

Who was Polly Cessna: Using Early Georgia Records to Uncover a Woman's Identity

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Researching our female ancestors who lived on the frontier pre-1850 poses many challenges. Record loss frequently occurred in a county's early years, and those records that do exist mainly name the men. A woman may have gone by several surnames and various nicknames. To combat these challenges, we must use thorough research methods and seek all possible records that could uniquely identify a woman and the men in her life.

Thorough, thorough research in court, tax, and land records in several jurisdictions revealed Polly's two marriages, a divorce, and two sets of children.

Challenges of Researching Women in the Early 1800s

The majority of the colonies and then later states operated under the English common law. This law treated women in ways that dramatically impacted record creation. Once a woman married, she became a *feme-covert* (woman covered), meaning she came under the protection of her husband. In essence, she had little control over her property, whether real or personal, even if it was her property before or inherited after marriage. She couldn't enter into business without her husband's approval, and any wages or property could be taken to pay her husband's debts. A woman couldn't sue or be sued without a "next friend." She could, however, be charged with minor crimes in the community. Under coverture, a woman would not be named in many of the records with her husband, including guardianship records.

In contrast to a married woman, a single woman, whether she had never married, was divorced, or was widowed, had the status of *feme sole* (woman alone). This legal status could be granted to a married woman, who became "as if sole" in the eyes of the law. This enabled her to participate in business and sue or be sued.

Names for women are another challenge in researching their lives. A woman could be listed in the records with her given name and maiden name, a nickname, and any married names she accumulated during her life. She could also be known by just one name without hinting at her parentage.

Finally, record loss impacts finding women in records. Key records for unlocking a woman's identity – probate, marriage, or land – could have been destroyed in a courthouse fire or other disaster.

Use the Genealogy Research Process

Working through a complete project on a female ancestor in the context of the men in her life is essential. This enables you to focus on a specific objective, analyze what is known, study the location, and make a research plan. Tracking the research and writing conclusions will help you make progress.



Create a Timeline of the Female Ancestor and her FANs

In the case of record loss, it is imperative to thoroughly review the woman in the context of the men in her life – husband, sons, brothers, father, and their associates. The best way to accomplish this is to create a timeline using every clue from every record. This timeline should also show any person she associated with. Note any neighbors, witnesses to a will, or extended family living listed in a census. Use the timeline to determine specific localities and dates to research that you may have initially missed. Be sure to record any questions that arise from this exercise.

Using a table or a spreadsheet, list the following for the records of the woman and her male associates.

- Dates, places, events, sources of information
- Names of individuals, as spelled in the records
- FAN club (friends, associates, neighbors)

- Other information from the records, such as occupation, military service, social or financial status, religion, etc.

Study the Locality and Explore Alternate Jurisdictions

Records can be kept at various levels – personal, town, city, county, state, regional, and federal. Exploring each level of record-keeping for a locality can reveal additional records for a female research subject in the case of few records or record loss. The following table suggests record types at various jurisdictions but is not all-inclusive. Although several jurisdictions could have mandated a record type, availability will vary.

Private	Town/City	County/District	State/Province	Federal
Church	Vital	Vital	Land	Land
Cemetery	School	Court	Military	Military
Newspapers	Cemetery	Probate	Tax	Tax
Business	Histories	Tax	Vital	Vital
Societies	Poor	Land	Census	Immigration
Directories	Voter	Naturalization	Naturalization	Census
Schools	School	Histories	Legislative	Cemetery
Manuscripts	Militia	Cemetery	Court	Petitions
Funeral Homes	Census	Military	Cemetery	Pensions
Family	Probate	Voter	Pensions	Legislative

Thorough research into the locality where a woman resided will give additional places to research. Consider gathering information gleaned into a locality guide. Topics could include the following.

- **Maps – both historical and topographical** to show any additional areas for research. Could your ancestor have done business at a neighboring courthouse or attended a different church?
- **Use Gazetteers** to find historical place names describing everything from towns and villages to rivers and mountains.
- **Discover the migration routes** leading to the area.
- **Discover alternatives** to records held at the courthouse or church

- The FamilySearch Wiki provides the United States Record Finder with a table of vital events.
- It lists the best records to search and alternative records in case the best records are no longer available due to record loss.
familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Record_Finder
- **Boundary changes** are significant to track in the case of record loss. Are you researching in the correct county, or could the parent county have the record you need? Keep in mind the following:
 - U.S. territory and state boundaries changed as the country grew.
 - United States counties were typically divided as the population grew.
 - Know the parent county, as the records could be kept at that courthouse.
- **Research the area's history** when your female ancestor was living there, local and regional.
- **County histories** can help you learn about early settlers and provide valuable clues about where to search for alternate records: churches, schools, businesses, etc.
- **Biographical sketches** of the influential people of the area may give hints about your female ancestor. Learning about the community helps put her in her time and place.
- **Periodicals** published by genealogical societies in your research locality can be a gold mine of information. To locate articles, use the Periodical Source Index (PERSI), now located on the Allen County Public Library website.
genealogycenter.info/persi/
- **Church histories** are another avenue to investigate. If you know your ancestor's religion, you can add another dimension to her life.
- **Newspapers** give great details about the community. Many websites are devoted to providing digitized newspapers.

Expand the Research and Correlate the Evidence

Because female ancestors' lives will be told through small bits of evidence, correlating that evidence is crucial. Create a research plan that follows her male associates, then follow that plan, tracking down each possible avenue of records. At the conclusion of a research project, write a report or summary of what was found and plan to continue the research until each avenue is exhausted. Write a final summary of the woman's life with historical context using any records discovered for her or her family.

Early Georgia Records for Women

State Land Lotteries

Georgia was a state land state and distributed its land through lotteries from 1805 to 1833. Carefully studying the eligibility requirements for the persons entitled to draw can aid in learning more about a woman.¹ Depending on the year, widows and spinsters were entitled to draws, as were orphans (male or female) under 21 where the father was dead and the mother could be dead, living, or remarried. A daughter could be listed by name in pre-1850 census years, where females were generally noted only as tick marks on the census.

State Legislative Acts

A woman who sought a divorce in Georgia had to appeal to the State Legislature, and that body would grant the divorce. The Digital Library of Georgia has the full text of the "Acts of the General Assembly of the state of Georgia" for various years.² The text is entirely word searchable. If a divorce is suspected, there could be a record in the Superior Court records and newspaper notices, but a final divorce decree had to be granted by the legislature.

County Records

A woman would be named in typical county records by name: marriage, probate, deeds, tax, and court. These could provide her maiden name or just a first name. In the antebellum years of Georgia, enslaved people were often deeded to daughters. Searching deeds or court records can find women named in conjunction with their male relatives providing clues to their origins.

Manuscript Collections

In manuscript collections, family papers, diaries, letters, and other documents can provide valuable insight into women and their lives. Search Archive Grid (researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/) for these collections in libraries and archives

¹ "Land Lottery Records," *Georgia Archives* (georgiaarchives.org/research/land_lottery : accessed 28 February 2023).

² "A Gateway to Georgia's History," *Digital Library of Georgia* (dlg.usg.edu/ : accessed 28 February 2023).

throughout the south. Search for surnames associated with the woman's male associates, as the collection may be indexed under their names.

Additional Resources

Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. *Genealogist's Guide to Discovering Your Female Ancestors: Special Strategies for Uncovering Hard-to-Find Information about Your Female Lineage*. Betterway, 1998.

Cyndi's List. "Female Ancestors." cyndislist.com/female/.

Mills, Elizabeth Shown. "The Historical Biographer's Guide to Cluster Research (the FAN principle)." *The Evidence Series*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2012.

Salmon, Marylynn. *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*. Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1992.

Schaefer, Christina K. *The Hidden Half of the Family: A Sourcebook for Women's Genealogy*. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Pub., 2006.