

How Disputes Can Benefit Genealogical Research

Family and neighbor disputes are always unpleasant to deal with. However, from a genealogical research perspective, these issues may provide significant research benefits because they usually leave a paper trail. This is especially true if the issue turned into a legal matter that had to be settled in court. If the dispute became heated enough, a law enforcement agency such as the local police or sheriff may have been called to break up the altercation. Even if no arrest was made, a police report would have been generated.

Family disputes can be especially emotional. Many researchers who find old correspondence often discover intimate details of relationships that caused splits within the family itself or feuds with neighbors. In some cases, the splits or feuds may have turned violent or led to permanent estrangement.

Besides family and neighbors, disputes may have involved a local business or business associates, employers, churches, schools, hospitals, or governmental entity whether it be on the local, state, or federal level. Disputes fitting these examples would definitely lead to hiring of attorneys and generating court records. The most common records where evidence would appear include land records, civil and criminal court proceedings, probate records, and correspondence from attorneys and governmental entities.

Land records may document long, drawn out arguments between neighbors or others over boundaries and/or ownership. Additional problems such as the perceived quality of the land, lack of, or poorly done surveys, or difficulty in determining proper documentation would also generate legal problems. Sometimes these records include detailed testimonials from neighbors, relatives, business associates, etc., supporting the claims of disputants, and detailed accounts of relationships between the various parties.

Civil court records may shed light on lawsuits filed against individuals for a variety of claims. For example, if they were a business owner or merchant, there may be litigation over unpaid accounts, defective work, or related issues. Probate records can reveal many beneficial clues. If an ancestor died intestate (without a will), or if they had a will that the heirs contested, the probate court will have documentation of the process of settling the estate, lists of creditors, heirs, and statements from anyone applying to administer the estate based on their relationship to the deceased. Criminal court proceedings may provide detailed information on offenses and testimony from witnesses, which may include family members.

Correspondence from attorneys and governmental agencies may provide a variety of clues. Examples may include the nature or summations of accusations, questions pertaining to specifics in the case or dispute, name the court where the proceedings took place, case and docket numbers, and names of people directly or indirectly involved in the matter at hand.

Governmental correspondence may include information on complaints against the entity over damages to crops, lack of support for settlements, roads, unpaid wages, or incompetent civil

servants and how their conduct impacted the person or family which led to the dispute or legal action.

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