

# Let's Get Social: Finding Female Ancestors in Their Clubs and Societies

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Genealogy researchers do not have to research a female line very long before encountering difficulties. Tracing female ancestors through the records can be challenging, but rewarding!

Female ancestors created very few records of themselves in history. Name changes upon marriage (and sometimes multiple marriages) hide women from view, too. It is no wonder researchers struggle to identify or keep track of a great grandmother.

## Women As Communicators

While the women may not have created a lot of records themselves, they were actively taking part in their communities and leaving traces of themselves in less obvious records.

Women frequently were:

- The communicators within the family keeping in touch with friends and family.
- The writers of diaries, journals and letters.
- The cooks and the creators of community cookbooks.
- The volunteers for community and church projects.

Researchers have to understand the family and community roles of our female ancestors at this level when trying to break through those brick walls.

**Always remember:** If something was important to your ancestor, it is important to you as a researcher!

While we hope to find that one record that will take down our genealogy brick wall, more often than not, we end up taking down a genealogy brick wall brick by brick.

## Getting Social in Clubs & Societies

Consider the clubs or organizations where you participate. What type of organizations are these? Women's church groups? Genealogy societies? Book clubs? Do they meet virtually or in person? What type of activities do they do?

Your female ancestors participated in clubs and organizations, too. The job of the genealogy researcher is to determine which ones and what records were kept.

### **Why are the clubs & societies our ancestors participated in important to our research?**

Researchers can potentially discover:

- A married name versus a maiden name at a point in time.
- The location in time and place of a female ancestor.
- Insights into her religious and social views.
- The people she associated with including other family members and close friends.

## Common Types of Clubs & Societies Women Joined

### Church Organizations

Churches and faith played a part in many communities and in many people's lives. Because of that, researchers need to look at women's roles and activities in the church they attended.

Seek out church or faith records such as:

- Attendance rolls
- Meeting minutes of women's groups. Examples of women's organizations include the Women's Missionary Union (Baptist), United Methodist Women, National Council of Catholic Women, National Council of Jewish Women, The Dorcas Society (non-denominational) and the individual church's women's organizations.

- Photographs of church activities
- Church published cookbooks, member directories and church histories
- Church newsletters

Expand the search for a group's records and activities beyond the church itself to university special collections, vertical files at the local and state libraries, and any write ups in the newspapers of activities or causes focused on by the group.

### Civic & Reform Groups

Women may have chosen to participate in a civic group or social cause. Again, these organizations created records whether from attendance or newsletters or write ups of their programs and events.

**The Suffragettes** - Was your ancestor a suffragette? Look for her in the newspapers! Women held meetings, and were also quite visible in order to get their point across. Do not overlook African American suffragettes and immigrant suffrage groups as well. All made important contributions.

**The Woman's Christian Temperance Union** - Was your ancestor part of the temperance movement focused on moderating alcohol consumption? The Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was founded in November 1874 in Cleveland, Ohio.

**The Women's Exchange** - An organization established by philanthropic women helping other women to sell their handiwork and create an income. Households needing to increase their income and/or genteel women who suddenly became breadwinners of their home might have taken part in the women's exchange movement. Society dictated that genteel women did not work outside the home, but that did not lessen the need to make money. The Women's Exchange was a place where they could sell their handiwork while not working outside of the home.

**The Needlework Guild** - Your ancestor may have participated in a craftsman guild such as the Needlework Guild established in the US in 1882.

**African American Women's "Black Women's Club Movement"** - In the 1890's, what became known as the "**black women's club movement**" began. Incited by efforts to end lynching, these clubs also focused on uplifting the black race and

combating racism, as well as on issues of health, sanitation, education, and women's suffrage. All of these clubs, which, in 1896, united under the umbrella of the **National Association of Colored Women**, their activities were typically chronicled in **newspapers**, especially in historically black publications. Local clubs may have published histories as well.

## Determining the Clubs & Societies Available To Your Female Ancestor

How does a researcher find out what types of clubs or societies were even available to your female ancestors? Two familiar genealogy record types are important to include in your search.

**City Directories** - One of the best sources to find organizations and churches in a community. Find city directories at all of the major genealogy databases.

**Local Newspapers, Religious Newspaper and Ethnic Newspapers** - "Read all about it" in the newspaper! Newspapers are a crucial resource for learning more about your female ancestors' lives in the community. [Chronicling America](#), [GenealogyBank](#), [Newspapers.com](#) and the major genealogy databases are good sources for newspapers.

**Tip:** Reach out to the local library for any local newspapers not found in online databases.