Finding Your Ancestors in Church Records

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Syllabus

This presentation pertains primarily to the records of Catholic and mainline and Evangelical Protestant churches. It will discuss the nature of churches and their records, records of "Establishment" churches, records of "Gathered" churches, administrative records, and tips for locating church records.

THE NATURE OF CHURCHES AND THEIR RECORDS

Church records offer valuable information and can provide critical vital data when civil records are missing. They are not public records, and access to them can be restricted. Church laws often govern access. Church law, doctrinal consideration, pastoral concerns, and historical developments affect what information is recorded.

The "ecclesiastical continuum"

Denominations can be considered to fall within an "ecclesiastical continuum," with "Establishment" churches at one end and "Gathered" churches on the other. Where a church falls on the continuum often indicates the kind and the extent of information available.

An example of a church that is totally on the Established side would be medieval Catholicism, where membership was required and equated with citizenship. Persecuted groups, like the Anabaptists in the Reformation period, exemplify the other end of the spectrum. Because the U.S. constitution forbids establishment of religion but ensures religious freedom, all churches in this country fall somewhere in the middle of the continuum. Gathered churches can develop towards the Establishment side and visa-versa. Methodism started as a reforming movement within the Church of England and now has many of the characteristics of an Establishment church. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, is now only one of many options. Records of Establishment churches tend to a richer source of data. Persecuted groups produce few, if any, records.

Church records are also influenced by the historical period in which they are written, the location of the church, and idiosyncrasies of the record keeper. Formal records began to be kept in the 15th century. The Council of Trent in 1563 mandated record keeping for Catholic Churches. The French Revolution, beginning 1792, transferred recordkeeping of vital data to the state, a movement adopted by other European countries, although churches continued to keep their own records. Immigration brought various recordkeeping habits to North America and created new ones.

In general, church records note key events in the lives of individual members: birth (baptism), rites of passage (first communion, confirmation, marriage), and death (funeral or burial). These acts are commonly referred to as "sacramental acts," "pastoral acts," or "ordinances" depending on the denomination. Congregations also keep administrative and statistical records pertaining to membership, tithes, and governance.

Records can be detailed or offer scant information. Records offering minimal information can at minimum help establish facts of person, place, and time.

THE WESTERN ECCLESIASTICAL YEAR

Older church records can sometimes list dates by the Sunday or day in the Church year rather than the secular calendar date. The following chart provides an overview.

Advent

Begins the fourth Sunday before Christmas and is the start of the Church year.

Christmastide

Christmas Eve	Dec. 24
Christmas Day	Dec. 25
Epiphany	Jan. 6

Lent

40 days before Easter beginning on Ash Wednesday. The date of Easter is calculated based on the phase of the moon. Sundays in Lent and Easter are sometimes named after the first word in the Medieval Latin verse that traditionally began the liturgy.

Sundays in Lent

Invocabit (Call on) or Quadragesima (40)	1st Sunday in Lent
Reminiscere (Remember)	2nd Sunday in Lent
Oculi (The eyes)	3rd Sunday in Lent
Laetare (Rejoice)	4th Sunday in Lent
Judica (Judge)	5th Sunday in Lent

Holy Week

Palmarum (Palm Sunday)	Sunday before Easter
Maudy Thursday / Holy Thursday	
Good Friday	
Holy Saturday	

Sundays after Easter

Quasimodogeniti (As new born babes)	1st Sunday after Easter
Misericordias Domini (The mercifulness of the Lord)	2nd Sunday after Easter
Jubilate (Rejoice)	3rd Sunday after Easter
Cantate (Sing)	4th Sunday after Easter
Rogate (Pray)	5th Sunday after Easter
Exaudi (Listen)	6th Sunday after Easter
Whitsunday / Pentecost	7th Sunday after Easter

Trinity

The Trinity season begins on the first Sunday after Pentecost. Sundays between Trinity and the first Sunday of Advent are numbered as Sundays after Trinity.

Feasts & commemorations

Saints days, feast days and other commemorations fall on specific dates. A pre-Vatican II calendar for the Roman Catholic Church is online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_Roman_Calendar_of_1960. After the Reformation, Lutherans and Episcopalians commemorated saints mentioned in the Bible (the Gospel writers St. Matthew, St. Mark, St. Luke, and St. John, for example) but eliminated most other commemorations.

RECORDS OF ESTABLISHMENT CHURCHES

Establishment churches keep records of baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and burial or funeral services. Catholic Churches also keep records of first communions. Most records will include at minimum the name of the person, the name of the act or rite, and the date.

Indexes

Indexes sometimes accompany records and can be useful.

Baptisms

Infant baptism is the norm, but it may occur later. Baptismal records can include the names of parents (if a child or infant), names of sponsors, and other information. Because baptism is the primary sacrament required for other rites, notes about subsequent rites are sometimes added retrospectively. For example, Catholic records can include notations of the person's marriage. Sometimes a death date is noted.

First communion

First Communion is a rite performed in Catholic Churches whereby children "of the age of reason" receive communion for the first time. Until 1910, it usually occurred at age 10–14. In 1910, the age was lowered to 7 by papal decree. Information is usually limited to name and date. Most Protestants have traditionally not admitted children to communion until Confirmation.

Confirmation

Confirmation is linked to the sacrament of baptism. In Catholic and Episcopal churches, it is a sacrament that must be administered by a bishop. In other Protestant churches, it is a rite in which the individual affirms vows made vicariously by sponsors at baptism and occurs after a period of catechetical instruction. In the Catholic Church, it can occur as early as age 7, but more commonly around 14. In most Protestant churches it occurs around age 12–14. In the Episcopal Church, it can be delayed until adulthood depending on the availability of the bishop. Recent theological and liturgical developments have made the age of confirmation more flexible for both Catholics and Protestants. Information in confirmation records is commonly limited to name and date, but can include the individual's birthday, name of parents, and his or her memory verse (common in German Protestant churches).

Marriage records

Marriage records commonly include the names of the couple's parents and are therefore important for linking generations. Records can also include the place of marriage, residence of the couple and their parents, names of witnesses, and the civil license number. Early U.S. German Protestant records commonly note the place of birth of the couple and give the maiden name of all females listed in the record.

If you do not know the church where the couple was married, it is useful to find the civil record of marriage first. If the record was signed by a clergyman, a city directory listing will often note the church he served. The History & Genealogy Department has lists of St. Louis clergy and the congregations they served, and the St. Louis Genealogical Society has a list online at https://stlgs.org/research-2/congregations/clergy-by-name.

Death records

Detail in death records can vary greatly from congregation to congregation. Some offer great detail and even include an obituary. Churches that own cemeteries often keep separate internment records.

Family registers

German Protestant churches sometimes kept "family registers" that record information about each member of a family on one page. They are similar to family group sheets used in genealogical record keeping.

GATHERED CHURCH RECORDS

Unlike most Establishment churches, membership in Gathered churches is based on evidence of conversion. Baptism occurs at the "age of reason" or after a conversion experience. Records of baptisms, marriage, and death are commonly kept, in the context of narrative minutes. Discrete lists can often be found, however. Emphasis is placed on membership records that track who joins and leaves the community and how. Letters of transfer from other congregations are common, as are membership lists. The records of Gathered churches can often provide interesting detail, as they can note evidence of "moral living" (or lack of it), including deeds that lead to excommunication.

ADMINISTRATIVE RECORDS

Administrative records include church council minutes, reports to denominational authorities, financial records, attendance records, tithe lists, and pew rents. Church council minutes are especially important if your ancestor was a clergyman, but can also provide interesting information about lay people.

FINDING CHURCH RECORDS

The History & Genealogy Department has records on microfilm for all parishes in the Archdiocese of St. Louis, the Catholic Diocese of Belleville, for many German Protestant (Lutheran and German Evangelical) congregations, and parishes in Canton Bern Switzerland. Links to guides and finding aids to these collections are online at https://www.slcl.org/category/finding-guide-topics/church-records.

Digitized church records are available on Ancestry, FindMyPast, and FamilySearch. Ancestry Library Edition and FindMyPast can be used free at any St. Louis County Library location. FamilySearch is a free website, but requires an account. Some records can only be used at LDS Family History Centers or at a FamilySearch affiliate library, such as the History & Genealogy Department. Some records are further restricted to viewing at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City or to members of the LDS Church.

The St. Louis Genealogical Society is currently digitizing St. Louis church records and putting them online through its website. The data is available to StLGS members.

If records are not available on microfilm or digitally, then contact the congregation directly. This may require doing the "genealogy" of the congregation to discover its current denomination or the current congregation in the cases where a congregation has merged with another.

If the congregation is defunct, check neighboring congregations in the same denomination, denominational archives, local libraries and archives, and denominational offices.

Many published secondary sources exist for researching church records. These include indexes, transcriptions, and abstracts based on original records. The History & Genealogy Department has many for Missouri and counties in states east of the Mississippi. Check the library catalog online at http://webpac.slcl.org/.

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Bibliography

The following is a sample of what is available in the History & Genealogy Department. Please consult the St. Louis County Library online catalog at www.slcl.org to find additional resources.

History & Genealogy Department

Finding aids, guides, and indexes are on the department's website at:
https://www.slcl.org/category/finding-guide-topics/church-records

Aids to finding records

◼ **NORTH AMERICA**

Lindner, Eileen W., ed. *Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.* Nashville, Abingdon Press. R 280.97 Y39. Lists denominational archives.

◼ **BRITISH ISLES**

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        Press, 1993. R 943 S653G and 943 S653G

Stelten, Leo F. *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin.* Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995.
        R 477 S824D (inquire at Reference Desk)

Thode, Ernest. *German-English Genealogical Dictionary.* Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing,
        1993. Also useful for records in Latin. R 929.1 T449G and Q 929.1 T449G