A Guide to New Jersey Primary Source Genealogy Documents and How they can help you find Vital Records

Primary Documents: Any record created in the time period that your ancestor lived. These may include official government records, church records, newspapers, letters, journals, etc. We will focus on official government records and other items likely to be found at the New Jersey State Archives or State Library.

Remember, in genealogy you are looking to establish when each ancestor was born, got married, and died. Work in order from yourself backwards, and from the last event in an ancestor’s life (death) to the first (birth). Don’t skip to a prior generation until you are unable to locate an event.

Non-Vital Records Resources

Federal Censuses 1790-1940 (note: pre-1850 you’ll only see head of house listed by name plus number of household members): Establish where someone lives, their age, and who they are living with. As censuses move into the 20th Century, naturalization status, country of birth, number of years married, and other information are added in. Excellent for narrowing down year ranges for when someone was a resident or was born, married, or died. Federal Censuses are available via Ancestry.com or on microfilm at the State Library or Archives.

State Censuses 1855-1915: Fills in gaps between Federal Censuses. Can turn a ten year residency or vital records search into a five year search instead. Three most used State Censuses are the 1895 (available on Ancestry.com), the 1905, and 1915 (both indexed on FamilySearch.org). These are also available on microfilm at the State Library or State Archives.

New Jersey State Wills ca. 1670-1900, 1901-1952: If the person has a Will or Inventory in either of these two collections, you can generally assume that they died the same year that the estate was probated [be careful if a person’s estate was probated in the very beginning of the calendar year, they may have died late the prior year.] The 20th Century Estate Documents may give you an exact death date. If the Testator left a will, this will contain family members, which proves their relationship. Early Estates (ca.1680-1817) are abstracted and available online via Google Books and Ancestry.com. (The State Library and the State Archives have the book copies). There is also an index to wills ca.1680-1900 available online via Google Books and Ancestry, and available in print at the Library or the State Archives. The 20th Century Estate Index is available at the New Jersey State Archives. All items in either collection are available for order at the New Jersey State Archives, by check through the mail or by credit card online.

County Surrogate’s Dockets ca. 1795 (or county’s founding)-present: If a person did not file a will with the State, it’s still possible that they had a probated estate with the County Surrogate. Once, again, this can be used to establish a year of death and may contain family relationships that will be useful to your research. The guide to County Records has details on searchable online indexes. The State Archives has

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Updated 1/9/19 RAF
microfilmed copies of some of the indexes and docket books available for in-house use only. To research and obtain copies of these records, contact the County Surrogate’s Office.

**Marriage Announcements, Obituaries, and Newspaper Stories 1700’s-present:** Most researchers are looking for family marriage announcements or obituaries to establish a date of marriage or death, or to find out other personal information. If you have no idea when a person was married or died, do not try for this type of search as your first step, unless there is a surname index to search that spans multiple years. (For many newspapers, this does not exist.) The State Library and State Archives have published Colonial NJ Newspaper Abstracts from 1680-1782. The State Archives also has a card catalog index of marriage and death announcements from Trenton Newspapers 1776-1899. A local public library or historical society may have something similar for the big area paper. If a family member was important or accomplished/was involved in something notable, there may also be a newspaper article about them. Once again, it’s important to have a very good idea [within a couple months] of when an event occurred in order to find it, as you may be hand-searching a daily paper.

**Divorces Colonial to 1948:** Colonial Divorces were either granted by an act of the Legislature or via the Chancery Court. The Chancery Court continued to issue divorces through 1948, when a new State Constitution took effect and changed the structure of the courts. Colonial Divorces will not have very much personal information about the petitioner and spouse. Newer divorce decrees will have more biographical information about the petitioners, including birth and marriage dates, plus the names and birthdates of any minor children from the marriage. The State Library will have printed law books containing divorces from the Colonial Era, as will the State Archives. The Archives holds copies of Chancery Court divorces through 1948, which may be used in person. Contact the Archives at njarchives@sos.nj.gov for search requests via mail.

**Naturalization Records Colonial-early 20th Century:** Colonial Naturalizations were either obtained by law created by the Legislature or oaths taken before the New Jersey Supreme Court. New Jersey Archives III Series Laws of the Royal Colony of New Jersey II-V has colonial naturalizations by law. This is an indexed published series held by both the State Archives and State Library. The Archives also has a Supreme Court Card File Index and Supreme Court Minute Books where colonial naturalizations are recorded. Beginning in the late 18th century, a person wishing to obtain citizenship would go through the County Court of Common Pleas. This was a two-step process: a Declaration of Intention (statement that petitioner wished to become a citizen) and a Petition for Naturalization (citizenship granted). Pre-1906 Naturalization records may help you to confirm in general where a person was living, but will not provide a specific town or state/county of birth. It will also not contain any biographical information about a petitioner. After 1906, you are much more likely to find specific personal information (and Declarations from the southern counties may even include a photograph of the applicant) that can help you to find a birth event or establish a person’s specific address/location at the time. It is also important to know that before the 19th Amendment was ratified, women rarely applied for naturalization. Because they could not vote, they naturalized (like their children) under their husband or father, and only his name and information will appear on any documentation. Naturalization records for the following
counties are owned by the State Archives (and can be ordered through the mail): Burlington (1790-1956), Camden (1844-1932), Essex (1792-1934), Hudson (1840-1948), Mercer (1838-1940), Ocean (1850-1966), Sussex (1817-1948), and Union (1857-1931). The Archives has additional holdings for in-person use only, mostly up to the late 1920’s or early 1930’s. To obtain official copies, contact the relevant county clerk.

Military Records Colonial to WWI: Soldiers who served in regiments raised in New Jersey from Colonial Conflicts to the end of the 19th Century will have Military Service Records at the New Jersey State Archives. New Jersey Residents who served in World War I will also have Unofficial Service Records at the Archives. These records will not contain biographical information related to a soldier, so are not generally good for trying to establish a birth, marriage, or death (unless the soldier was killed in action). The one exception is Unofficial WWI Service Records which lists the soldier’s birthday and current address. Some individual military documents may also help with additional information, for instance, Civil War allotment rolls may or may not include a soldier’s mailing address and his wife’s name. If you are looking to obtain federal pension records, which will have biographical information on a soldier and his family, contact the National Archives, or visit subscription websites such as HeritageQuest (the State Library and Archives subscribe) for the Revolutionary War or Fold3 for Revolutionary and Civil War.

Vital Records

The State of New Jersey began collecting Birth, Marriage, and Death records in May of 1848. From May 1848-May 1878 (early ledger records, rather than individual certificates), there is likely to be less information about the person. Many events during this time period were not recorded (approximately 60%). Indexes to Marriages May 1848-May 1878, Deaths May 1848-May 1878, and Deaths June 1878-June 1897 are available on the New Jersey State Archives’ website. You may also search an index to New Jersey Vital Records from May 1848-December 1900 on FamilySearch.org (requires free account to use). The records in the Family Search index are an amalgamation of civil vital records and church records. If you find an entry with a GSU# starting with a 4 or 5, it’s likely a civil vital record held by the State Archives. 1901-03 NJ Vital Records have been indexed on Ancestry.com and marriages 1901-2016 as well. Archive.org has digitized NJ marriage indexes 1901-2016, and Deaths 1901-2000. (Reclaim the Records who scanned and published the said indexes also has a searchable New Jersey Death index 2001-2017 at www.newjerseydeathindex.com.) Prior to May 1848 no other civil birth or death records exist in large numbers*. Church and cemetery records may have birth and death records prior to May 1848. The State Library has several local history books with church records, or family histories** that may have vital record information.

*Some County Clerks Offices recorded Slave Births prior to May 1848
**Be skeptical, unless the family history was published recently. Many family histories written in the late 19th or early 20th Century do not cite their sources, so it’s hard to tell where they got their information

Births (May 1848-100 years old): Available to research in person or order from the New Jersey State Archives by mail or online. Birth records may be useful (especially the later ones) in identifying personal information about the parents, including where they were born and how many living children they had.

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Marriages (May 1848-100 years old): Available to research in person or order from the State Archives by mail or online. A searchable online index for Marriages May 1848-May 1878 is available via the Archives website. Marriage records are often better than death records for gleaning personal information about the bride, groom, and their parents, as (presumably) everyone was alive and in their right minds at the time. For records 1901 and on, there are indexes both by brides’ and grooms’ names (available on microfilm at the State Archives, digitized 1901-1903 on Ancestry, and digitized 1901-2016 on Archive.org), generally in 5 year chunks, which is incredibly useful if you are not sure what year a couple married, or if the groom has an easy to misspell last name.

Deaths (May 1848-100 years old): Available to research in person or order from the State Archives by mail or online. Searchable online indexes to deaths May 1848-May 1878 and June 1878-June 1897 (which is being continually updated) is also available via the Archives website. Death records may not have as much information as a marriage record, depending on how much the informant knew about the decedent. However, they will accurately tell you when the person died and how.

Vital Records less than 100 years old: Items less than 100 years old are owned by the NJ Department of Health, Office of Vital Statistics and Register. For any record needed for official purposes, you must contact that office at 609-292-4087. However, as a courtesy to genealogical researchers, Health has provided limited microfilmed records to the State Archives for in-person use only: Births to 1923, Marriages to 1948 (with Brides’ Index to 1948), and Deaths to 1957.

County Marriage Records (ca. 1795 or County’s founding to 1900): These were recorded by Clergymen or Justices of the Peace and submitted to the County Clerks’ Office. Unfortunately, all these will do is confirm that a couple has been married. They do not include parents’ names and are often just a brief statement: I [official’s name] married [bride] and [groom] on [date]. You may look at these if you can’t find a State marriage after May 1848 or if the couple was married before 1848. The Archives owns the following county marriages (meaning you may order them remotely): Atlantic, Burlington, Cumberland, Essex, Mercer, Somerset, Sussex, Union. The Archives has other county marriage records available for in-person use only. To obtain a remote copy, contact the appropriate County Clerk. In addition, FamilySearch.org has begun digitizing County Marriage Records. You may search the site and get a free copy (although in general you have to create a free account in order to view or download the images).

Colonial Marriage Bonds (ca. 1666 to 1799): Some items in this collection are actual marriage records, but most are Colonial Marriage Bonds. These are promissory oaths designed to protect a bride’s dowry. The date on the bond is not the date of the marriage. But if a groom took one out, the couple almost certainly got married. Every couple in New Jersey did not have to get a marriage bond, in general only wealthier couples applied for this. Both early marriages and the marriage bonds do not have much personal information about the bride or groom. However if either party to a marriage bond was under 21, parental consent was required for the marriage to take place and a permission note was submitted as part of the bond, which names the father (usually).