

GenGuides | A TOUCH OF SOCIAL HISTORY

by *Genwriters* | What Social History can do for your Family History

Many genealogists, after years of researching the names, dates and locations of their ancestors, thirst for something more. The files and notebooks filled with pedigree charts, family group sheets, vital records, censuses, deeds, wills – the list is endless – provide the necessary statistical details of your ancestors’ lives. But these files and notebooks, and the documents they hold, are really quite meaningless to the non-genealogists in your family. They tell only part of the story. Stimulate interest in your research by writing the stories. Compile the information you have collected in your research and turn those documents into a narrative that can be passed down through the generations.

To make the stories more compelling, add a social history element. Social history helps us to understand how our ancestors interacted with their surroundings and how those surroundings impacted their lives. Placing your ancestors within the context of their social and historic surroundings will help you to get to know them better. It would be wrong to think of your great-grandfather’s life against the backdrop of 21st century New York. He didn’t have television, telephones, cars, or even indoor plumbing. His own world was unique and interesting. Spend some time researching the time and place your ancestors lived in. Immerse yourself in their era and culture. Connect yourself to their world.

A written family history needn't be boring. By incorporating social history into the context of your family history research, you will move beyond the dates and begats and will begin to bring your ancestors to life. A narrative written within the context of well-researched social history can be interesting, even fascinating. Your ancestors’ lives were filled with much more than their marriage date and the birth of their children. While traditional genealogical research uncovers vital

statistics such as these, a healthy dose of social history research can give details about the connecting days and months in our ancestors’ lives. Social history elements will breathe life into your ancestors and to your written family history. Social history can talk to why your ancestors lived where they lived, did what they did, even felt what they felt. Learning about social history allows you to step into your ancestors’ world, to walk in your ancestors’ world.

What is Social History?

Social history is the study of the lives of ordinary people. Where history focuses on the who, what, when and where, social history looks at why and how. It looks at why things happen and how events affect people. Social history is the study of society and cultures. Social history looks at how events affect people collectively.

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SOCIAL HISTORY TOPICS

What topics of social history should you consider? Looking beyond the who, what, and where, you want to select topics that will add context to your family history. This context will help you get to know your ancestors as real people, not just names and dates on a sheet of paper.

As you add elements of social history to your research, you may be able to break through some brick walls in the process. Social history helps us to understand why our ancestors did certain things. Social history research will expand your research thought process, opening new doors into your ancestral past.

Some social history topics you might want to consider:

- Clothing
- Community
- Education
- Entertainment
- Family and Home Life
- Food
- Housing
- Religion
- Work/Occupations
- Society
- Technology

A WORD OF CAUTION

Be careful not to make generalizations about historical context as it relates to your ancestor. While your ancestors might have lived at the time of an historical event, that event might not have had any impact on their lives. If you were to write:

George Howell, who was born just after the turn of the century, married his childhood sweetheart on 22 May 1927. Just two days earlier, Charles Lindbergh began his historic transatlantic flight from New York to Paris. After their wedding, George and his bride settled into the family homestead in Crosswicks, New Jersey.

While it may be true that George and his wife were married at the same time Charles Lindbergh made that historic flight across the Atlantic Ocean, there is no correlation between these two events. Were George and his wife passengers on Charles' plane? Was Charles a friend of theirs? Were they present to watch Charles begin his journey? If a particular historical event did not directly impact your ancestor's life, that event should not be a part of your family history narrative.

SOCIAL HISTORY CAN EXPLORE THE QUESTIONS:

- What kinds of work did my ancestors perform?
- Why did my family move from place to place?
- Did the family hold onto any beliefs, customs, folklore, or superstitions?
- Was education available and how did my family value education?
- How did diet and clothing change over the years?
- Who were the neighbors and how did the neighborhood impact the family's life?
- What are the social relationships within the community?

ONLINE SOURCES FOR SOCIAL HISTORY

The online social history resources are limited only by your imagination in seeking them out. The examples provided here are a few of the larger, more popular websites. After exploring these sites, visit your favorite search engine to search for information on the specific social history topic you are researching.

MAKING OF AMERICA

<http://www.hti.umich.edu/m/moagrp>

Making of America is a digital library of primary sources in American social history. Search the collection of approximately 9,500 books and 50,000 journals. The contents of these volumes are fully searchable by key word, author, or title.

AMERICAN MEMORY

<http://www.memory.loc.gov>

American Memory, presented by the Library of Congress, provides free access to over 9 million items that document U. S. history and culture. These materials chronicle historical events, people, places, and ideas that continue to shape America.

DIGITAL HISTORY

<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu>

Digital History is an extensive website featuring a wide range of historical documents and reference resources. The social history section provides stories that reflect the lives of people who lived at the turn of the last century. The history reference room houses an extensive collection of reference resources such as biographical directories, chronologies, interactive timelines, and annotated guides to history resources on the web.

DOHISTORY

<http://www.dohistory.org>

Explore the process of piecing together the lives of ordinary people from the past. Using the 200-year-old diary of Martha Ballard as a basis, you will learn basic skills for interpreting the fragments that survive any period in history.

EYEWITNESS TO HISTORY

<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com>

History through the eyes of those who lived it. Stories are categorized by era. Don't miss the chronological Index of Eyewitness Accounts.

US GENWEB

<http://www.usgenweb.com>

Don't overlook the valuable resources that make up the U. S. GenWeb Project. This website is maintained entirely by volunteers. The information provided is as diverse as are the volunteers. Take the time to search the locality pages for each area you are researching.

THE VICTORIAN WEB

<http://www.victorianweb.org/>

Click on the "Social History" button and you will find a long list of articles and resources covering literature, history, and culture in the age of Victoria.

FASHION-ERA

<http://www.fashion-era.com/>

Fashion-Era contains 615 content rich, illustrated pages of fashion history, costume history, clothing, fashions, and social history. Two centuries of fashion and style are covered, from the French influence in the early 1800s to the 1970s disco era.