

Scandalous Ancestors: Tracking Black Sheep Family Members

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Family Scandal

This means different things to different researchers and families. We tend to recognize taboos related to:

- Births
- Marriages or Lack of Marriage
- Job-related/Criminal Acts
- Notable/Infamous Deaths

Regardless of the circumstances, these are your ancestors—they are not you. When dealing with other family members on touchy subjects, show compassion and courtesy, but note that those actions should not reflect negatively on anyone now.

Scandal in Genealogy Research

These can crop up:

- As part of a family story
- Simple mathematics related to vital records
- Interesting residences/locations
- As a result of a DNA test

Prime Resources

- Newspapers**
- Vital Records
- City Directories
- Occupational Related Records
- Court Records

Newspapers

Take the time to go through newspapers, *especially* if you have family that's been part of a particular region for a long time. So much of the "color" and story of our ancestors comes out in those pages.

Vital Records

This is where "performing mathematics" comes in. What is the likelihood that a child born less than nine months after a marriage was premature in whatever time period you're researching? Six months early in the 1920s is highly unlikely, it's more likely a child was conceived out of wedlock.

City Directories

Look at the whole range of years available. Don't just look for your person. Check out everyone by that surname also considering alternate spellings. If it's got a reverse listing look for everyone at that address or in that block. Don't forget to check business and municipal listings too.

Occupational Records

Personnel files/rosters, company magazines, union magazines, etc. Be creative in brainstorming what might be available once you know your relative's profession.

Court & Corrections Records

Often the follow-up to another find such as evidence of a divorce or newspaper coverage of civil or criminal acts and/or litigation. Look for courthouse records but also look for law reviews (Google Books has been a nice resource for these), as well as police beats columns and court proceedings in newspapers.

Search sites to know:

These first two resources I tend to use in the process of trying to understand what kinds of information exists for a location or topic.

Cyndi's List: <https://www.cyndislist.com/>

FamilySearch Wiki: https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page

PERSI at FindmyPast: <https://search.findmypast.com/search/periodical-source-index>

This database is a high-level index of historical and genealogical newsletters and journals compiled by the staff of the Genealogy Center at Allen County Public Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana. You can get citation information for articles for free but must pay for full-text articles.

WorldCat: <https://www.worldcat.org/>

Combined catalog of international library catalogs. Login not required but allows for saving lists, favorite institutions. Zip code gives institutions ranked by distance.

ArchiveGrid: <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>

Similar service from same parent company as WorldCat but focused on archival collections.

GoogleBooks: <https://books.google.com/bkshp?hl=en>

Large collection of out of copyright scanned books, journals. The examples of industry journals and labor union Journals/newsletters were found here.

Internet Archive: <https://archive.org/>

Another resource for out of copyright scanned books.

Case Study

The Request: To find information on my 3rd Great-Grandfather, an Irish cop in Detroit.

Start With What You Know

My 2nd Great Grandmother, Flora Jane Massy

- Born 14 Jan 1867 in Detroit, MI to Henry Massey and Augusta Corey (per death certificate) the informant was her son.
- Flora's marriage returns from Woodstock, Ontario, Canada lists her place of birth as Detroit and her parents as Henry and Augusta Massey
- 1881 Census lived with the family of William Garbutt in Woodstock, Ontario, Canada
- Aged 3 in 1870 Census and was living with Augusta Massy and her Cory grandparents.
- Augusta was with her parents in Wayne Co in 1860
- No Massys found in Detroit in the 1860 Census
- Records from 1891 forward are inconsistent in stating her parents place of birth
- There IS a John O. Massey, policeman, born in Ireland and listed in Detroit in the 1870 Census. He was married to someone else.

What I Couldn't Find

- Flora's birth certificate
- Augusta's death certificate
- Any indication of Flora's life between 1870 and 1881.

Steps Forward

Hit #1: Augusta's Marriage record to H. R. Massy:

Hit #2: City Directories

Hit #3: Detroit Police Force Applications—offer a range of valuable information:

"The rest of the story"

Hit #4: Accidental find—Website dedicated to Hartland Civil War Veterans

Hit #5: Civil War Pension File

Hit #6: Tracking down his 2nd wife, Nancy Michels

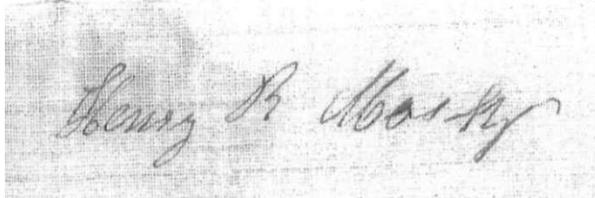
Hit #7: Tracking his movements after Michigan with newly found information

A Highly Unreliable Narrator?

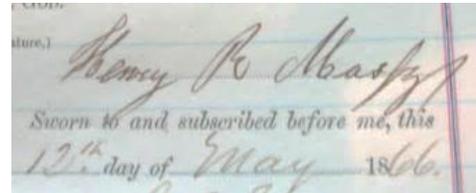
There are many inconsistencies in Henry R. Massy's story—foremost among them his claims of no previous family in his pension application, his checkered past, not to mention his name change and varying birthdate.

In the end one could take a page from the Pension auditors—Henry signed his oath to the Detroit police force with the same funny “R” which led to his pension approval.

1865 Army enlistment

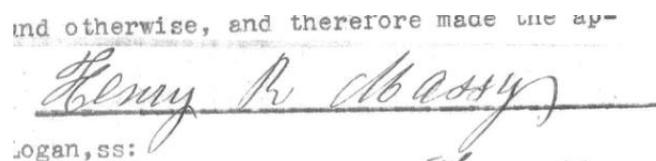
A close-up photograph of a handwritten signature in cursive ink on a document. The signature reads "Henry R. Massy".

1866 Oath to Police

A photograph of a handwritten signature "Henry R. Massy" on a document. Below the signature, the text reads "Sworn to and subscribed before me, this 12th day of May 1866." The word "Sworn" is partially obscured by the signature.

1916 Pension Application

and otherwise, and thererore made the ap-

A photograph of a handwritten signature "Henry R. Massy" on a document. The signature is written in cursive and is underlined. To the left of the signature, the text "logan, ss:" is visible. Above the signature, the text "and otherwise, and thererore made the ap-" is partially visible.

Questions, Comments, Corrections? Contact me!

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