

Upstate New York Research Still Difficult, but Getting Easier

By Richard H. Benson

Upstate New York

THOSE OF US FROM THE MIDWEST WHO HAVE HAD TO trace our New England ancestors through upstate New York have had a challenging time. Fortunately that job is getting easier, although challenges remain.

The challenges arise from the fact that vital statistics were not kept until the late nineteenth century and church records are sparse. Some records were kept by traveling ministers and cannot be located today. People moved often, making it difficult to find the records they left behind.

New Englanders moved into the Hudson River Valley, particularly Dutchess County, in the mideighteenth century.[1] After the Revolutionary War, settlers moved into more areas, such as the southern New York counties along the Susquehanna River. However, it was after the War of 1812 that migration really started. My Benson family left Danby, Vermont, in 1816 for Jefferson County, New York. My wife's Read family coincidentally also lived in Danby and left in 1818 for Chautauqua County, New York.

As this growth continued, new counties and towns were formed. A settler might be listed in Tioga County in the 1820 census and in Tompkins County in the 1830 census without having moved. The town of Caroline was formed from Spencer, Tioga County, in 1811 and transferred to Tompkins County in 1822. An essential research tool is French's *Gazetteer*. [2] French tracks the formation of each county and town, indicating also the counties and towns from which each was formed. It is necessary to understand such changes in order to know where to look for census, land, probate, and cemetery records.

Sometimes researchers do not know the county in which to search. They may have seen a census record that merely says "born in New York State." The first step is to try to find sources that identify the town or county. Death certificates, gravestones, or obituaries might help. Sometimes county histories profile residents and tell from where they came. The first deed outside New York may identify an ancestor as "now of Jackson County, Michigan, previously of Jefferson County, New York." If the name is unusual, finding someone in a New York census index may be possible. The downside of unusual names is that they are often spelled differently in different records. Of course, if the name is John Brown, there will be many entries in census records and it will be difficult to tell which, if any, relates to the appropriate family.

Sometimes records in your own home or in the home of a relative may have the answers. For years I tried to identify the parents of my wife's ancestor, Mary Jane Herrick, who died in Chautauqua County, New York, in 1856 after marrying there in 1844. I tried to trace dozens of Herrick families that had lived in the county, without success. It was only when reading a family diary from the 1890s that a reference to Aunt Libbie and Uncle William Herrick of Erie County, Pennsylvania, was noted. Their father, Ezekiel Herrick, had been a carpenter and moved from county to county without buying land. There was no trace of him in Chautauqua County. Records in Erie County, Pennsylvania, helped make the identification.

Census records are now easier to use in tracking families. They used to require combining whole rolls of microfilm in large libraries, using often incomplete or inaccurate printed indexes. Now indexed copies of census records for all available years are online. Certain years have been indexed by *Ancestry.com* and others by *HeritageQuestOnline.com*. Access to the indexes and census page images on both websites is available for a fee. Many libraries have subscriptions. The 1880 census is online at *FamilySearch.org*. Starting with 1850, the census lists all household members, and in 1880 it also shows where each person's parents were born. The U.S. census records begin in 1790 and are available for every

ten years (except 1890, for which the records were lost to fire). Also helpful are New York State census records, available for some counties as early as 1825 and every ten years thereafter.

Once a county is identified for your ancestor, land and probate records for that county need to be searched. Visiting the county courthouse can be an adventure. However, most of us settle for borrowing microfilms of these records at a local Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The first deeds may show from whence a settler moved. Later deeds may identify children to whom land was deeded. Not all deeds were recorded. In some areas the original purchases are not available in the county clerk's office, particularly if made through the Holland Land Company or other large landowners.[3]

Probate records are in the County Surrogate Court's office in New York, rather than in a probate court. Beginning around 1830, they may show names of heirs and where they were living.[4] A good guide to these records is Gordon Remington, *New York State Probate Records: A Guide to Testate and Intestate Records*, published by NEHGS in 2002. Not much is online; most probate records will have to be ordered on microfilm from the Family History Library.[5] When checking the Family History Library catalog at *FamilySearch.org* for probate data, be sure to check what other types of records are available for the county and town.

Some vital records have been published in newspapers. Thousands of marriage and death notices have been transcribed and published by Fred Q. Bowman.[6] Other newspaper extracts have been published for Washington and Steuben counties.

Some Major New York Sources In the NEHGS Library

In the absence of vital records, cemetery data can be very valuable. The good news is that websites for the New York counties on the USGenWeb project, hosted by *RootsWeb.com*, contain more and more transcriptions of cemetery records. These websites may also contain census and other primary records. In some cases the entire contents of the website can be searched for a name.

Other cemetery records are available through “New York DAR Cemetery, Church and Town Records,” a multi-volume manuscript in the State Library in Albany and the DAR Library in Washington, DC.[7] Other church records, tombstone inscriptions, and family records were published in *Early Settlers of New York State*. [8]

Many records are published in periodicals, particularly *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* and *Tree Talks*. More good news is the recent publication of Worden's *Index to The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record 1870–1998*. This CD-ROM, available from The New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, allows you to find your ancestors in the 129 volumes of this periodical. The annual indexes to *Tree Talks* should be searched. I spent years looking for information about my great-great-great-grandfather, David Cook of Washington County, New York. But I found no

probate records or gravestone there. It turned out that six months before he died in 1824, he moved to live with a son in Genesee County, New York. He wrote his will there. I found this information when I noticed his daughter, Phebe (Cook) Benson, listed in an index to *Tree Talks*.

We often make fun of the “mug books.” These were county histories published in the last part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They are called mug books because people submitted information and pictures (their “mugs”) of their families, then bought copies of the books. Much of the information provided on their early ancestry is suspect. However, for people living at the end of the nineteenth century, data on immediate family members is usually accurate. Some of these “mug books” are being published on county websites.

Family Bible records and obituaries are sometimes the only available sources for upstate New York. The problem is where to find them. Some have been published in sources described above; however, others may be sitting in someone's attic. It is probably worthwhile to place queries on family message boards sponsored by *Ancestry.com* and *Genealogy.com*. There is always a chance of finding a cousin with access to these records.

With more data online and more indexes available, upstate New York research is getting easier.^[9] However, be aware that undocumented genealogies available online often contain errors. Stay with primary source records such as census listings, wills, deeds, church records, and cemetery data. Good searching!

Notes

¹ If your ancestors were considerate enough to settle in the Beekman Patent of Dutchess County, the multi-volume *Settlers of the Beekman Patent* by Frank Doherty can be invaluable [see his article at page 17 of this issue].

² J.H. French, *Gazetteer of the State of New York* (Syracuse, N.Y.: R.P. Smith, 1860, with several reprintings).

³ For a listing of thousands of early Holland Land Company transactions in several counties of western New York see Karen E. Livsey, *Western New York Land Transactions, 1804–1824* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1991) and *Western New York Land Transactions, 1825–1835* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1996).

⁴ Harry Macy, Jr., “Treasure in the Surrogate's Court,” *The NYG&B Newsletter*, 14:4 (Fall 2003): 49–51.

⁵ Some counties are putting more information online. The Ontario County Records and Archives Center has placed indices to Surrogate Court records from 1789 to 1926 and to deeds from 1789 to 1845 online at *raims.com*.

⁶ See sidebar on the previous page for a list.

⁷ A list of all the transcribed cemetery inscriptions, Bible records, and local and family records in these volumes is found in General Peter Gansevoort Chapter, D.A.R., *Revised Master Index to the New York State Daughters of the American Revolution Genealogical Records Volumes* (2 vols., Zephyrhills, Florida, Jean D. Worden, 1998)

⁸ Janet Wethy Foley, *Early Settlers of New York State*, 9 vols. (Akron, N.Y.: T.J. Foley, 1934–42, reprinted as 2 vols., Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1993), also available on CD-ROM.

⁹ A recent source is “Upstate New York Research,” a lecture video by Henry B. Hoff (Boston: NEHGS, 2003). The syllabus for this video is at www.NewEnglandAncestors.org under “education.” RICHARD H. BENSON is a retired

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