

Finding Your One Among Millions: Methods & Tips for Urban Research, a New York City Case Study

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Family history research in a large city can be richly rewarding as urban centers typically keep better records. However, when it is your ancestor who does not appear in the vital records, how do you find a substitute record for them? Searching among the plethora of people in a city can be challenging. A case study in 19th-century New York City will illustrate some ways to navigate research in urban areas.



Rebecca Schellens, circa 1886

New York Quick Facts

- 62 counties, of which all but two existed by 1860
 - Nassau (1899 from Queens)
 - Bronx (1914 from New York)
- Vital Records (earliest dates, not complete, better after 1866)
 - Manhattan (1847 births, 1795 deaths)
 - Brooklyn (1866 births, 1847 deaths)
 - Albany (1870)
 - Statewide registration 1880, but typically not implemented until 1890 (deaths) and 1915 (births).
- State Census (1825, 1835, 1845, 1855, 1865, 1875, 1892, 1905, 1915, 1925). Not all dates exist for all counties. For extant records see: <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/genealogy/nyscens.htm>.
- Jurisdictions
 - Town – responsible for recording vital records. Towns are large geographic areas that include both rural and urban areas.
 - Village – also responsible for recording vital records. Villages are incorporated areas within a town.
 - Cities – larger population centers who also record vital records. Cities can exist within towns.
 - Hamlets – smaller, unincorporated areas without recorded vital records. The records would be at the village or town level.

Methods for Locating Urban Church Records

- Collect known locality data for the extended family: city directories, census, vital records.
- Collect resources to identify contemporary churches: city directories, Sanborn maps.
- Plot data: place family localities and historic churches on a period map using city directory street indexes.
- Analyze locality data and churches: determine the family's movement, and ward(s) where they lived and match those wards to zip codes.
- Locate present-day churches: find current churches within the identified zip codes.
- Correlate data: match the current churches to see which are still extant and determine possible record locations for those that were closed.
- Determine closest to the time frame of the potential record and contact them!

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