

Genea-Break: Reviewing Marriage Records 14 February 2024 for the Cranberry Genealogy Club

Written by Sue Ennis and updated February 2024

Among commonly used record collections for genealogists are the vital records known as BMD or birth, marriage, and death records. The spotlight for this month is shining upon **marriage records**. Paperwork associated with the marriages of our ancestors will vary among states, counties, and countries. Be sure to collect all available records that were generated at the time of the marriage, because each record has slightly different information! Knowing what records were generated and where they were filed allows a researcher to gather more details about the married couple. For example, if your ancestor was married during the 19th century in Pittsburgh, there might be some records related to the marriage filed with the county and some others with the city. The Pittsburgh City marriage returns from 1875 to 1909 are in a separate location from the county marriage licenses from 1885 to present day. By reviewing both of these marriage records, you will notice additional information from one record to the other.

Universally, marriage records fall under two categories: those related to the intention to marry and those generated as documentation that the marriage occurred. Sometimes these related items are combined onto one form but can also be found individually. A *marriage application* was sometimes required to be filled out to obtain a *marriage license*. Both of these can include birth dates and place of birth of both parties; the names of all parents, maiden names of mothers, birthplaces of parents, and whether a parent is living or deceased at the time of the marriage could be listed on the application or license.

I recently examined a marriage record from Pennsylvania which indicated the second marriage for both parties. In this marriage, both the bride and groom had been divorced, indicated with the date of the final divorces, name of the former spouses, place the divorces occurred, and a docket number of the divorce decrees. In this instance, the indication of the bride's divorce is the only record found so far to document that my second cousin's biological parents were actually married! Along with the application, a *consent form* might also be included for any individual under the lawful age. Note that the lawful age for marriage could be 21, 18, or 16; check the requirements for the age restriction in each state.

Marriage banns were public notices noting the intention of marriage between two people. Originally, banns came from the local church and were for the purpose of making sure each person was available for marriage without objection. Another occasional marriage record was a *marriage bond*. This was a record generated by a groom and his witness and often required a monetary fee.

Additional records were offered as proof that a marriage had occurred legally. The most common are the *marriage certificate* and the *marriage return*. A certificate is signed by the official who performed the marriage, whether a minister or priest or a civil official. Often the name and location of the church or the location and title of the official are included along with names of witnesses to the marriage. The original marriage

certificate was usually given to the wedded couple; some church-issued certificates are ornate or colorful. A *marriage return* is a form that is generated by the officiant and serves as a receipt and proof of the marriage, listing the date, location, and all involved individuals. This is often filed with a government/civil agency.

Two other items that can confirm that a marriage took place are a *marriage register* and *newspaper announcements*. A marriage register is a written record by a clerk, priest, minister, or other officiant which verifies that the marriage was legally performed. The interesting fact about a marriage register is that information from the other marriage documents might be added to the register. I recently looked at the marriage register of my maternal grandfather who was the pastor of both the Nanticoke, Pennsylvania, and Parsons Primitive Methodists Churches (Wilkes-Barre, PA) for 51 years. Rev. T. W. Jones not only kept meticulous records of every marriage he performed, but he also included the maiden names of all females involved, even the witnesses! I viewed these marriage registers in a historical society and found out they are also digitized on Ancestry.com.

Newspaper articles that announce both an engagement and a marriage are becoming more easily accessible through digitization projects. A great website to use when starting your research the Library of Congress's *Chronicling America* database of newspapers, found at <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>.

British and North American newspapers can be accessed from any FamilySearch Center using their databases. Local public, genealogical, and historical society libraries offer microfilmed or digital access to newspapers. Knowing a date, even if just the year, can narrow the search. Depending upon the decade, there might be a newspaper photo of the bride and groom or even of just the bride. Helpful data is often found in these newspaper articles: the names of members of the bridal party, possibly their relationship to the bride or groom, location of the marriage, and perhaps details about the attire and decorations. These social history details add to your ancestors' stories; the facts included provided evidence of the marriage.

There are several places where researchers can access information about marriage records. Begin with the state archives where the marriage occurred to find out what date ranges are available and what records were created. Pennsylvania's State Archives has general information online with date ranges and specific details for finding marriage records: <https://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/default.aspx>. In Pennsylvania starting on 30 September 1885, the County Clerk of Orphans Court registered and issued marriage licenses. This link provides a list of what county records are held at the State Archives: <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rq/rq47m.htm>.

To find the county records in Pennsylvania and all other states, go to the *FamilySearch Research Wiki*. Click on the specific state where the marriage occurred to find out what forms are available, where they are located, and how to search and access copies. Each state has different date ranges for marriage records, so examining

the facts for each state is important. Examples of direct links to location pages within the *FamilySearch Research Wiki* include:

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/How to Find New York Marriage Records](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/How_to_Find_New_York_Marriage_Records) and [https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/How to Find Pennsylvania Marriage Records](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/How_to_Find_Pennsylvania_Marriage_Records).

An article about US marriage records, written by Johni Cerny, FUGA, is published in *The Source: A Guidebook to American Genealogy*; this book is fully digitized and available free and online through *RootsWeb* on *Ancestry.com*:

[https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php/Marriage Records](https://wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php/Marriage_Records). *Cyndi's List* has information about general and unique resources for examining marriages and divorces at www.cyndislist.com/marriages/.

The *USGenWeb Archives* website has information about marriages from each county of Pennsylvania; you can search this site here: <http://usgwarchives.net/marriages/pennsylvania/pennsylvania.htm>. Perhaps you are fortunate enough to have an original marriage certificate for your ancestors. If so, take a photo of both sides to aid in preservation. Then carefully unfold the certificate; store it inside an archival page protector or archival folder. Archival storage items provide for safer handling of original records or photographs. Using marriage records in genealogical research will provide a snapshot of that moment in time for the bride and groom and even their families.