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# The “Shady” Side of the Family Tree

- Prison, Criminal, Asylum Records and More

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Many researchers may be aghast to find ancestors hanging out on the “shady” side of the family tree with criminal backgrounds, mental illness, poverty and other “unacceptable” behavior. However, while these ancestors may be socially ‘unpopular’, they certainly can add interest and often many more fascinating details to the family story than your average run-of-the mill ancestor.

Their records can also help break through “brick walls” when you find that someone has disappeared in the normal records. Don’t be afraid to keep an open mind and see what “black sheep” might be hanging out in your pedigree.

## ORGANIZATIONS & HELPS

- **Ancestry.com “Black Sheep” Message Boards**

- [boards.ancestry.com/topics.organizations.blacksheep](http://boards.ancestry.com/topics.organizations.blacksheep)

Over 300 discussion threads regarding researching of black sheep ancestors and the mysteries that surround them.

- **Blacksheep Ancestors**

- [www.blacksheepancestors.com](http://www.blacksheepancestors.com)

Find your black sheep ancestor using links to genealogical prison records, historical court records, executions, biographies of famous outlaws, criminals & pirates at BlackSheepAncestors.com.

Choose from records in Canada, America, England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Europe.

- **International Black Sheep Society of Genealogists**

- [ibssg.org/blacksheep](http://ibssg.org/blacksheep)

The International Black Sheep Society of Genealogists (IBSSG) is an Association of Genealogists who have found "blacksheep ancestors" in their direct family lines, or under the "One Degree Rule" of the Society.

The One Degree Rule is: If a person lived in the family domicile of an ancestor, and the actions of that individual affected the family, as if they were an ancestor, or member of the immediate family, then that individual’s acts can be used for membership qualification under this rule.

## PRISON / CRIMINAL RECORDS

- **Trials**

- **Famous Trials** – <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/ftrials.htm>

- **Newspapers**

- **Online Historical Newspaper Website** –

- <http://sites.google.com/site/onlinenewspapersite>

An ever changing listing of all the online newspapers in one location including both free and paid subscription websites.

- **Prison Records** –

- **Historic U.S. Prison Records Online** –

- <http://genealogy.about.com/od/records/tp/Historical-Prison-Records-Online.htm>

These online records often include extra details from descriptions of the offense, to the inmate's place and year of birth. Mug shots, interviews and other interesting records may also be found in these databases.

- **Witch Trials**

- **The Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project –**  
<http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/home.html>

This is an electronic collection of source materials relating to the Salem witch trials of 1692 and a new transcription of the court records. Includes a name index to the Salem Witchcraft Papers.

The archive also contains educational information, such as biographical profiles, a collection of images containing portraits of notable people involved in the trials, pictures of important historic sites, historical paintings and published illustrations taken from 19th and early 20th century literary and historical works.

- **Salem Witchcraft Trials 1692 –**  
<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/salem/SALEM.HTM>

- **Convict Ships**

- **Convicts to the American Colonies**

Between 1614 and 1775 more than 50,000 English men, women, and children were sentenced to be deported to the American colonies for crimes ranging from the theft of a handkerchief to bigamy or highway robbery.

After years of painstaking research, the names of nearly all those transported were extracted from official court records by Peter Coldham and published. From this unexpected source the researcher at last had the means of learning the names of the persons transported to the colonies, the charges against them, the dates and places of sentencing, the ship names, and the places of arrival in the colonies.

*More Emigrants in Bondage–*

[http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/BookView.aspx?dbid=49263&iid=FLHG\\_MoreEmigrantsinBondage-0003](http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/BookView.aspx?dbid=49263&iid=FLHG_MoreEmigrantsinBondage-0003)

- **Convicts to Australia**

Transportation, as a punishment for convicted criminals in England and other parts of the British Empire, came about in the seventeenth century. At first transportation was primarily to America. However, this stopped with the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War in 1776 and a new penal colony in Australia was developed.

Transportation was formally abolished in 1868, but had not been practiced for nearly a decade before that. By the time transportation was discontinued, approximately 160,000 people had been sent to Australia.

The following databases contain Australian convict transportation registers for the various fleets of ships involved. Information available in these registers includes: name of convict, date and place of conviction, term of sentence, name of ship on which sailed, departure date, name of colony sent to.

**Australian Convict Transportation Registers – First Fleet, 1787-1788**

<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1177>

**Australian Convict Transportation Registers – Second Fleet, 1789-1790**

<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1178>

### **Australian Convict Transportation Registers – Third Fleet, 1791**

<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1179>

This database contains Australian convict transportation registers for the Third Fleet of ships. Information available in these registers includes: name of convict, date and place of conviction, term of sentence, name of ship on which sailed, departure date, name of colony sent to.

### **Australian Convict Transportation Registers – Other Fleets & Ships, 1791-1868**

<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1180>

This database contains Australian convict transportation registers for ships arriving between 1791 and 1868. Information available in these registers includes: name of convict, date and place of conviction, term of sentence, name of ship on which sailed, departure date, name of colony sent to.

### **UK Surgeon Superintendents' Journals of Convict Ships, 1858-1867**

<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=2320>

This database contains indexed images of medical journals kept by surgeons aboard convict ships sailing from England to Australia.

Each journal in this database records details from one voyage of a convict ship as it traveled between England and Australia. Information found in the entries varies by journal but can include details such as name, age, crime convicted of, length of sentence, point of embarkation, native country, education, death date, cause of death, sick lists, lists of ship's stores, and day-to-day happenings aboard ship. You may also find lists of convicts, punishments, and prisoners who exhibited good conduct during the voyage. Crew members information may also be included.

- **Colonial Court Records – Adultery, Drinking and Fornication OH MY!**

Yes, especially in early colonial times cases were brought to court where people were acting in ways that the local community didn't approve of based most often on their religiously held standards. Cavorting while married, starting an unapproved tavern, "experimenting" before marriage (which happened often during betrothal) or even missing church, caused people to be brought before the court and fined.

For a long time these records were shied away from by early researchers, but the book - *Lost Babes: Fornication Abstracts From Court Records Essex County, Massachusetts 1692-1745* (Derry, N.H., 1992) by Melinde Lutz Sanborn helped make many of them more accessible.

The book is no longer in print and her website with the data is no longer available, but most of it can be accessed through the Internet Archive.

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080113160051/http://www.ancestryandgenealogy.com/freedataancforn.asp>

### **SOCIAL OR MENTAL HEALTH RECORDS**

- **Asylums**

- [www.asylumprojects.org](http://www.asylumprojects.org)

Dedicated to the history of asylums in all forms. The term of asylum is applied to not only what is commonly thought of: mental hospitals, but can also be applied to sanatoriums, state training schools, reform schools, orphanages, and prisons.

Everyone throughout the United States and in many other countries has in one way or another felt the touch of these institutions. These places have both directly and indirectly affected people and their families. They have shaped lives and created many popular myths about them.

With all that in mind, this site was created to help in the historical research of any institutions that can be classified as an asylum. It was created for both serious researchers, those who are doing genealogical research, and people with an interest in asylums.

### **Historic Asylums of America**

➤ <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~asylums/index.html>

This web site is an attempt to catalog and present America's historic psychiatric hospitals (state hospitals; insane asylums) founded mostly in the latter half of the 19th century. Some constructed in the 20th century are also included.

### • **1880 U.S. Federal Census Schedule of Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes** [search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1634](http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1634)

In the 1880 U.S. Federal Census, a supplemental schedule called “Dependent, Defective, and Delinquent Classes” was included. This schedule included different forms to enumerate the following classes of individuals:

- Insane
- Blind
- Homeless children
- Idiots
- Paupers and Indigent persons
- Prisoners
- Deaf-mutes

In addition to the individual’s name, their race, gender, age and residence were also included. For individuals with mental or physical illness, questions regarding their medical history were asked. For the homeless children, questions about their parents were asked. For the prisoners, details regarding their imprisonment were part of the details requested.

### • **Almshouses / Poorhouses, etc.3**

Social services for the poor have been around in America since before the Revolutionary War. Early in the country’s history it was local communities that were faced with the challenge of taking care of these individuals in some way. The facilities were known by many different names – county farms, poor farms, almshouses, poorhouses or workhouses. Consider this list of people that may have been cared for in one of these facilities:

- Homeless Families (often due to natural disasters or fire)
- Destitute Families
- Victims of Domestic Abuse
- Unwed Mothers
- Orphans
- Elderly People (those unable to care for themselves or have family take them in)
- Seasonally Unemployed Workers
- Injured Workers (often worked in mines, factories, on the canals etc.)
- Handicapped People (mentally ill, mentally retarded, blind, physically handicapped)
- Sick People (those unable to pay for treatment with contagious or chronic diseases)

Many states passed laws that required these facilities to keep records on the individuals in their care. Below are some examples of sites where these types of records can be found.

### **Poorhouses Information By Location**

- [www.poorhousestory.com/other\\_poorhouses.htm](http://www.poorhousestory.com/other_poorhouses.htm)
- [www.cyndislist.com/poor/locality/](http://www.cyndislist.com/poor/locality/)

### **New York, Census of Inmates in Almshouses and Poorhouses, 1830-1920**

- [www.ancestry.com/s23557/t24702/rd.ashx](http://www.ancestry.com/s23557/t24702/rd.ashx)