

# Local Government Records Useful in Family History Research

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Researchers of family history and genealogy generally are aware that some local government records may contain information concerning their ancestors. These researchers are often unaware, however, of the wide array of local records that they may consult, and where these useful and important records may be found. This information leaflet was prepared to inform the ever increasing number of persons engaged in family history research, and to illustrate for local officials which sorts of records comprise the most valuable sources of genealogical information. Some series of both federal and state records contain important family history information as well. For information on records held by the State Archives, consult Leaflet #1 for *Records in the New York State Archives Useful for Genealogical Research* or contact State Archives' Reference Services Unit, Albany, NY 12230; phone: (518) 474-8955. The following types of records are found at local governments in New York State and are useful for local community historians and scholarly researchers:

## **Birth, Death and Marriage Records (1847–1852, 1880–present)**

While these officially are considered state government records, official birth, death and marriage records (often referred to as “vital records or vital statistics”) are maintained locally by clerks and/or registrars of vital statistics, acting as agents of the State Commissioner of Health. Other than during a brief period between 1847 and 1852, these records generally were not created by local governments in New York State until 1880. Some cities hold vital records dating from the 1860s and 1870s. Those records created since 1880 are subject to access and copying restrictions promulgated by the Commissioner of Health. More information is available from the Vital Records Section, New York State Department of Health, PO Box 2602, Albany, NY 12220-2602; phone: (518) 474-3055.

The local “registrar” is often the town, village or city clerk, or the clerk’s designee, but in Monroe, Onondaga and Tompkins Counties (known as “county registration districts”) the county health departments serve as registrar. County clerks sometimes maintained marriage records during the early 1900s, and, on occasion, births, deaths and marriages were recorded in 17th through early 19th century town “records books” along with minutes and other information.

## **Probate Records (1787–present)**

The proving of wills, settling of estates and administration of guardianships have been in county jurisdiction since 1787. While wills and letters of administration are recorded in libbers, supporting documentation found in case files contains valuable information that may not be recorded elsewhere. These records include petitions listing heirs, inventories of personal property, administrators’ itemized accounts, petitions for guardianship, bonds, original wills and individual

bills and receipts. Probate records are found at the county surrogates court. Towns created during the colonial period may sometimes have scattered probate records as well.

### **Other Court Records (1683–present)**

Civil and criminal cases have been handled at the county, city, town and village levels since colonial times. County-level courts have included the Court of Sessions, Court of Common Pleas, Court of Over and Termini, Supreme Court, County Court and Family Court. Other municipalities have been served by local justices, who kept civil, criminal and motor vehicle records. While claims, proceedings and judgments generally have been recorded in volumes known as “dockets,” valuable detailed information on individual cases may be found in supporting case files. Inactive court records usually are kept by county, city, town and village clerks, and constitute a vast and all but untapped resource for family history research. Jury lists, filed with county and municipal clerks, are valuable because they often provide occupations of prospective jurors.

Local court records cover a broad variety of cases, including indebtedness, mortgage foreclosure, insolvency and divorce. Adoption records are sealed by court order, and many family court records contain confidential materials and are unavailable for research purposes without judicial permission. Access to divorce cases in Supreme Court less than 100 years old is also prohibited without judicial permission. Access to court records comes under the jurisdiction of the State Office of Court Administration. For information regarding access to court records, contact the Office of Court Administration at 25 Beaver Street, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10004; phone: (212) 428-2877.

### **Census Records (1790–present)**

Copies of federal and state censuses traditionally have been filed with county clerks and are a well-known source for family history information. Beginning with the 1850 Census all residents are listed individually. As a general rule, the more recent the enumeration, the more detailed the information recorded. If manuscript volumes are not to be found locally, many censuses can be consulted on microfilm. In some instances this microfilm is available on interlibrary loan. On rare occasions censuses may be found at cities, towns, villages and school districts as well as at counties.

For a detailed listing of holdings at local governments, and information on using censuses on microfilm, consult “New York State Census Records 1790-1925” (Bibliography Bulletin 88) published by the New York State Library in 1981. Some of the census records listed on pages 20-22 of this publication as being held by the State Archives and State Library have now been returned to the respective local governments that own them. Bulletin 88 may be purchased from the Documents Unit, New York State Library, 6th floor, CEC, Albany, NY 12230; phone: (518) 474-5953.

### **Real Property Records (17th century–present)**

Recording property transactions always has been an essential function of local government in New York State. Deeds, mortgages, maps and related records contain information on individuals as well as their real property holdings. Deeds, for instance, sometimes provide detailed lists of heirs who received portions of a decedent's property. While these are generally found at county clerks' offices, 17th and 18th century land transactions were recorded at towns and often with city chamberlains as well. Some deeds predating the mid 19th century may never have been officially recorded at local governments.

### **Taxation and Assessment Records (17th century–present)**

Assessment rolls and tax rolls are closely related and constitute the basic records of property and its valuation. These also record the land owners' names and sometimes information on location, size and use of the property and what is constructed on it. Since the 1850s counties have collected past-due taxes and their chief fiscal officers retained warrant copies of city, town and village tax rolls. Westchester County, where warrant tax rolls are retained by towns, is the exception. In other counties, copies of older tax and assessment rolls may sometimes be found at cities, towns and villages.

### **Naturalization Records (ca. 1800–early 1900s)**

These records were generated upon an alien's application to a local court for citizenship. The most important series are aliens' declarations of intention, applications for citizenship and records of actual naturalization. Some contain information on date of birth, country of nativity, locality of foreign residence, and date and place of entry into the United States. These records generally are found at county clerk's offices but also may be found in the records of city courts. These usually have been recorded into volumes for which indexes have been provided.

### **Military Service Records (ca. 1840–ca. 1920)**

Local governments formerly had responsibility of determining eligibility for military service and supporting local militias through special assessments. Such records may be found as lists of persons eligible for military duty; lists of soldiers, officers and seamen; and militia tax or assessment rolls. These may be kept by the county clerk or chief fiscal officer, or by city or town clerks. Veteran's discharge records have been filed with county clerks since 1909.

### **Maps and Surveys (17th century –present)**

Usually created to aid in the location and boundary identification of parcels of real property, maps are an extremely valuable, reference source. One may find the location of an ancestor's property on either manuscript or printed maps filed with many local offices. They are often kept by county, city, town and village clerks, but may also be found at real property tax offices, highway and engineering departments.

### **School Records (1812–present)**

Following the passage of the Common School Act in 1812, towns were required to provide public education and levy taxes to finance the establishment of schools and hiring of teachers. Records documenting these actions, and some attendance and academic records as well, may be found with town clerks and school districts. School commissioners also filed annual reports with county clerks. Records of former school districts often ended up in private hands or in local historical repositories. School records have been underutilized by family history researchers despite their potential value. Some school records identifying individual students may be considered confidential under the Federal Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). For information regarding access to student records, consult the Committee on Open Government, Department of State, Department of State, One Commerce Plaza, 99 Washington Ave, Albany, NY 12231-0001, e-mail: [opengov@dos.state.ny.us](mailto:opengov@dos.state.ny.us); phone: (518) 474-2518; fax: (518) 474-1927.

### **Records of Government Administration (17th century–present)**

Minutes and proceedings of local governing bodies contain a wealth of information about the origins and operations of counties, cities, towns and villages, and contain references to those persons involved in or affected by government administration. Early fiscal records reflect transactions between governments and numerous individuals who supplied or received goods or services. Oath books contain signatures of persons who were local officials. Clerks of county legislative bodies hold their county proceedings, while at cities, towns and villages, minutes are kept by the respective clerk.

### **Miscellaneous Records (17th century–present)**

Various series of records, some documenting functions no longer carried out by local governments, contain interesting information about individuals. Early town highway records list residents in “road districts” and names of citizens required to work on the highways. Records of livestock earmarks, brands and strays provide names of local farmers. County clerks often maintained registers of professions, dentists or lawyers for example. Some counties and municipalities hold early records of slaves and their manumission. Election records such as registers of voters, poll and enrollment lists provide names of individuals and locate their residences in wards or districts. Useful early welfare records include those created by town overseers of the poor and county almshouses. “Miscellaneous record books” kept by county clerks include a mixture of court and non-court records, including lists of public officials and information on insolvent debtors. Records held by municipal historians are often an extremely valuable source, and information on individuals is also found in fire, police, health, and cemetery records found at all levels of local government.

The Local Government Records Law (Article 57-A, Arts & Cultural Affairs Law), passed in 1987, requires that each local government “support a program for the orderly and efficient management of records, including the identification and appropriate administration of records with enduring value for historical and other research.” The law requires each local government designate a Records Management Officer (RMO) who has overall responsibility over that local government’s records. Persons interested in using historical records in their research should contact the local RMO, and the officially appointed historian and/or archivist before planning to use the records.

**For additional information contact:**

Government Records Services  
New York State Archives  
Room 9A47 CEC  
Albany, NY 12230  
phone: (518) 474-6926