

Hidden Treasures from FamilySearch.org

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Unindexed record collections, digital film, and digitized family history books are hidden treasures. Some record collections on FamilySearch.org have been fully indexed, some partially, and some not at all. While many records have been indexed—about 3.7 billion—another 1.3 billion (26%) have not; approaching half (42%) of all collections have not been indexed at all; 41% of images have not been indexed (as of July 2016). Are unindexed collections really unindexed? These treasures are hidden until you learn how to use them.

Collections

- Learn of the existence of collections using the FamilySearch Catalog, the collection list, the Wiki, and Google. Learn of books using the catalog.
- To see the collection list, select Search and then select Records. Select Browse All Published Collections. (Look underneath the Search button.) Collections with images have a camera icon in the collection list and a browse link on the collection page.
- To restrict Google searches to FamilySearch.org, include [site:FamilySearch.org]. (Don't type the square brackets.)
- Check the catalog entry, the collection description, and the wiki for important information such as collection coverage, indexing status, publication progress, record organization, known issues, and other important information. "This collection is being published as images become available" means it is an "Express" publication.

Waypoints

- The images in a collection are grouped for convenient browsing. A group of images may correspond to one or more physical volumes, a roll of microfilm, or some other natural grouping.
- Waypoints—also called browse points—mark pathways to the image groups. At each waypoint the path branches by locality, date, record type, or other natural division.
- Waypoints are organized in a *hierarchy*. For example, "[Central America Colonial Records](#)" is divided into countries, which are divided into provinces, which are divided into cities, which are divided into volumes.
- County records of the United States are often published in state collections with a simple hierarchy: county and then volume.

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- Large collections sorted by surname are often waypointed into ranges. For example, the index for "[United States Mexican War Index and Service Records, 1846-1848](#)" is waypointed into ranges A-Ba, Bd-Bron, etc.
 - The display of the waypoint pathway is called a breadcrumb trail. It allows quick navigation back up the hierarchy. Waypoints are displayed alphabetically, not logically, so there may be unexpected gaps or overlaps.
 - When FamilySearch publishes images before waypoints are ready, digital film numbers are used as placeholders. (For more information, see "[Browsing Images with Film Numbers as the Browse Point](#)" in the [FamilySearch.org Help Center](#).) Film notes in the catalog may assist interpreting the numbers' meanings.
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Image Groups

- Waypoint names, particularly the final one, indicate the records that can be found in the image group.
 - Familiarize yourself with the first several images in the group.
 - If the image group was scanned from a FamilySearch microfilm, one of the first images might be the film number. Learn about the records by looking up the film in the FamilySearch catalog. (See "[Using Film Notes in the Catalog to Determine the Content of a Final Browse Point in Historical Records](#)" in the FamilySearch.org Help Center.) A title board may specify location, volume title, record type, and date range.
 - If the image group was scanned from a United States National Archives and Record Administration microfilm, the first images may contain a pamphlet describing the arrangement of the records.
 - If the group is a record volume, look for the volume cover, spine, and title page. These often indicate record type and date range. Look for instructions, tables of content, and indexes.
 - Check to see if separate images were taken for the left and right hand pages, or front and back of documents. Figure out the numbering scheme for pages, folios, certificates, etc. Image numbers do not match page, folio, or certificate numbers, making it challenging to find a desired record. Remember that records are often ordered by recording date, not event date.
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Indexes

- Indexes and other finding aids have existed long before computers and those indexes can be used to find records in collections without computerized indexes.
 - As you familiarize yourself with a collection, look for indexes and finding aids. They may be identified in catalog titles, catalog notes for the collection, waypoints, wiki article, and collection description.
 - Indexes may reside within the same image group as the records, or they may be in a separate group. They may be in separate collections. Indexes
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in separate volumes may be named obviously, or obscurely, just as they were in the courthouse or other archive.

- Before computers, genealogists often published indexes in genealogical periodicals or books. Look for these. Computerized indexes may exist in separate collections (like the IGI) or on other websites.

Index Organization

- Indexes may be organized geographically, chronologically, numerically, strictly alphabetically, but typically in semi-alphabetical name groups.
- Semi-alphabetical name groups are formed in many ways. For example, entries for surnames starting with the same letter might be grouped together, though not alphabetical within the group. Within groups, entries might be ordered chronologically or numerically.
- Name groups can be organized in more complex ways. Names might be grouped by several letters of the surname, the first three letters, the first and third letters, or the first letter and the first vowel. They might be grouped by the first letter of the surname and the first letter of the given name. Common surnames might exist as separate groups. If there is a set amount of space for each group, there may be separate space for overflow.
- If the index is complex, there may be a guide table—a sub-index or index to the index. The guide table may be at the front of the volume or section. Or it may be in the top or side margins of the page. When name groups are out of order, a guide table is essential.
- To divide names into groups, a Russell (or L-M-N-R-T) Index uses the first letter of the surname, the first key letter (L, M, N, R, or T) following it, and the first letter of the given name. It can be recognized by a skeleton key at the top of each page. To find a name, locate the key table. Find the column for the first key letter (after the initial letter) in the surname. Find the row for the first letter of the given name. Find the section number at the intersection of the column and row.
- Deeds are indexed twice, once by seller (grantor) and once by buyer (grantee). Grantor indexes are also called forward or direct indexes. Grantee indexes are also called reverse or indirect indexes.

Binary Search Method

- Take the highest image number and divide by two. We will call this the *step* size. Add the step size to the current image. Check the image. If it is sufficiently close to the desired record, go image-by-image to the desired record. If not, divide the step size by two. If the current image is past the desired image, subtract the step size from the current image number to obtain the next image to check. Otherwise, add the step size to the image number. Check the image and repeat the process. During the process, round the step size up as desired to make arithmetic easier.

Boundary Search Method

- Boundary Search is a simple method for finding the desired record. It tracks the upper and lower bounds for the desired image.
- Start by making a note of the highest and lowest image numbers for the image group. If you can, calculate the image number of the desired record. If you cannot, guess about half-way between the high and low boundaries. Check the image. If it is sufficiently close to the desired record, go image-by-image to the desired record. If not, update the high or low boundary and repeat the process.
- You can calculate the image number if you know the numbered record (pages, certificates, etc.) per image or the number of images per record. Look to see how many records you need to move in order to get to the desired record. If using records per image, divide the number of records by the records per image. If using images per record, multiple the number of records by the images per record. Add or subtract the result from the current image number. Check the image. If it is not the desired record, update the high or low boundary and repeat the process.

References and Suggested Readings

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