

Personal Journals, Diaries and Old Letters in Genealogical Research

Prior to the 20th century, the ability to read and write was not considered a top priority by our ancestors. Paper was also a very scarce and expensive commodity. If you are fortunate enough to uncover a surviving journal or diary, this could greatly enhance your prospects for research success.

Journals, diaries, and old letters can serve many purposes for the genealogist. They may shed light on a number of genealogical research issues including:

1. Family relationships
2. Former places of residence
3. Places of visitation
4. Major events in the life of an ancestor or family
5. Reasons for migration from one area to another
6. Religious affiliation
7. Educational and economic status of the writer
8. Offer personal (the writer) observations which may be useful in helping the researcher understand the time period

Journals, diaries, and old letters may be the closest option available if older family members are deceased. Writers may have jotted down facts and personal feelings that would have never been made public to the family or anyone else.

When examining these types of materials it is wise to have a genealogical dictionary handy. The terminology used in wording will reflect the meanings relevant to that time period. Some professionals have also suggested having a handwriting style book handy as well. Reading penmanship from the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries can be a challenge.

When the text refers to an individual or members of a family, it is also wise to determine what the relationship was between the writer and those names in the source. This may help you determine the relevance and accuracy of the information.

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