

Diseases, Disasters & Distress: Bad for Your Ancestors, Good for Genealogy

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Overview

Wouldn't it be nice if all the branches on our family trees were filled with bright shiny leaves that reflected only good kin and happy times? The truth is, most of our pasts are dotted with blemishes, and bad things did happen, often to good people. History is blanketed with disheartening tales of devastation and loss, and at one time or another we may discover a family story of a great aunt who perished in some horrible epidemic, or some other relative who died as a result of a flood, fire, transportation mishap, or other accident. Certainly, it may be difficult for us today to comprehend the everyday adversity that befell our ancestors, or the lasting hardships they endured as a result. But as genealogists, we can often find important clues among the rubble. This presentation will discuss five ways to learn how diseases, disasters, and distress may have impacted your family's history.

Learning About Diseases, Disasters, and Distress

1. Track Family Stories

- Learn about a tragedy by talking to your relatives.
- Prove what happened by locating official records and historical documents.
- Create a timeline for the ancestor to help place his or her life in historical context.

2. Scour the Internet

- Work the Web to learn more about natural disasters, fires, explosions, diseases and epidemics, occupational, transportation, or freak accidents, or other unusual mishaps.
- Try a Google <http://www.google.com> search for data, books, photographic collections, videos (e.g. the "Great Chicago Fire", or "1918 Flu Pandemic").
 - Cyndi's List <http://www.cyndislist.com>
 - USGenWeb <http://www.usgenweb.org>
 - GenDisasters <http://www.gendisasters.com>

3. Read All About It

- If something bad happened to your ancestor, check the news!
- Look for "narrow escapes" as well
- Survival stories in diaries, journals, books, audio or video

- Start by looking for articles in the daily or weekly paper
- Check with the local library, historical or genealogical society
- Online Newspapers
 - Chronicling America newspaper directory <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>
 - Newspaper Archive (\$) <http://newspaperarchive.com>
 - Newspapers.com (\$) <http://www.newspapers.com>
 - GenealogyBank (\$) <http://www.genealogybank.com>
 - Google News Archive <http://news.google.com/newspapers#A>
 - Online Historical Newspapers Website
<http://sites.google.com/site/onlinenewspapersite/Home>
 - Elephind <https://www.elephind.com>
 - The Ancestor Hunt <http://www.theancestorhunt.com>
 - Fulton History <http://fultonhistory.com>

4. Go to the Source.

- Conduct a thorough search of all available records for the deceased ancestor.
- Start with death certificates
- Use Joe Beine's Online Searchable Death Indexes
<http://www.deathindexes.com>
- If the civil record is unavailable, try church burial records
- Local cemeteries
- FindAGrave <http://www.findagrave.com>
- Interment.net <http://www.interment.net>
- BillionGraves <http://www.billiongraves.com>
- Funeral home records
- Check coroner's records, (If your ancestor died young or suspiciously, or experienced an accidental or violent demise)
- Great site: Coroner Casefile Wiki (University of Pittsburgh)
<http://coronercasefile.pbworks.com/w/page/16512016/FrontPage>
- Sometimes a coroner's statement is attached with the death certificate
- Check with the county clerk's office, where coroner's files may be included among probate records, justice of the peace records, or in the local court system records
- Some coroner's records may have been transferred to state libraries/archives
- FamilySearch <http://www.familysearch.org>

- U.S. Census Mortality schedules
- Military service/pension records
- Town and local histories

5. Ask Others.

- Disasters frequently affected more than just one person or family.
- You may find others looking for information on the same event. Scour genealogy blogs, or build one of your own about the event.
- Geneabloggers <http://www.geneabloggers.com>
- RootsWeb/Ancestry Message boards <http://boards.rootsweb.com>
- GenDisasters <http://www3.gendisasters.com>
- Social Networking sites
- Facebook <http://www.facebook.com>
- Twitter <http://www.twitter.com>
- Google Plus <http://plus.google.com>
- Pinterest <http://www.pinterest.com>

Conclusion

As humans we can't avoid bad news, but as genealogists we can learn from it. By discovering the darker moments in our ancestors' lives, perhaps we can eventually answer some of those "Whatever happened to?" questions that often plague our research progress.

Further Reference

"Flirting with Disaster" by Lisa A. Alzo, *Family Tree Magazine*, March 2010. Purchase digital issue for \$5.99 through [ShopFamilyTree](#)

Legacy Family Tree Webinar: Thomas MacEntee 2011. "It Is Well With My Soul: Finding Ancestors Amid the Rubble of Disaster and Misfortune." November 9, 2011. Subscribers can watch for free. Purchase Legacy membership for \$49.95 annually at: <http://legacy.familytreewebinars.com>

Other Resources

Ancestry's Red Book: American State, County & Town Sources by Alice Eicholz. Salt Lake City: Ancestry Publication, 2004, 1989. Access for free at: (Wiki).

[https://www.ancestry.com/wiki/index.php?title=Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources](https://www.ancestry.com/wiki/index.php?title=Red_Book:_American_State,_County,_and_Town_Sources)

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