



TRAVEL YOUR TREE

Where Ancestry Meets Adventure

Moonshine & Coalmines: Unraveling Stories & Secrets to Reconstruct a Family Through Oral History, Documents, and DNA

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OVERVIEW

This case study pieces together the elusive origins of a 19th-century Polish immigrant family. Through DNA analysis, historical records, and myth-busting research, we'll uncover a tale of poor Pennsylvania coal miners, lost homes, hidden siblings, and even an arrest for an illicit still in the woods. Learn how to navigate surname variations, reconstruct migration timelines, and use modern genealogy methods to bring the past to life.

NOTE: RESOURCE LINKS FROM THIS PRESENTATION/FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION - *Right-click on your mouse/track pad to activate the hyperlinks*

BACKSTORY

The private examples used in this presentation are the “story” (so far) of my grandmother’s hardworking, coal-mining, Pennsylvania family. Collectively, they illustrate this case study presentation on research methodology, sources beyond vital records.

ORAL HISTORY & ASSUMPTIONS

We all “hear” things differently. From our early childhood, “Why? Why? Why?” to the family historian, you are now asking investigative questions. As children, we may have “heard” things and created a “story” in our minds. Maybe relatives shared an oral history that sounded unlikely or intriguing. We likely asked questions along the way and didn’t write down the answers or whom you heard it from (kudos if you did!) we are all guilty of this at one time or another. We review some reminders and tools to use when gathering memories and information.

Asking the Questions

- It’s vital to ask the eldest relatives alive, cousins, even distant cousins for what they “know” and what documents they may have.

Phone Calls, Visits & Photos

- A necessary step to uncovering family gems

Doing the Digging - Repositories

- Sometimes visits to local archives and repositories are required or hiring someone to go there for you.

- ArchiveGrid <https://www.oclc.org/research/areas/research-collections/archivegrid.html>
- State, University & Local Libraries
- Historical Societies & Museums – Local, State, Special Nebraska <https://nebraska.access.preservica.com/>

Timelines

- Timelines are powerful tools for organizing and analyzing genealogy research information
- Is this the right person/does this make sense?

Historical Context important to keep in mind!

- Library of Congress Timeline <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/>
- National Archives milestone documents <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/list>

Name Challenges

- Article: Mutilation: The Fate of Eastern European Names in America by William F. Hoffman
<https://pgsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Mutilation-of-Surnames.pdf>

Border Changes

- Wikipedia.org
- Familysearch.org Wiki & Historical Maps for country border changes
- Atlas of Historical County Boundaries @ Newberry Library
<https://publications.newberry.org/ahcb/>

Locality Guide – What sources am I missing?

- Go to the FamilySearch.org wiki first
<https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki>
- Create your own: RLP #18 Podcast on YouTube – Creating a Locality Guide
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duyh_TvDa8g
- To create your own, include:
 - Historical jurisdiction changes
 - Record type list organized by time period
 - Where records are held *now*
 - Gaps & known losses
 - Maps or boundary notes
 - Research tips specific to that place

STORIES & TOOLS TO UNRAVEL THEM

You've organized your "stories" and now it's time to research them and prove or disprove them, separate fact from fiction. Here we review tools used in verifying and reconstructing my family's timeline.

Vital Records

Obituaries

- Utilizing newspaper sources like those noted below, local libraries and sometimes pasted into [Find-A-Grave](#) entries

- <https://www.legacy.com/> more recent

Newspapers

- Newspapers.com (\$)
- Genealogy bank (\$)
- Chronicling America by the Library of Congress <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>
 - Coverage: 1690–1963 (varies by title)
 - Including newspapers in other languages
- State Historic Newspaper Websites Samples:
 - Nebraska <https://nebnewspapers.unl.edu/newspapers/>
 - Colorado <https://www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org/>
 - Pennsylvania Newspaper Archive <https://panewsarchive.psu.edu/>
 - New York <https://utica.libguides.com/c.php?g=937480&p=6756858>
 - NYC - Old Fulton History <https://www.fultonhistory.com/>

Naturalization Records

- Ancestry.com, Familysearch.org & County websites
- Naturalization Links (US & State) on Family Search
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Naturalization_and_Citizenship_Online_Genealogy_Records
- Naturalization: Federal or State Blog Article (The Legal Genealogist)
<https://www.legalgenealogist.com/2012/08/17/naturalizations-federal-or-state/>
- Examples in presentation: Centre County, Pennsylvania Public Access Portal WEBIA - <https://centrecountypa.gov/684/Web-Information-Access-WEBIA> and Clearfield County, Pennsylvania Archives weblinks
<https://www.clearfieldcountypa.gov/Archive.aspx?AMID=66>

Alien Records - AR-2 Files (August 1, 1940 – March 31, 1944) & Flexoline Index

- NARA Flexoline Fielded Search – BOOKMARK it’s hard to find (for me anyway) detailed link:
<https://aad.archives.gov/aad/fielded-search.jsp?dt=3340&tf=F&cat=GP44&bc=,sl>
- NARA About Flexoline <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-description.jsp?s=5259&cat=all&bc=sl>

Land Records

- Intro to Land Records by Angela Packer McGhie at RootsTech 2025 – access with FamilySearch.org free login
<https://www.familysearch.org/en/rootstech/session/introduction-to-using-land-records-in-genealogical-research>
- Example in presentation: Centre County, Pennsylvania Public Access Portal WEBIA - <https://centrecountypa.gov/684/Web-Information-Access-WEBIA>

Social Security SS-5 Social Security (and Numident) Application

Ordering an SS-5 from SSA FOIA: <https://www.ssa.gov/foia/request.html>

WPA Employment Files – order from St. Louis NARA

- <https://www.archives.gov/st-louis/archival-programs/civilian-personnel-archival/ccc-finding-aid> Use “WPA Order Form” in right margin

Wills & Probate Records

- FamilySearch.org
- Ancestry.com

- County Clerk & Recorder
- Family Search example used in presentation:
<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3QHV-279H-B49G>

Court Records

- Order in the Court! Introducing United States Court Records by Julia A. Anderson, RootsTech December 2025 online presentation – access with FamilySearch.org free login <https://www.familysearch.org/en/rootstech/session/order-in-the-court>
- Example in presentation: Centre County, Pennsylvania Public Access Portal WEBIA - <https://centrecountypa.gov/684/Web-Information-Access-WEBIA>

DNA

- DNA Painter Tool <https://dnainter.com/>
- Rootstech on Demand digital library has pages of free videos (requires (free) familysearch.org login information)
<https://www.familysearch.org/en/rootstech/search?f.language=en-US&f.text=DNA&p.index=0>

Assistance

- Find a specialist in the area you are researching for coaching & brick wall Consultation Association of Professional Genealogists (APG) www.apgen.org

STORIES TRANSFORMED TO FAMILY HISTORY

After transforming our stories from fiction to facts and organizing them in a timeline, it becomes easier to assemble a narrative of the collected evidence in a structured document. Having writer's block? Use artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted writing tools in your document program (Microsoft Word) or an AI program to help you get started.

AI Tools for locating sources, historical context, and writing assistance

- ChatGPT <https://chatgpt.com/>
- Claude <https://claude.ai/new>
- Perplexity <https://www.perplexity.ai/>

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES: *Webinars, Videos, Podcasts & Institutes*

- ConferenceKeeper.org upcoming genealogy webinars and conferences
- Legacy Family Tree Webinars: familytreewebinars.com (Free & Paywall)
- FamilySearch.org Learning Center:
<https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/learning-center>
- AmericanAncestors.org Free webinars, colonial records & migration
- Youtube.com various channels for Family Search, Ancestry.com, FindMyPast, MyHeritage, and MANY others
- Conference & seminars: NGS, RootsTech, & specialty societies
- National Genealogical Society (NGS)
- Podcasts: there are many out there now, but I love Research Like a Pro from the professionals at Family Locket (also on Youtube.com)
- Intensive institutes & classes on writing, advancing methodology skills, dna, records, many other genealogy topics:
 - SLIG <https://slig.ugagenealogy.org/>
 - GRIP (NGS) <https://grip.ngsgenealogy.org/>
 - IGHR <https://ighr.gagensociety.org/>
 - AppGen <https://appliedgen.institute/>
 - ISGBFH <https://isbgfh.com/bi/>
 - NGS <https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/>