

# You Are There: Ancestors in Historical and Social Context

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As family historians we are always looking to fill in "the dash" ... the events and stories of an ancestor's life between their birth date and death date. Learn how you can use online resources to understand how your ancestors lived, how they interacted with their community, their beliefs as well as prejudices and biases.

## Why “Context” is Important in Genealogy Research

Once you have researched and recorded genealogy records and data for an ancestor, what's left to do? Well to get a complete picture of an ancestor's life you need to place that information in social and historical context.

Context is important to genealogy and family history research. It puts your ancestor in a specific time and place. How did they live? What was life like for them? What local, national, and world events impacted their lives? How much did they spend on food or to purchase a home? These and many other questions can lead you on an amazing adventure of discovery by expanding your research.

## Presentism and Bias: How to Avoid Them

One practice that is common in documenting the lives of our ancestors, is the use of presentism as well as allowing personal bias to influence interpretation of social and historical context.

**Presentism:** introducing present-day ideas, perspectives, and views when interpreting the past.

**Bias:** the practice of giving disproportionate weight for or against a belief, an idea, or a practice. Bias can be personal or practiced by a group or institution.

So make sure you “check yourself” when researching and documenting social and historical context. Ask yourself “Am I interpreting this through the beliefs and practices prevalent in that time and place?”

## Tools for Discovering and Sharing Your Ancestors' Context

Keep in mind that most records are just a collection of facts with no indication of social or historical context. You will need to search outside the world of genealogy records to totally understand the life of your ancestor.

**Archives:** Whether visiting in-person or using online resources, there are many archives around the world with resources for context searching.

**Books, Journals and More:** A huge collection of digital books available for FREE exists covering history, societies, fraternal organization yearbooks and publications, and

more. Remember to search BROAD first then use the search filters to narrow down the results.

**Business and Occupation:** Don't forget that what your ancestor practiced as a trade or if they owned a business. A variety of resources can be used to discover context including digital books, city directories, and newspapers.

**Cemeteries:** Search for the history of the cemetery where your ancestor is buried. If possible, visit the cemetery to see who else is buried nearby, or use an online cemetery resource utilizing maps of the burials.

**Community:** Where your ancestor lived, where they worshipped, where they worked indicate not only the neighborhood but also the society aspect of their lives. Resources include city directories, diaries, letters, books, maps, and more.

**Diaries and Letters:** One of the best primary resources for social and historical context is a diary or letter written by your ancestor. Also look for other diaries and letters by family members and community members.

**Historical Newspapers:** Another great resource and can be used to search for your ancestor as well as their community. Don't forget to avoid presentism and bias when reading articles and accounts!

**Location:** Often neglected, make sure you look nearby if your ancestor lived on a city, county, state, or national border. Borders were much more permeable, and it was easier to cross over than you might think.

**Military Service:** While you may find military service records, look for stories and accounts of service. This can include pension files (filled with witness testimonies and affidavits), newspaper articles, and books.

**Timelines:** Not only are timelines helpful to plot out the major events in the life of an ancestor, online programs will often allow you to include historical events. Also use information gathered from diaries and letters as well as books.

# Resource List

## Archives

- **ArchiveGrid**  
<https://www.oclc.org/research/areas/research-collections/archivegrid.html>

## Articles

- ***Adding Historical Context to Your Ancestor's Life*** – Legacy Family Tree  
[https://news.legacyfamilytree.com/legacy\\_news/2016/04/adding-historical-context-to-your-ancestors-life.html](https://news.legacyfamilytree.com/legacy_news/2016/04/adding-historical-context-to-your-ancestors-life.html)
- ***Use Social History in Genealogy Research – Telling Your Ancestors' Stories*** – Are You My Cousin, Lisa Lisson  
<https://lialisson.com/social-history-genealogy/>

## Books and Journals

- **Google Books**  
<https://books.google.com/>
- **Google Scholar**  
<https://scholar.google.com/>
- **Hathi Trust**  
<https://www.hathitrust.org/>
- **Internet Archive eBooks and Texts**  
<https://archive.org/details/texts>
- **JSTOR**  
<https://guides.jstor.org/genealogy>
- **MyHeritage Books & Publications**  
<https://www.myheritage.com/research/catalog/category-8020/books-publications?s=77618193>
- **MyHeritage Historical Books Index of Authors & People Mentioned, 1811-2003**  
<https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-11002/historical-books-index-of-authors-people-mentioned-1811-2003>
- **PERSI – FindMyPast**  
<https://search.findmypast.com/search/periodical-source-index>
- **WorldCat**  
<https://worldcat.org>

## Cemeteries

- **Billion Graves**  
<https://billiongraves.com/>
- **Find A Grave**  
<https://www.findagrave.com>

## Community

- **Don's List**  
<http://www.donslist.net/PGHLookups/Dir1Win.shtml>
- **Digital Public Library of America – Directories**  
<https://dp.la/search?q=city%20directories>
- **Google Maps Street View**  
<https://mapstreetview.com/>
- **History Pin**  
<https://www.historypin.org/>
- **Internet Archive – Directories**  
<https://archive.org/search.php?query=directory>
- **Library of Congress – City Directories Online**  
<https://www.loc.gov/search/?in=&q=city+directory&new=true>
- **Library of Congress – City Directories on Microfilm**  
<https://www.loc.gov/rr/microform/uscity/>
- **MyHeritage City Directories**  
<https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-10705/us-city-directories>
- **Online Historical Directories**  
<https://sites.google.com/site/onlinedirectorysite/Home/>
- **Trulia Real Estate Listings**  
<https://www.trulia.com>
- **Zillow - Real Estate Listings**  
<https://www.zillow.com>
- **What Was There**  
<https://www.whatwasthere.com/>

## Location

- **Atlas of Historical County Boundaries**  
<https://digital.newberry.org/ahcb/>

## Military

- **MyHeritage - Military Collections**  
<https://www.myheritage.com/research/catalog/category-3000/military>

## Newspapers

- **Ancestor Hunt – Newspapers**  
<https://theancestorhunt.com/newspapers.html>
- **Elephind**  
<https://www.elephind.com>
- **Free Newspaper Archives in the US**  
<http://www.freewebnewspaperarchives.us/>

- **Google Newspapers**  
<http://news.google.com/newspapers>
- **MyHeritage Newspaper Collection**  
<https://www.myheritage.com/research/category-8000/newspapers>
- **MyHeritage Newspaper Name Index, USA and Canada**  
<https://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-10969/newspaper-name-index-usa-canada>
- **Newspaper Abstracts**  
<http://newspaperabstracts.com/>
- **Old Fulton New York Post Cards**  
<http://www.fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>
- **Online Historical Newspapers**  
<https://sites.google.com/site/onlinenewspapersite/Home>
- **The Olden Times**  
<http://theoldentimes.com>

## **Timelines**

- **Timetoast**  
<https://www.timetoast.com>

## **Other**

- **American Historical Association – Affiliated Societies**  
<https://theancestorhunt.com/newspapers.html>