



Introduction to United States Church Records

U.S./Canada Research Specialists
FamilySearch International

Objectives

You will be able to:

- Acquire a general knowledge of churches in the United States.
- Understand different types of church records and the content they contain.
- Discover ways to determine the church your ancestor attended.
- Learn how to identify and locate church records.

Usefulness

- Church records can be a good substitute for vital records.
- Most family members are usually found in the same church records.
- Letters of recommendation may show previous or subsequent residences.
- Church records provide community context via godparents, witnesses and fellow communicants.

Protestant Church in the United States

Other Countries	United States
Usually had a state church	No state church (post-revolution)
Usually had a central authority	Typically, no central church authority
Congregations gave records to a central authority	Records were usually kept by individual congregations

**Post American Revolution there was no recognized state church in America.*

- Anglican
- Baptist
- Congregational
- Dutch Reformed
- Lutheran
- Methodist
- Presbyterian
- Society of Friends

Amish

Following a disagreement concerning the practice of shunning, Jakob Ammann and his followers separated from the Mennonite congregation. Arriving in the American colonies in the early 18th century the Amish settled in Pennsylvania but currently have communities in parts of the United States including: Ohio, Indiana and Wisconsin. Communities also exist in Canada. With Swiss Anabaptist the Amish do not perform Infant baptism.

Anglican Church

The Anglican Church or Church of England is known as the **Episcopal Church** in the United States. It is also known as the Protestant Episcopal Church. It was well established in Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina and a few other English colonies in North America in the 1600s. It was very strong in colonial times, especially in the Southern States.

Baptist Church

Baptists in Colonial America are credited to Roger Williams and John Clarke, who in 1638 established the First Baptist Church in America in Providence, Rhode Island. Baptists became the largest Protestant denomination in the United States by the early 1800s, when many churches were organized throughout the mid-Atlantic and southern states. The Baptists again became the largest Protestant denomination after 1920.

Church of the Brethren

Also known as Dunkards and German Baptist Brethren was founded by Alexander Mack in 1708. Part of the Anabaptist movement, infant baptism is not practiced. The first American congregation was formed in 1723 in Germantown, Pennsylvania. The denomination has split several times with the most famous occurring in 1728 when Conrad Beissel left the Brethren and formed his own community which became known as the Ephrata Cloisters in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

Congregational Church

In 1660 approximately 75 percent of the total population of the thirteen colonies was either Anglican or Congregationalist. The Puritans who established the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Separatists of Plymouth Colony were the first of many groups known as Congregationalists. Several of these congregations later united to become Unitarians, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, the Christian Church, or the United Church of Christ.

Dutch Reformed Church

The first congregation for the Dutch Reformed Church in Colonial America was established in 1628. The first meeting was in New Amsterdam, New Netherlands (now known as New York City, New York). In 1819, it was known as the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church. Services were held in Dutch until 1764, although in the mid-19th century there was a revival of using Dutch instead of English as more Netherlands immigrants came to the U.S. The current name is Reformed Church in America.

Hutterites

With communes formed in 1528 the Hutterites were founded by Jacob Hutter and resided in central and eastern Europe. Part of the Anabaptist movement, Hutterites do not practice infant baptism. Migrations to the United States began in 1874 and settlements were established in the Dakota Territory. Due to persecution in the United States during World War I most of the colonies moved to Canada and settled in Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. During the 1930s some of the colonies moved back to the United States.

Lutheran Church

The first Lutherans in Colonial America were members of the Swedish Lutheran Church who landed in the Delaware Valley in 1638 to establish the colony of New Sweden. Many Lutherans came to Pennsylvania in the 1700s, brought by immigrants from Germany and Scandinavia. A significant number

of Scandinavian Lutherans settled in the states of the upper Midwest. Large numbers also settled in major cities such as New York, Chicago, and Seattle.

Mennonites

Established by Menno Simons and taking hold in central Europe among the German and Dutch speaking people, the first Mennonite settlement in the United States was established in 1683 at Germantown in the colony of Pennsylvania. Later Mennonite settlements were established in the Lancaster County, Pennsylvania area. Mennonite communities exist throughout the United States and Canada. As part of the Anabaptist movement Mennonites do not practice infant baptism.

Methodist Church

In 1784 the first Methodist Episcopal congregation in America was formed, and frontier circuits in SC, NC, TN, KY, western PA and New England resulted in explosive growth. By 1850 approximately one-third of all-American Protestants were Methodists. From about 1820 to 1920 Methodism was the largest Protestant denomination.

Presbyterian Church

Seventeenth and eighteenth century immigrants from Scotland and Northern Ireland brought Presbyterianism to Pennsylvania and later to many of the middle and southern colonies. By the mid-eighteenth century, Presbyterianism had nearly as many members as the Anglican and Congregationalist churches.

Society of Friends (Quakers)

Members of the Society of Friends (often referred to as Quakers) began immigrating from England, Wales, and Germany in the late 1600s. A large group of Quakers settled near Philadelphia. By 1700 the Society gained considerable influence in most of the New England and mid-Atlantic colonies. Quaker migration to the southern colonies, especially North Carolina, continued until the Revolutionary War when the strength of the Society began to decline. Many Quakers left the southern states and migrated primarily to Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Canada.

Record Type and Content

- **Baptism or Christening Record**
 - Includes name, date, parents' names, place of event
 - May include birth date, witnesses/sponsors/godparents
- **Marriage Record**
 - Includes name of bride and groom, marriage date and place
 - May include parents, ages and residence
- **Register of Death and/or Burial Record**
 - Includes name, date and place of death/burial, age
 - May include spouse's name, if minor child the names of parents
- **Membership Record**
 - Includes name of member, date and place list was made
 - May include date and how received, spouse's name
- **Additional Church Records**
 - Admissions and Dismissals
 - Birth Records
 - Church Disciplinary Records

- Church Histories
- Circuit Rider Records
- Financial Records
- Genealogies
- Letter of Recommendation
- Meeting Minutes
- Missionary and Clergy Records
- Personal Conversion Narratives
- Pew Rentals
- Vestry Books

Determining the Church of your Ancestor

- **Family Tradition and Clues in Family Records**
-marriage records, family bibles, family histories and obituaries
- **General Religions of Countries**

Country	Popular Religious Affiliation
England	Church of England
Scotland	Presbyterian, Episcopal
Ireland	Catholic, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland (Northern Ireland)
Wales	Church of Wales
Germany	Lutheran (Northern), Catholic (Southern), Reformed
France	Catholic, Protestant – Huguenot
Netherlands	Dutch Reformed, Catholic
Switzerland	Catholic, Reformed
Greece	Greek (Eastern) Orthodox
Russia	Russian Orthodox
Philippines	Catholic
Mexico and Latin America	Catholic
Denmark, Finland, Norway	Lutheran
Belgium	Catholic
Poland	Catholic

France, Italy, Portugal, Spain	Catholic
Australia	Church of England, Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist
Belarus	Catholic, Eastern Orthodox
Czech Republic	Catholic
Estonia	Lutheran
Hungary	Catholic, Reformed
Latvia	Lutheran, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox
Lithuania	Catholic

- **FamilySearch.org – Place Search**

Explore the church records in the FamilySearch catalog within the specific locality (town and county) that your ancestor lived. A **county history** can also help determine the churches in the area where your ancestor lived. It is also important to consider that the church near your ancestor's residence may have determined their place of worship.

- **Obituaries**

An obituary contains valuable genealogical clues that can lead to other historical sources, including church records. It is not uncommon for an obituary to list the deceased's place of burial/cemetery, religious affiliation and church attended. Newspapers are the foremost source used in identifying an obituary. Four key websites to consider for digitized newspapers are:

- The Library of Congress – Chronicling America
- Newspapers.com
- GenealogyBank.com
- NewspaperArchive.com

- **Cemetery Records**

Cemetery records include headstone inscriptions and written records (burial records). These records may provide clues about an individual's religious affiliation, particularly if they are buried in a church cemetery. Many towns and counties have published in book form their cemetery records. It is important to not overlook this resource since some headstones that have been transcribed are now too weathered from the elements to read and would not be included in online cemetery websites.

Three key websites to consider for digitized cemetery records are:

- BillionGraves.com
- FindAGrave.com
- USGenWebTombstones.org

Locating Church Records

- **Contact the Specific Church**

A Google search should identify the contact information for your church of interest or create a list of hits that reference the church you are researching. If you are not able to identify information about your church of interest, contact the local historical/genealogical society (see below). Many churches have also created a social media presence, so consider searching on Facebook, Instagram, etc.

- **Church Archives or Central Headquarters**

- *National Directory of Churches, Synagogues, and Other Houses of Worship*
By: Gordon J. Melton & John Krol

- **FamilySearch.org – Wiki and Place Search**

Utilize the FamilySearch Wiki to identify places where the church records for your ancestor may be housed. Searching the Wiki by locality/place of residence or religious denomination should yield the best results. Refer to the list of *Helpful Resources* at the end of this handout for additional information.

- **Online Church Records**

Consider the following tips for when searching for church records online: try different search terms, including vital records; look for records based off locality (town, county, state); search for name or church and/or denomination; employ different search engines

Four general websites for United States church records are:

- FamilySearch.org
- Ancestry.com
- USGenWebArchives.org
- AmericanAncestors.org

- **Historical Societies and Archives**

These repositories may have local church records, or copies of them. Their staff tend to be very knowledgeable on local history. The local historical/genealogical society can be identified from the town or county's FamilySearch Wiki page. Colleges and public libraries are additional resources that can be consulted.

- **PERSI – Periodical Source Index**

An index to family and local history periodicals from over 8,000 genealogy and historical societies from all over the world. Many of these periodicals publish church records. You can access this index for free on Findmypast.com

Drawbacks

- Records can have spotty coverage, not everything will be included.
- It can be hard to determine an ancestor's religious denomination.
- It can be difficult to find the repository where church records are housed.
- Some marriages or christenings are at special distant churches.
- Church records end up in unusual places or have been destroyed.

Helpful Resources:

Anglican Church

- Archives of the Episcopal Church: <https://www.episcopalarchives.org/>
- Virginia Theological Seminary: <https://www.vts.edu/resources/seminary-archives/archives>
- The American Anglican Council: <https://www.americananglican.org/>
- Anglican Church North America: <http://anglicanchurch.net/>

Baptist Church

- American Baptist Historical Society: <http://abhsarchives.org/>
- National Association of Free Will Baptists: <https://nafwb.org/>
- Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archive: <http://www.sbhla.org/>

Church of the Brethren

- Brethren Historical Library and Archives: <http://www.brethren.org/bhla/>

Congregational Church

- Congregational Library: <http://www.congregationallibrary.org/>
- Connecticut State Library: <https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hq/genealogyindexes/church>
- Yale University: <https://archives.yale.edu/repositories/4/resources/270>

Dutch Reformed Church

- Reformed Church in American Archives: <https://www.rca.org/>

Hutterite Church

- Hutterite Contact Directory: <https://www.cedrontech.com/directory/>
- Mennonite Historical Library: <https://www.goshen.edu/mhl/>

Lutheran Church

- Concordia Historical Institute: <https://concordiahistoricalinstitute.org/>
- Evangelical Lutheran Church of America: <https://www.elca.org/archives/>

Mennonite Church

- Mennonite Historical Society: <https://www.lmhs.org/>
- Mennonite Historical Library/Goshen College: <https://www.goshen.edu/mhl/>

Methodist Church

- African Methodist Episcopal Church at the Payne Theological Seminary and A.M.E. Church Archive: <https://commons.ptsem.edu/payne>
- Historical Society of the United Methodist Church: <https://www.umchistory.org/>
- United Methodist Archives Center: <http://www.gcah.org/>

Presbyterian Church

- Northern Region-Presbyterian Historical Society: <https://www.history.pcusa.org>
- PCA Historical Center: <https://pcahistory.org/>
- Presbyterian Heritage Center: : <https://www.phcmontreat.org/library.htm>

Society of Friends (Quakers)

- All Quaker Congregations: <https://quakermeetings.com/Plone/>
- Orthodox Records-Haverford College Library: <https://www.haverford.edu/library/special/>
- Hicksite Records-Swarthmore College Friends Historical Library: <https://www.swarthmore.edu/friends-historical-library>

Obituary Resources

- Chronicling America: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>
- Newspapers.com: <https://www.newspapers.com/>
- Genealogy Bank: <https://www.genealogybank.com/>
- Newspaper Archive: <https://newspaperarchive.com/>

Cemetery Resources

- Billion Graves: <https://billiongraves.com>
- Find A Grave: <https://www.findagrave.com/>
- U.S. Gen Web Tombstones: <http://usgwtombstones.org/>

Online Church Records

- FamilySearch.org: <https://www.familysearch.org/en/>
- Ancestry.com: <https://www.ancestry.com>
- US Gen Web Archives: <http://usgwarchives.net/>
- American Ancestors: <https://www.americanancestors.org/index.aspx>

PERSI

- Periodical Source Index: <https://www.findmypast.com/persi>