HOW TO BEGIN

Records of churches and synagogues often provide the genealogist with valuable information about ancestors. The types of extant records vary according to the denomination's customs and the record-keeping styles of individual pastors. Some churches maintain parish registers, in which vital events such as baptisms, marriages, and burials are recorded, sometimes predating public vital records. Other congregations kept only minute books, where one may find an ancestor's name in the notes of the congregation's business sessions. Both types of records have genealogical and historical value and are worth the effort it often takes to find them.

This Pathfinder offers guidance in navigating the Genealogy Department's holdings of American congregational records and related guidebooks, directories, and bibliographies. The first step is to determine the ancestor's denomination, and if possible, his or her precise church. Newspaper obituaries, funeral cards, baptismal and marriage certificates, family Bibles, cemeteries, county histories, and the ethnic background of the ancestor can all provide important clues. Record the names of any churches that appear, and see if the records exist in the Genealogy Department's catalogs.

If no specific church is evident, but one finds clues about the denomination, use secondary sources to determine what congregations of that denomination existed in the locality and time period of the ancestor. County histories are useful for rural locations, but urban areas pose particular challenges to the researcher, since several churches of the same denomination may have existed in close proximity. City directories may help. Look for congregations affiliated with the ancestor's ethnic group. If, after taking the above steps, one is still uncertain about an ancestor's denomination, a search of all available congregational records for a particular locality may be necessary.

If one knows the ancestor's denomination and church, it might also be productive to search beyond the congregation. The collection includes denominational histories and biographical compilations of both clergy and laity for many churches, such as The Brethren Encyclopedia /Gc 929.102 C473br/, The Mennonite Encyclopedia /Gc 929.102 M52men & Gc 929.102 M52mena/, the Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists /Gc 929.102 B33e/, the American Jewish Year Book /Gc 929.102 J55a/, and the Annals of the American Pulpit /Gc 929.11 Sp7a/. All of these may yield clues, which in turn may help identify ancestors, their acquaintances, or their pastors. They will also help place the ancestor into historical context.

USING THE DEPARTMENT CATALOGS

The Genealogy Department collects records of congregations from many denominations from North America. They can include photocopies and microfilms of original record volumes, but in most cases they consist of published compilations taken from original records. Availability varies by locality; many church records have not been published. In addition, the Department collects congregational and denominational histories and directories, guidebooks on doing research in specific church records, church-related bibliographies, special guides and catalogs to church records and archives, and denominational periodicals with a historical focus.

Church records can be found in the online catalog at www.ACPL.Lib.in.us under the specific name of the congregation, for example, St. John's Lutheran Church. Some books are also listed under the religious group, for example: Quakers or Methodists. One can also search for church records using a specific locality such as Allen County, Indiana or Cincinnati, Ohio.
Be sure to search both the online catalog for church records in book form and the microtext card catalog for microfilmed church records. The PERiodical Source Index (PERSI) provides a subject index to hundreds of thousands of articles in genealogical and historical periodicals, and includes many references to church records. In addition, one should also use the Family History Library Catalog, available online at www.FamilySearch.org, to search for microfilmed church records worldwide. Many of these can be ordered from the Family History Library for a nominal fee.

**MAJOR CONGREGATIONS RECORD COLLECTIONS**

**Allen County, Ind. Church Records.**
A large collection of photocopied and microfilmed parish registers and minute books of various denominations for Fort Wayne and Allen County. Check the catalog under the name of the specific church.

*American Home Missionary Society Papers, 1816-1894.* /385 rolls, microfilm/ Collected letters from missionaries of various denominations, chiefly Presbyterian and Congregational, to the Society home office, describing local conditions and often naming church members.

*American Missionary Association Manuscripts, 1839-1882.* /261 rolls, microfilm/ Similar to the above collection, but for a different missionary society.

Chamberlayne, C. G. Compiler of a series of Anglican records for colonial Virginia. Check the online catalog for a list of titles.

*Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend Collection.* /microfilm/ A collection of microfilmed Indiana parish registers for older Roman Catholic churches in the diocese.

*Evangelical and Reformed Church Records - Pennsylvania.* /24 rolls, microfilm/ A collection of Lutheran and Reformed records, arranged by county.

*Georgia Baptist Church Records.* /43 rolls, microfilm/ Selected Baptist church minute books arranged by county.

Hebert, Donald J. Compiler of an extensive collection of Catholic and Acadian church records in Louisiana. Check the online catalog for a list of titles.

Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Soc., 1962. /Gc 977.2 Ab89/ Follows the format of Hinshaw (below), with abstracts of many Indiana meetings.


Kelly, Arthur C. M. Compiler of an extensive collection of church records from several denominations in the Hudson and Mohawk River Valleys of New York, where few vital records are otherwise available. Check the online catalog for a list of titles.
North Carolina Baptist Church Records. /53 rolls, microfilm/ Collected Baptist minute books from the 18th and 19th centuries, arranged by county.

Ruff, Paul Miller. Compiler of a collection of Lutheran and Reformed church records from central and western Pennsylvania. Check the online catalog for a list of titles.

Vosburgh, Royden Woodward. Vosburgh Collection. /microfilm/ A collection chiefly of Reformed Dutch, Lutheran, and Presbyterian Church records from New York State, many dating from the 18th century.


Weiser, Frederick S. Compiler of a series of Lutheran and Reformed church records in Pennsylvania and Maryland. Check the online catalog for a list of titles.

GUIDEBOOKS

Guidebooks such as those listed below assist researchers in a variety of tasks. They can aid in locating and interpreting church records, offer help in writing congregational history, and provide important historical background on denominations that is essential to both of these tasks.


Pettee, Julia. *List of Churches: Official Forms of the Names for Denominational Bodies with Brief Descriptive and Historical Notes.* Chicago, American Library Association, 1948. /Gc 973 P451L/ Arranged by denomination and includes a list of all sects and subdivisions within each.

Smith, Kenneth. *German Church Books: Beyond the Basics.* Camden, ME: Picton Press, 1989. /Gc 929 Sm52g/ Useful for interpreting church records written in German script and thus has applications for research in German-American congregational records.


**BIBLIOGRAPHIES AND RECORD INVENTORIES**


Historical Records Survey (U.S.). *Inventory of the Church Archives of...* /various call numbers/ A series of church record surveys compiled by the W.P.A. in the 1930s with varying regional and denominational scopes. They are extant for the following states: Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Tennessee,

*National Union Catalogue of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC).* Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1959-. multi-volume. /Gc 016.091 N21/ Lists major manuscript collections in U.S. archives, including many church-related references. Print editions ceased with 1993. NUCMC are available online and cover from 1986 to the present.


**DIRECTORIES**


*Official Catholic Directory.* New York: P.J. Kennedy, 1981- /282 Of2d Readers Services/ Published annually, this work lists the addresses of every Catholic parish in the U.S. by diocese and town, and includes founding date.


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