

## RESEARCH GUIDE

# Finding Your Family in Wills and Probate Records

*Probate records are some of the most valuable documents you'll come across doing your family history. These records, created after an individual's death, often exist in time periods when birth, marriage, and death records are unavailable and contain personal details unlike any other record. Even though you might not have known your ancestors, you can discover the people and possessions they cared about and perhaps learn a little more about their character and personality.*

## ***The Wills and Probate Collection on Ancestry***

*Ancestry is home to the largest online collection of documented wills and probate records for the United States. You'll find records for all 50 states covering more than 300 years, from 1668 to 2005. That's more than 170 million documents available for browsing. The size of this unprecedented collection means you're likely to find at least one of your ancestors.*

## Types of probate records

- Accounts and inventories
- Adoptions
- Apprenticeships
- Bonds
- Deeds and land records
- Estate taxes
- Guardianships
- Marriage settlements
- Name changes
- Petitions
- Wills and codicils

## What Are Probate Records?

When a person dies, a variety of records are created as the court deals with the distribution of the deceased's estate. The term "probate records" broadly covers all the records produced by state laws, although, strictly speaking, "probate" applies only when there is a will. Whether the deceased individual left only some personal property or a large estate, it's likely that you'll find records that tell you names of family members, lists of personal possessions, and information about property and residences. Unlike other types of records, probates are usually made up of multiple loose papers gathered together into a packet. Here are some records you'll typically find in a probate packet:

### **Wills**

A will gives instructions on how an individual wants their estate distributed at the time of their death. It usually describes the individual's land and property and includes names of heirs, witnesses, and guardians. You may even find your ancestor's signature.

### **Petitions**

To begin the probate process, a petition must be filed with the court. Typically this is done by one of the deceased individual's heirs. It often includes names, relationships, and residences of heirs.



**Inventories**

A probate inventory lets you see the belongings that your ancestor actually owned—and their worth. From the cost of their bed linens and number of cows they had to the deeply personal items like watches, photos, and shaving tools, you'll be able to form a more complete picture of your family member, their life, and how they compared to others in the community.



Goods, claimed by the Widow, under the Execution Law, to wit:		
2 Beds and bedding, \$27.00, Wearing apparel \$20.00		\$47.00
1 Cow \$18.00, 1 Sheep \$2.00, 1 Spinning wheel \$1.50		21.50
10 lbs of Fat \$1.00, 1 Lot of Books \$1.00, 1 Lot of meat \$10.00	80	12.00
1 Tub & lot of Carpet, \$5.00, 1 Lot of Bags \$4.00		9.00
1 Supper Kettle & Baskets, \$2.00, 1 Lot of Poles \$1.00		3.00
10 lbs. Linen & box \$2.00, 1 Knocding trough & Yaw, \$1.00		3.00
4 Iron kettles & 2 pans, \$3.50, 1 Lot of tin ware, \$3.25		6.75
2 Smoothing irons, fire tong & shovel & Coffermil,		1.50
4 Tubs, & Churn \$3.50, 1 Iron kettle, \$1.00		4.50
2 Locking Glasses,		2.25
3 Tables, \$6.00, 13 Chairs, \$9.00, 1 Lot of books, \$2.00		17.00
3 Bureaus, \$31.00, 1 Bed & bedding, \$10.00		41.00
2 Coverlets & 4 Quilts, \$9.00, 1 Lot of Linen & Bedding, \$10.00		19.00
1 Chest, \$3.00, 1 Saddle & bridle, \$6.00, 1 Whip \$1.50		10.50
1 String of Wels, 1 Robe and a lot of Baskets &c.		8.00
1 Cupboard with all the ware therein,		13.00
1 Iron pot 2 Buckets &c. \$2.00, 2 Fire holds, \$1.50		3.50
1 Oats Cradle, 1 Graps Scythe & 1 axe,		4.50
1 Silver watch, \$11.00, 1 Lot of Pictures, & shaving tools, \$2.00		6.00
1 Wagon, \$70.00, 1 Steed, \$15.50, 1 Horse, \$77.50		163.00
1 Mare, \$71.00, 1 Cold, \$26.00, 2 Cows, \$30.00		127.00
2 Cow Chains,		50
		\$522.50

To the Honorable the Judges, of the Orphans Court, for the County of Berks.

The Petition of Rebecca Reed and Maria Reed Minor Children of Michael G Reed Late of Bethel Township Berks County, by their Mother Catherine Reed Respectfully Represents

That the Petitioners are under the age of fourteen Years, and have no Person to take care of their Persons, and Estates, they therefore Pray the Court to Appoint some Suitable Person as Guardian for their Purpose.

And they will Pray &c

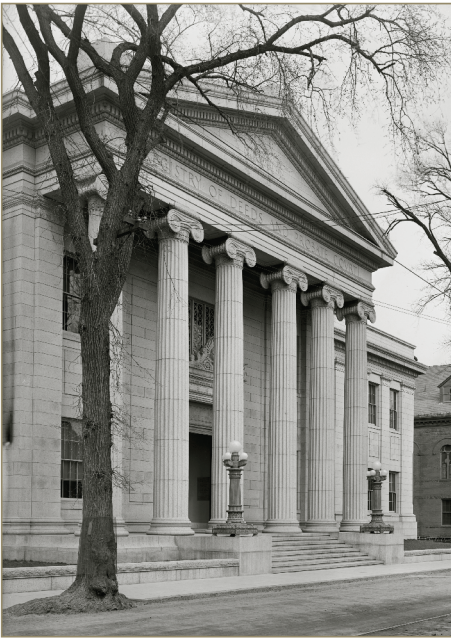
Catherine Reed

For Rebecca Reed and Maria Reed

**Guardianship and orphans' court records**

A guardian is someone that the court appoints to be responsible for the interests of minor children. They are often relatives or close friends of the family. Keep in mind that an "orphan" might have a living parent who is appointed as the guardian. In these records you'll often see names of widows, ages of children, and residences.





## Searching for Wills and Probate Records

Before Ancestry created their extensive online collection of probate records, you'd usually have to visit local courthouses to find these documents. Now you can locate these records in the comfort of your own home.

### Before You Begin

Your searches will be more successful if you have a general idea of when and where your ancestor died (state and county). Keep in mind that not every person has probate records, and men who were property owners are much more likely to have them than women.

Tip: Although an individual's probate may contain dozens of names of interest to you, at this time you can search only for the deceased person. This means you shouldn't wait for hints to identify your ancestors. They may be in records for other family members but you won't get hints for them unless they are the person the probate packet is for.

SEARCH
 Match all terms exactly

**First & Middle Name(s)**

Exact, sounds like, similar & initials

**Last Name**

Exact...

**Death**

Day  Month  Year

**Any Event**

**Location**

**Keyword**

e.g. pilot or "Flying Tigers" ▾

**Case Number**

**Probate Place**

Day  Month  Year

**Location**

Exact...

**Probate Date**

SEARCH
Clear search

### Searching the Collection

When you're searching for probate records, think about the details you expect to find in the records you're looking for: a name, death date, and location where the records were probated. Use these to complete the search fields. Even if you don't have an exact death date, an educated guess can help. Use the Exact checkbox to specify +/- 1, 2, 5, or 10 years on either side of your date.

Tip: The probate process can take time so make sure you search in the years following the death, too. And if the individual owned property in multiple states, make search you look for records in each one.

### Browsing the Collection

If you don't find your ancestor in the collection using a search, you can also browse through each state county by county.

Tip: Probate records vary by state (and even year). Sometimes you'll find packets containing multiple documents, sometimes you'll find only a single record.



## Navigating Through the Records

As mentioned previously, probate records usually contain a variety of papers that have been gathered together into a packet. Because their format is different than many family history records, Ancestry has created special tools to help you get the most from the records.

1. To navigate through every document in a packet, use the green or gray arrows.
2. If you don't see the filmstrip (or if you want to hide it) click the filmstrip icon.
3. To go to a specific page, enter the number and press **Return** or **Enter**.
4. Click the people icon to open the index panel.
5. In the filmstrip, a green line highlights every document that is part of a person's probate packet. As you scroll through the packet, the line remains, helping you know if you're still looking at records in the same packet.
6. To view a specific image, click its thumbnail in the filmstrip.
7. To hide the panel on the right that includes the table of contents, click the panel icon.
8. The index displays the individual's name, probate dates, and a table of contents (if you're viewing a packet). Click **Related Content** to see other records that might be for this person and Ancestry members who have saved this record to their tree.
9. To quickly access a specific document, click its link in the table of contents.

The screenshot displays the Ancestry interface for 'Utah, Wills and Probate Records, 1800-2000'. The main document viewer shows a petition for the estate of Nathan Gedge, deceased, filed in 1902. The document text includes details about the petitioner, Charlotte L. Gedge, and the deceased's estate. The interface includes a filmstrip at the bottom showing thumbnails for the cover page and petition papers. A right-hand panel provides an index with fields for NAME (Nathan Gedge), PROBATE DATE (16 Nov 1905), PROBATE COUNTY (Sevier), and CASE NUMBER (4584). Below the index is a table of contents listing various document types and their page ranges.

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