

After the Fire: Techniques for Overcoming Record Loss

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Class Description: Did you know over half of the counties in Kentucky suffered record losses? Jennifer will demonstrate techniques to advance research objectives while working within a burned county. She will present examples of the methodology used to work around the destruction of sources. Learn the importance of understanding jurisdictions and including the FAN club in your burned county research.



Oakland Public Library, photograph, 1875, Alameda County, California, Courthouse. Permission to use.

Key Takeaways

- Burned counties are not brick walls.
- Counties have children too!
- How to determine if a county suffered record loss and where to locate remaining sources.
- Importance researching locality, jurisdictions, and context.
- When, why, and how to locate and utilize duplicate, substitute, and replacement sources.

A “burned county” refers to any county that has experienced record loss. Most counties suffer from record losses due to fires; hence they’re coined burned counties. However, many events, besides fires, cause a county to suffer record losses. Some examples are tornados, flooding, cyclones, hurricanes, earthquakes, war, explosions, arson, theft, record retention, deterioration, bookworms, vermin, mold, and faded ink. Do not assume that all record collections were destroyed because a county suffered record loss.

The FamilySearch research wiki lists county formation and parent county data to help understand the locality.¹ County histories are a great resource that can often be found at HathiTrust.² The FamilySearch catalog is an excellent site to search for surviving collections, but not all counties have all collections in their catalog. An example is Alameda County, California, which can require making a trip to the courthouse or clerk’s office to search the records.³ If that is not possible, contact the county and ask

¹ FamilySearch, Research Wiki (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Kentucky,_United_States_Genealogy : accessed 1 August 2023).

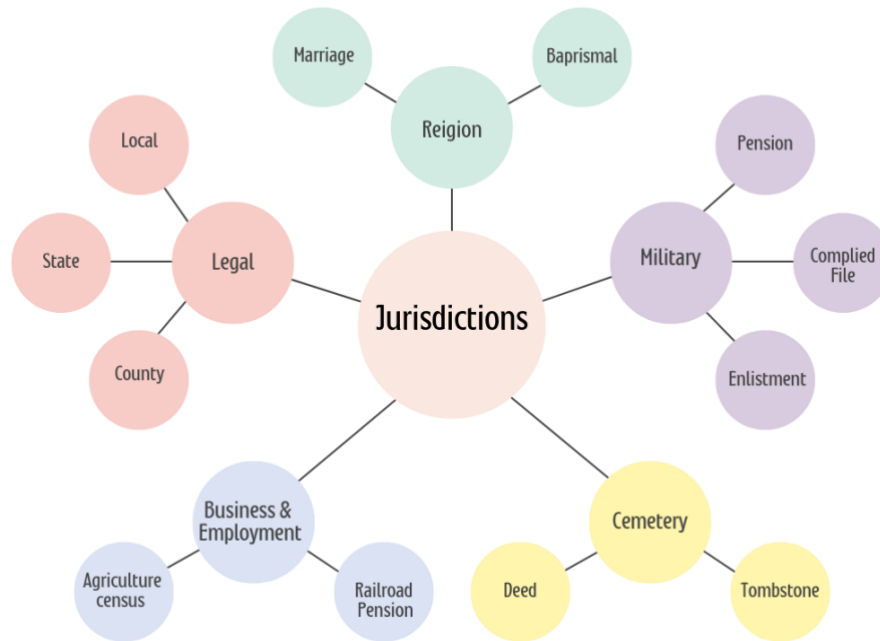
² HathiTrust, Digital Library (<https://www.hathitrust.org/> : accessed 1 August 2023).

³ FamilySearch, Alameda County, California, catalog (<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/results> : accessed 1 August 2023).

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about their record-ordering process. Record collections are also held at local, state, college, and university libraries. State archives, historical societies, genealogical societies, and the National Archives (NARA).

Diagram 1



When researching in a burned county, it is critical to understand the area's history, border changes, and jurisdictions to locate enough records to answer a research objective. Placing ancestors in a historical context will identify jurisdictions to research. Diagram one presents several jurisdictions and a few types of documents found within them.

There are several options available to research the history of the area. County histories can place ancestors in a historical context, and newspapers from the region offer firsthand accounts of the disaster, the happenings, and the events therein. It is critical to understand the boundary changes of the region before analyzing documents. Take time to study the county, boundary changes, jurisdictions, and record loss in your research notes.

- o Much of the South was rural, backwoods country.
- o Many records were destroyed by climate, poor storage, and war.
- o 22 Kentucky Courthouses' were burned during the Civil War

Courthouse Records that Might be Lost

- o Marriage records
- o Wills and other probate records
- o Land records: order books, warrants, plat books, patent & deed registration, tax lists

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- Court records – civil, criminal, guardianship, naturalization, divorce, adoption, indentures, ear marks, strays

Replacement Sources:

Genealogists could locate replacement sources if the county suffered catastrophic record loss or if the record collection needed to answer a research question was lost. There are three document types to fill the gap, duplicate, substitute, and replacement.⁴

Duplicate: A handwritten or typed copy of the lost original document.

- A marriage certificate is lost, but the marriage was also recorded in a county register
- Pages in a Family Bible with birth, death, and marriage were copied by hand and included in a Revolutionary War Veteran's pension file.

Substitute: Contains the same or similar information as the lost record but was created for another purpose.

- The 1810 census is lost, but a tax list identifies the person of interest living in a specific county.
- The probate file is lost, but land records identify the children of the person of interest

Replacement: Replicating a new record to replace the lost document.

- Land records were destroyed and recreated after the disaster
- Marriage records were destroyed and recreated after the disaster

Exercises

Answering these questions is optional, but putting techniques and methods into practice will be beneficial to overcoming your burned county brickwalls. Hint: Search the bibliography and recommended reading! Feel free to email me with any questions or if you want to check your answers.

1. When was Culpeper County, Virginia, formed?
2. What is Culpeper County's parent county?
3. Did Culpeper County, Virginia, experience record loss?
 - Yes or No
 - What was the cause of the record loss?
 - Did Culpeper suffer catastrophic or considerable loss?
4. What record collections are still available?
5. What jurisdictions in the county could hold other record collections?
6. What state or federal repositories could hold Culpeper County record collections?

⁴ Marsha Hoffman Rising, *The Family Tree Problem Solver: Proven Methods for Scaling the Inevitable Brick Wall* (Cincinnati, Ohio : FamilyTree Books, 2005), pages 144-146.

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7. The Washington County, Tennessee, 1790 census is lost. What is a substitute record, or records, that can verify William Green resided in Washington County during that year?

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Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness. State Guides. <https://raogk.org/counties/tennessee/>. List of counties with burned courthouses. The "state counties quicklink" on the left sidebar for the state you are researching.

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