

Help! The Courthouse Burned!



Now I Can't Research My Family

Pamela Dallas

pbdallas@earthlinl.net

All Rights Reserved 2007

The courthouse is one of the genealogist's favorite research repositories. The records held in county courthouses are the records that lead us into our ancestors' daily lives and help us establish the backbone of our family history research. The deeds, wills, mortgages, marriage, birth and death records, probate and tax records, and numerous other documents contain the information we seek to confirm our research conclusions and lead us to additional new information.

What do we do then when our research takes us to a "burned county"? Do we give up? Do we decide not to research that family? Certainly not! We become creative and move forward with our research!

Strategies For Researching In A Burned County

Background Information

When did the courthouse burn?

- How much of the courthouse burned – which areas?
- How great was the record loss?
- Was there more than one courthouse or record repository for that county?

Obtain an inventory of the courthouse records

- Many courthouses published inventories of their holdings
- The WPA inventoried many courthouses
- In some cases individuals, historical or genealogical societies or other groups have inventoried courthouse records
 - Are the records you think burned hiding in the basement and the clerk is unaware or does not want to be bothered?

***Most jurisdictions reconstructed or re-recorded many records. Deeds handed down in the family may not have been recorded for years after a transfer**

Substitute Records in the area

- Newspapers
- Cemetery Records/Funeral Home Records
- City Directories
- Religious Records
- Title and Abstract Companies
- School Records
- Published Records
 - County, Town & City Histories
 - Publications of the local genealogical and historical societies

Check Other Courthouses

- Check neighboring counties for deeds, probate & tax records, and marriage records.
- The parent/progeny county might have the records you seek.
- Consult the courthouse in the county of their previous residence and the county they lived in after the “burned county”.

Check Other Record Repositories in the County

- Local Libraries
- Private Libraries
- Local Historical Societies & Archives
- Museums
- Township Library

Check Other Record Repositories in the State

- State Archives
- State Library
- University Libraries
- Any unique repositories or special collections

Check Other Jurisdictions

- Federal Records
 - Census
 - Mortality Records
 - Military Records
 - Federal Land Grants and Homesteads
 - Immigration & Naturalization
 - Federal Court Records
 - Social Security
- State Records
 - Census
 - State Militia and Pension Records
 - Land Lotteries & Land Grants
 - State Land States/Federal Land States
- City, Town or Village Records
 - Birth, marriage and death records
 - Tax records
 - Town Meeting Minutes
- Township Records
 - Many states have strong township jurisdictions

Check Unique Records

- NUCMC
- Decennial Edition of the American Digest
- Supreme Court Cases, Federal Digest, Decennials

Research Strategies

- Contact the local genealogical and historical societies and local and state archives
- Be creative, find other avenues of research and look into unique records
- Read local histories. Learn the history and customs of the region
- Study collateral lines

