

This handout primarily uses examples and repositories from the United States; record types and government jurisdictions vary by place and period.

INTRODUCTION

Finding an ancestor's occupation is often just the beginning of the story. Whether they owned a business or worked for one, their occupation may have created records that document their education, employment, business activities, professional affiliations, and daily work.

Following those clues can lead from a simple occupational label to the business itself, the workplace, the surrounding industry, and the organizations connected to it. Each question points toward new records and repositories that can help reconstruct a fuller picture of an ancestor's working life.

STARTING WITH AN OCCUPATION

An ancestor's occupation may appear in census records, city directories, vital records, obituaries, military records, tax records, probate files, and newspapers. Compare multiple records over time, because one source may give only a general occupation while another identifies an employer, specialty, or business ownership. Look for:

- Occupation or trade
- Employer or business name
- Industry
- Work location
- Owner, employee, partner, or apprentice
- Changes in occupation over time

FOLLOWING THE CLUES, ASK BETTER QUESTIONS

An occupation is more than a job title—it provides clues that can lead to additional records. The key is recognizing those clues and asking the questions they suggest. Each answer leads to new records, new evidence, and a deeper understanding of an ancestor's working life.

Category	Questions to ask
Business	Owned or employed? Business name? Products or services? Incorporated? DBA names? Business name changes? Still exists? Location and surroundings? Near transportation? Neighboring businesses?
Industry	What industry? What products or services? Growing or declining? Labor disputes or economic events?
Education & Training	Formal education required? Apprenticeship?

Category	Questions to ask
Licensing & Regulation	License or certification required? Regulated at the local, state, or federal level?
Professional Organizations	Labor union? Professional or trade association?

EXPLORING THE BUSINESS

Records created by or filed on behalf of a business can identify owners, partners, officers, employees, customers, locations, and dates of operation. They may also reveal how the business was organized, how it changed over time, and whether additional records survive.

- Business licenses
- Articles of incorporation
- Annual reports
- Partnership agreements
- Ledgers and account books
- Customer accounts
- Payroll records
- Personnel records
- Minute books
- Correspondence
- Contracts
- Invoices
- Stockholder records
- Bankruptcy records
- Insurance records
- Employee newsletters
- Company magazines

Look for these records in: Secretary of State offices, county and municipal records, corporate archives, historical societies, museums, university special collections, and local libraries.

RESEARCHING THE WORKPLACE

The location of a business can reveal valuable clues about an ancestor's daily work environment. Maps, directories, photographs, and local histories help place the business within its community, identify neighboring businesses, and provide context for how the business operated.

- Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps
- Plat maps
- Bird's-eye maps
- City directories
- Historic photographs and postcards
- Aerial photographs
- Deeds and land records
- Tax assessment records
- Local histories
- Railroad maps

Look for these records in: Library of Congress, local libraries, historical societies, county recorder's office, state archives, university map collections, and David Rumsey Map Collection.

UNDERSTANDING THE OCCUPATION

Many occupations required education, training, licensing, certification, or membership in professional organizations. Even occupations that required little formal training may have generated records documenting employment, apprenticeships, labor unions, or professional activities. Understanding the occupation itself can lead to records that reveal an ancestor's qualifications, career, and professional life.

- School, college, and university records
- Apprenticeship records
- Licensing and certification records
- Labor union records
- Professional association records
- Membership directories
- Professional journals
- Occupational histories
- Certification examinations
- Continuing education records

Look for these records in: colleges and universities, state licensing boards, labor union archives, professional associations, corporate archives, state archives, historical societies, and libraries.

EXAMINING THE INDUSTRY

An ancestor's occupation was shaped by the industry in which they worked. Learning about that industry can provide valuable context, explain changes in employment, and identify additional sources that document the business, its workers, and the products or services it provided.

- Trade journals and magazines
- Industry directories
- Trade association publications
- Government reports and investigations
- Industry histories
- Trade catalogs
- Patent records
- Technical manuals
- Museum collections and exhibits
- Oral histories
- Company anniversary publications

Look for these records in: libraries, state archives, National Archives, industry and trade associations, museums, university special collections, Google Books, HathiTrust, Internet Archive.

LOCATING THE RECORDS

Business records are often preserved in many different repositories rather than a single location. Before contacting an archive or library, use online catalogs and finding aids to identify collections that may contain the records you're seeking. Once you've identified a potential repository, search its catalog, review available finding aids, and contact the institution if additional information is needed.

Access note: Privately created records may not have survived or may remain closed. Ask repositories about restrictions, uncatalogued material, retention schedules, and related collections.

Online Search Tools

Tool	Best for
FamilySearch Catalog familysearch.org/search/catalog/	Books, manuscripts, digitized and microfilmed records, and local history collections.
ArchiveGrid researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/	Manuscript collections, business records, personal papers, photographs, and archival finding aids.
WorldCat search.worldcat.org/	Books, company histories, annual reports, trade publications, directories, and library holdings worldwide.
Google Books books.google.com/	Company histories, trade journals, government publications, annual reports, and local histories.
HathiTrust Digital Library hathitrust.org/	Digitized books, trade journals, government documents, directories, and industry publications.
Internet Archive archive.org/	Historical books, city directories, trade journals, annual reports, and business publications.
Digital Public Library of America dp.la/	Digitized photographs, manuscripts, books, maps, newspapers, and archival materials from libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies across the United States.
National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC) loc.gov/coll/nucmc/	Manuscript collection descriptions and repository information.

When records aren't available online, consider who created, maintained, or preserved them. Contact the repository and inquire about uncatalogued collections.

CONCLUSION

Many occupations leave a paper trail, although the records may be scattered, restricted, uncatalogued, or no longer extant. By learning to recognize clues, ask better questions, and look beyond traditional genealogy sources, you can discover records that bring your ancestor's work and daily life into sharper focus.

SUGGESTED READING & RESOURCES

1. Szucs, Loretto Dennis, and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, eds. *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy*. 3rd ed. Provo, UT: Ancestry, 2006.
2. Library of Congress. *Business History: A Resource Guide*. Accessed July 31, 2026. <https://guides.loc.gov/business-history-research>.
3. FamilySearch Research Wiki. "United States Business and Occupations." Accessed July 31, 2026. https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Business_and_Occupations.
4. Library of Congress. "Business Research Guides." *Science, Technology & Business Division*. Accessed July 31, 2026. <https://www.loc.gov/research-centers/science-and-business/researcher-resources/research-guides/business-research-guides/>.