline	8 Cents
May 31	By Cash rec'd of Wm Kirkland for his Daughters Ann and Elizabeth	30
June 26	By Cash rec'd of Duncan Cameron Esq for Mary Philips	30
July 20	By Cash rec'd of James Gordon for Nancy & Felicia Norfleet	30
August 15	By Cash rec'd of Mrs. Nancy Smith for her daughter	30
September 10	By Cash rec'd of Wm Kirkland for his Daughters Ann and Elizabeth	30

This 1805-1809 female boarding school ledger, Salem, NC, includes many entries for fees paid for female students, sometimes by their mothers.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Please see *Your Genealogy Today* Sept/Oct 2021 for Part 2 of this article.



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