

Teasing the Silent Woman

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Not only are women difficult to research, they are difficult to write about. Most of the records were created for and/or about men. Few women left diaries or letters. This lecture, based in part on an article which appeared in *Reassembling Female Lives, A Special Issue of the National Genealogical Society Quarterly*, demonstrates how to reconstruct women's lives using documents created for and about the people with whom they interacted.

Questions to ask

Setting the stage:

Community

- Did the family live on a farm, plantation, ranch or in a city or village?
- Were they on the frontier? Did they move from place-to-place?
- Were they part of a larger religious or ethnic group or outsiders?
- Were there epidemics, natural disasters, economic upturns or downturns?
- Did railroads, canals, turnpikes or new industries create changes in the community?

Family background—his and hers

- Was the family new to the community or well established?
- Were family members active in government, the military, religion, the arts?
- What was the religion, educational background?
- What social circle did the family move in?
- Was the family rich, middle-income or poor?

Specific details:

Lifestyle prior to marriage

- Was her family large or small; were there step-parents?
- Where her siblings older and/or younger?
- Could she and her sisters read and write? Did they attend school?
- Was she employed outside the home?

Marriage

- How old were they when they married? Was this the community norm?
- Did she appear to fit in with her husband's family?
- Did she appear to remain close to her own family?
- How did their lifestyle compare with that of neighbors and relatives?

Setting up housekeeping

- Where did they live?
- Did his or her family provide materially in establishing their household?
- What was the husband's occupation?
- Did her lifestyle differ from those of her siblings?
- Did they have financial problems?
- Did she change religions?
- Did they leave the community in which she had lived?

Children

- How many children were there and how were they spaced?
- Were there major illnesses and/or deaths?
- What type of education and/or training did the children receive?
- When did the children leave home?
- When did the children marry and was the marriage acceptable to the family?
- Did war, migration, family deaths or separations affect the family?

The final years

- Did she live alone, predecease her husband, live with her children?
- Was there a second marriage?
- Did her children or grandchildren suffer trauma that would affect her life?
- When and under what circumstances did she die?

Some Suggested Sources of Information

The Community

County and city histories

- Provide descriptions of community events, ethnic groups, available educational facilities, religious institutions, musical and other artistic opportunities

Newspapers

- Detail community events, products for sale locally, news that impacted the community

Church documents and histories

- Include information on people and events

Descriptions of military actions in the area (Indian attacks, wars)

- Show community involvement and emotional impact

Descriptions of historic structures and homes

- Provide details of what the community was like and the types of homes available

Diaries, letters, memoirs, photographs

- Describe life and events in the area

Travelogues

- Describe the area as seen through the eyes of strangers
- Account books, advertisements, histories of businesses
- Provide information on life styles
- Manufacturing, social and agricultural censuses
- Provide information on schools, churches, places of employment

The Individual

- Tax records
 - When compared with others provide insight into lifestyles
- Records of fraternal organizations
 - Can provide family details and show social standing, community involvement, etc.
- Property transfers and court suits
 - Provide clues regarding financial stability
- Agricultural censuses
 - Provide details about family lifestyles and habits

Bibliography

Microfilm and Microfiche

American Women's Diaries. 34 reels. Includes diary manuscripts, letters, reminiscences, narratives, journals and oral history transcripts. NewsBank.

New England Women's Diaries (from the American Antiquarian Society).

Southern Women's Diaries (from twelve southern universities and historical societies).

Western Women's Diaries (from universities, private libraries and historical societies).

Early American Imprints. 26,195 and 59,488 microfiche. Two distinct collections reproducing every existent book, pamphlet and broadside published in America from 1639–1819. Newsbank.

Series I, 1639–1800, is based on Charles Evans's *American Bibliography* and Roger Bristol's *Supplement to American Bibliography*.

Series II, 1801–1819, is based on Ralph B. Shaw and Richard H. Shoemaker's *American Bibliography, 1801–1819*.

New England Women in the 18th and 19th Centuries: Personal Papers, Letters and Diaries. 35 reels.

Guide: series level. University Publications of America.

Records of Ante-Bellum Southern Plantations from the Revolution through the Civil War. 500+ reels.

Guide: series level. University Publications of America.

Southern Women and Their Families in the 19th Century: Papers and Diaries. Guide: series level.

University Publications of America.

Travels in the Old South I, II, III. 9,243 fiche. Includes accounts of travel between 1607 and 1860.
Guide: Thomas Dionysius Clark, *Travels in the Old South: A Bibliography*. Lost Cause Press.

Travels in the West, Southwest and Northwest. 2,637 microfiche. Includes directories, historical serials, Congressional speeches and biographies of Indian sympathizers, trappers, mountain men and cowboys. Guide: *Library of Western America. Travels in the West, Southwest and Northwest*: Lost Cause Press.

Voices from Ellis Island: An Oral History of American Immigration. 8 reels. Interviews with people who immigrated through or worked at Ellis Island, 1892–1924. University Publications of America.

Western Americana. 5,222 microfiche. Includes 1,012 titles on a variety of topics including the trails west, Indians, women, fur trade and early exploration, travel accounts, memoirs, reminiscences, directories, guidebooks and regional, state and local history. Guide: *Western Americana: An Annotated Bibliography to the Microfiche Collection*. UMI.

Internet Sources

The Library of Congress's *American Memory: Historical Collections for the National Digital Library* is an ever expanding site which today includes

American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1940.

Prairie Settlement: Nebraska Photographs and Family Letters, 1862–1912.

An American Time Capsule: Three Centuries of Broadsides and Other Printed Ephemera

Tending the Commons: Folklife and Landscape in Southern West Virginia

American Women's History: An Online Research Guide. Maintained by Ken Middleton, reference/microforms librarian at Middle Tennessee State University Library. The site currently has over 2100 citations to print and Internet sources and over 500 links to digital collections. You can browse by topic or by state. Many of these collections are part of the “invisible” or “deep” web, buried within large databases (e.g., of photographs).

Making of America Digital Library, Cornell University and the University of Michigan:

A digital library of books and journals (currently has 10,000 books and 50,000 journal articles on-line) focusing on American social history from the antebellum period through reconstruction.

The Valley of the Shadow, Two Communities in the Civil War

Letters, diaries, newspapers, maps, photographs, church records, population census, agricultural census, military records and freedman's bureau records documenting this period in Augusta County, Virginia, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania.

The United States Historical Census Browser. The data presented here describe the people and the economy of the U. S. for each state and county from 1790 to 1960.