



The Genealogy Superpowers of an Occupation

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An occupation, whether it is a temporary job or a lifelong career, is a fact frequently used by genealogists and family historians. So what exactly can an occupation tell us about an ancestor?

The Anatomy of An Occupation

For most of our ancestors, an occupation was not necessarily a “career” as we see it in modern times, but a means of supporting oneself and one’s family. Whether your ancestor was a brick layer or a banker, there will be record sets to help discover more about your ancestors.

Some occupations will yield more information than others: white collar jobs such as accountant, lawyer and the like mean you’ll have access to the records of professional organizations, yearbooks, annual conferences etc. Yet blue collar positions, especially those where a union was organized, are also rich in records.

Once you’ve located the occupation of an ancestors, focus on two areas of further research: 1) did an ancestor change occupations over time and for what reasons; and 2) what did the occupation actually involve in terms of duties as well as hazards and accidents. Seek to find as much descriptive information as possible to add to your research.

Where to Find Occupation Information

Many of the basic records used by genealogists contain occupation data:

- **Federal and state census records.** The first census to list occupation for each member of the household was the 1850 Census. The 1840 Census did have a count of persons employed in specific classes of industry or occupation.
- **Vital records.** While you won’t find occupation data on birth certificates, you may find this information on marriage records as well as death certificates.
- **City and business directories.** Most directories would list the occupation of a resident. Also remember to check the business listing if your ancestor was a business owner. In addition, check for business advertisements in the directory.
- **Fraternal society records.** Some groups such as the National Grange were organized based on a specific profession or trade such as farming. Check to see if your ancestor belonged to a trade group based on his or her occupation.
- **Passenger lists.** Occupations were noted for both the incoming immigrant as well as the sponsor.



- **Newspapers.** Often an obituary would mention the occupation of the decedent as well as surviving children. Check for articles about the opening or closing of a business. And also review advertisements for any business owned by an ancestor.
- **Wills and probate documents.** The decedent's occupation would often be listed in these records especially if the assets of a business were to be parceled out to those mentioned in a will.
- **Property records.** Most personal property records won't list an occupation but if land were purchased for business purposes, you'll learn more about your ancestor's occupation.
- **Military records.** Draft cards and registers often recorded the occupation since some occupations were considered vital to the war effort and this information was needed by the local draft board.

Research Strategies Using Occupations

Whether looking for an occupation or using an occupation to expand your search, here are some strategies that have proven effective for other genealogists:

- **What exactly is the occupation?** Some occupations no longer exist or we tend to use more modern terms to describe the duties and activities of an occupation. Look for definitions of "old occupations" to make sure you understand the exact details of that occupation.
- **Look for similar occupations on census sheets and other records.** Scan population schedules as well as mortality schedules to find similar occupations. Many laborers such as railroad workers lived in the same tenement building or the same neighborhood. Learn more about possible co-workers who were part of your ancestor's "network."
- **Plot and track place of employment.** Using a mapping program such as Google Maps, pin locations where your ancestors were employed and determine the location relative to their residence. A visual depiction of cluster research data can help your research.
- **Track company history.** Was your ancestor a company man or woman? Did they work for the same employer for 30, 40 or more years? Research the place of employment and locate newspaper articles for information on growth or decline, as well as job promotions.
- **Check corporate archives and business records.** Some corporations maintain an archive of company history, either on-site or online. Contact the company (or determine the surviving company) and ask if they have an archive, the types of records to be found and how it can be accessed.



Sharing Your Family History Using Occupation Information

Besides recording an Occupation in your genealogy database, there are several ways in which you can use that occupation information in different family history-related projects.

- **Write a narrative.** After finding the occupations of a specific ancestor, and researching places of employment, job duties, etc., compose a brief narrative highlighting your ancestor's work experience. A fun way to do this is to create a "resume" for your ancestor!
- **Create a photobook, scrapbook or shadow box.** You may have inherited a collection of items related to an ancestor's occupation such as award pins, anniversary pins, or even retirement-related items. Scan and digitize records, letters, newspaper articles and even 3D items such as medals, pins and ribbons. Research the person's occupation and the company where he or she worked. Create a commemorative item to share with family and friends.
- **Share via social media.** Look for Facebook groups related to companies that no longer exist or for former employees of a company. Join the group and post information about your ancestor and their occupation. Check for message boards related to specific companies and post information there as well.

Resource List

- **Ancestry Message Boards: Occupations**
<http://boards.ancestry.com/topics.occupations/mb.ashx>
- **Cyndi's List: Occupations**
<http://www.cyndislist.com/occupations/>
- **Directory of Corporate Archives in the United States and Canada**
<https://abundantgenealogy.com/corporate-archives-directory-us-can>
- **Dictionary of Old Occupations and Trades**
<https://www.thoughtco.com/dictionary-of-old-occupations-and-trades-1422235>
- **Discovering the Occupations of Your Ancestors**
<https://www.thoughtco.com/discovering-the-occupations-of-your-ancestors-1422324>
- **Employment Records – Genealogy Today**
http://data.genealogytoday.com/contents/Employment_Records.html
- **Surnames via Occupations**
<http://surnames.behindthename.com/names/source/occupation>