

OPERATION GRANNY FILES

The Maiden Name Hunt Worksheet

Six proven techniques to recover a woman's lost maiden name, source by source.

Workbook / Case Study Guide

Mission 31: Her Name Was Lost

Clearance Level: Biscuit-Tin Operative

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QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

Every family tree has a gap: a married woman's maiden name you cannot find. You have six proven techniques to hunt it down. This worksheet walks you through each one, source by source, with a decision tree and an evidence grid to track what you find. Start at the top and work down. When you find the name in TWO independent sources, you can stop hunting and start citing.

TECHNIQUE 1: THE COURTHOUSE — Dower Releases & Land Records

A widow had a legal right (dower) to her late husband's property. When he sold land while alive, she had to sign away that right. Her name appears on the deed, usually in a separate release section.

What to search: County deed indexes. Search the husband's name during years he was buying/selling property.

What to look for: A separate paragraph labeled "Release," "Dower Release," "Acknowledgment," or similar. The wife's signature or mark (X, fingerprint) typically appears here.

Where it appears: Varies by state. Strong in original colonies and Midwest. Rare or absent in Louisiana and western community-property states.

Evidence weight: High — the woman signed the document herself (or made her mark), naming her husband and their legal relationship explicitly.

Quick checklist:

- ☐ County deed records searched for husband's name during property-sale years?
- ☐ Release/Acknowledgment section found and photographed?
- ☐ Wife's name, date, witness information recorded?

TECHNIQUE 2: THE COURTHOUSE (PART 2) — Probate & Estate Files

A father's will that names "my beloved daughter Sarah, wife of Thomas Reed" performs the exact linkage you are hunting for. The full probate file (will, inventory, distribution records, receipts) may name her multiple times.

What to search: County probate indexes. Search the names of her father, grandfather, or husband's father if his will has already been found.

The phrase "relict of" = widow of. Example: "Mary, relict of James Reed" = Mary, widow of James Reed. This often identifies a woman as surviving her husband without stating her maiden name directly.

Evidence weight: High — the document is the deceased's own statement (will) or an official court record, and the testator typically names daughters explicitly to establish legitimate heirship.

- Wills naming daughters and their married names
- Probate distributions listing heirships
- Widow's estate files (filed on the widow's death) naming her birth relatives as heirs
- Receipts or acknowledgments signed by heirs

Quick checklist:

- ☐ Probate files for her father searched?
- ☐ Probate files for her husband's father searched?
- ☐ Will/distribution documents photographed?
- ☐ Her name and relationship to named parent recorded?
- ☐ "Relict of" phrase noted if present?

BONUS INSIGHT

"Relict of" isn't just legal boilerplate — it's a direct genealogical signpost. Whenever you see it attached to a woman's name in a probate or land record, treat it as confirmation that a husband's estate record exists and is worth pulling.

TECHNIQUE 3: THE CHURCH — Baptismal & Church Records

Sacramental record-keeping (especially baptism) required naming both parents. Many denominations explicitly recorded the mother's maiden surname as a matter of course, independent of what secular law required.

What to search: Church registers. If you know the denomination and approximate location, contact the parish or diocesan archives directly; many have catalogs online.

Denomination matters: Catholic parish registers are often unusually reliable on mothers' maiden names. Protestant traditions vary considerably; Quaker records tend to be detailed on relationships; Jewish records vary by congregation.

Evidence weight: Medium to High, depending on the denomination's practice and whether the name appears explicitly or as an inference from godparents.

Quick checklist:

- ☐ Identified the family's likely denomination?
- ☐ Located the home parish or congregation?
- ☐ Searched baptismal records for all children (not just the first)?
- ☐ Godparents/sponsors surnames noted and compared across entries?
- ☐ Church record location and reference number recorded?

TECHNIQUE 4: THE VITAL RECORDS — Children's Vital Records

Birth, marriage, and especially death certificates for a woman's children routinely include a “mother's maiden name” field. Pull this record for EVERY child, not just the first one found, because the field is frequently blank on some and correct on others.

Why multiple children matter: The informant may not have known or remembered correctly on the first certificate but provided accurate information on another.

Evidence weight: Medium — a single certificate naming the maiden name is a lead only; two independent children's certificates confirming the same name is beginning to look reliable.

Quick checklist:

- ☐ Birth certificates for ALL known children requested/searched?
- ☐ Marriage certificates for daughters searched?
- ☐ Death certificates for all children requested/searched?
- ☐ MMN field recorded separately for each certificate?
- ☐ Consistency across certificates noted?

TECHNIQUE 5: THE NEWSPAPER — Obituaries

Newspaper obituaries — for the woman herself, but also for her father, brother, or husband — are underused because beginners search only for the woman's own name. An obituary for her father will often list her among the survivors by both married and maiden name.

What to search: Newspaper archive databases (Chronicling America, NewspaperArchive, Ancestry, local library databases). Search surrounding relatives' names, not just the target woman.

Evidence weight: Medium — obituaries are secondary sources, but they represent the family's own statement of identity and relationship.

Quick checklist:

- ☐ Father's obituary searched and recorded?
- ☐ Brother's obituary (if known) searched?
- ☐ Husband's obituary searched?
- ☐ Multiple newspapers searched for same death?
- ☐ Maiden name reference(s) noted if found?

TECHNIQUE 6: FULL-TEXT SEARCH — FamilySearch & the New Tools

FamilySearch's Full-Text Search (covering ~2 billion record images as of 2026) now lets you search the ENTIRE body of a document — every margin note, witness line, and annotation — rather than just indexed fields.

What to search: FamilySearch Full-Text Search (free). Search land records, probate, court documents, and church registers with keywords like the woman's given name + the husband's surname + location keywords.

Verification is mandatory: The document must be read on the original image to confirm the transcription is correct.

Evidence weight: Medium — full-text search is a lead-generation tool; the evidence weight comes from reading and citing the original document, not from the search result itself.

Quick checklist:

- ☐ FamilySearch Full-Text Search attempted with multiple keyword combinations?
- ☐ Search results filtered to relevant time period and place?
- ☐ Original images opened and read (not relying on search snippet)?
- ☐ Confirmed transcription accuracy before using as evidence?

THE EVIDENCE GRID

Use this grid to track what you've found and where. When you have the same maiden name appearing in TWO independent sources, you can treat it as a working hypothesis and move on to verification (Mission 19: Genealogical Proof Standard).

Technique	Source Detail	Date(s) Found	Maiden Name(s)	Confidence
Dower Release	County, deed book, page			High / Med / Low
Probate	County, probate packet, doc type			High / Med / Low
Church	Church name, denomination, register			High / Med / Low
Children's Vital Rec.	Child's name, cert type, state/county			High / Med / Low
Newspaper	Newspaper name, date, county			High / Med / Low
Full-Text Search	Collection, document type, location			High / Med / Low

GRANNY PRO TIP

Coverture State-by-State: Married Women's Property Acts eroded the worst of coverture starting in the

1830s-1890s, unevenly by state. Early reformers (1839-1850): Mississippi (1839), New York (1848). Mid-century wave (1850-1870): most northeastern and midwestern states. Late reformers (1870-1900): Southern states, some western territories. If she married AFTER her state's act, dower releases become far less common; if she married BEFORE it, dower documents are far more likely to survive. Check your state's legislative history before assuming dower releases will exist.

GRANNY SAYS

"Half of every family tree is female, and the records were built to make her hard to follow. That is not a mystery — it is history, and it is fixable. You have six techniques and six directions to hunt. Patience and paperwork will get you there. Every woman had a name, and it is still findable."

Notes

Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.
