



7 Tips for Finding Hidden Stories and Treasures at the Church History Archives

by Rhonda Lauritzen | Aug. 17, 2019

[Mormon Life](#)



The following article has been adapted and republished with permission from evalogue.life.

If you have an interest in finding your family's history, you may be overlooking a goldmine of sources, context, and personalities from the past. I had been missing this treasure when I unexpectedly found a goldmine of 19th-century women's voices as part of a project to nominate the [Ephraim Relief Society Granary](#) to the [National Register of Historic Places](#). It took my breath away when my own ancestors made unexpected appearances, and I wept when I read the feisty quote of my fourth-great grandmother. Originally I thought I would find what I needed at the [Family History Library](#) in Salt Lake City, but ultimately discovered answers at the [Church History Library](#). It is crucial to know that these are different buildings with different databases. Could your ancestors be awaiting your discovery there too? Keep reading for 7 tips.

[Watch video: Forgotten history of the Ephraim Relief Society Granary](#)

What You Can Find at the Church History Library:

The [Church History Library](#) contains journals, town histories, and records from local wards and Relief Societies. These include minutes that are generally not digitized and often contain candid notes and names of members. They also have photos, personal papers, and articles. Even if you don't find anything specific about your family, this is a wonderful resource for painting a portrait of the broader community that adds color and brings your ancestral [story](#) to life.

The Project That Led Me Here:

In the summer of 2018, I was asked to research and co-author a nomination to put the [Ephraim Relief Society Granary](#) on the [National Register of Historic Places](#). In the very first phone call, the lead architect, [Shalae Larsen](#), told about her personal connection to Ephraim saying, “My third-great-grandfather was the pioneer painter [C.C.A. Christensen](#).” The Executive Director for [Granary Arts](#) replied, “Yes, we’ve heard of him. C.C.A.’s cabin is located on our property, right behind [the granary](#).” When I arrived onsite, I discovered that I too had connections to that exact plot of land. A monument referencing my own ancestors was right at the property as well. You can’t make this stuff up! In doing the work of telling family stories, I have come to believe that ancestors want to be [remembered](#) and that they will beckon if we are listening.

Later, as I devoured research, a quote from my fourth great-grandmother jumped off the page. I had already tracked down her pioneer story on [FamilySearch](#), and it touched me so deeply that tears rolled down my cheeks. ([Related: Pioneer stories help us work harder, be more grateful](#)). Here in the minutes, however, was a whole different side of her. She spoke in a Relief Society meeting with stubbornness and even a tinge of sarcasm. Annie was holding out for the women to get their own space. Whoever kept the minutes captured her personality, not as the sort of formal testimony that one might write for posterity, but with a rare glimpse into the room. It showed what the ladies discussed and more importantly, clues about what they were thinking.

Relief Society minutes for many towns can be found at the [Church History Library](#). For my project not only did I locate

those minutes but I amassed *31 pages* of call numbers and summaries related to my project.

What I Found at the Church History Library— 5 Luminous Discoveries:

Full histories already compiled: I pored over complete books beautifully compiled by the Ephraim Relief Society women telling their own history. Before this visit I had been nibbling on breadcrumbs, and here was a feast already prepared. These books contained the dates, anecdotes, and details I craved and needed. I found the deeds that set the National Register nomination straight. Now we could finish it. This is the sort of color that brings a story to life.

Candid papers: The Church History Library archives also contained journals, letters, photos and town histories. Both the *quantity* and *quality* of primary sources about Ephraim blew me away.

Relief Society minutes: Buried deep in the basement was microfilm containing the ward and Relief Society minutes from the inception of the town.

Connecting with other researchers: The desk librarian put me in touch with a wonderful researcher who wrote her dissertation on the very subject I was researching.

An uncanny connection: While seated at one of the microfilm computers, I found an architectural drawing of my ancestor [Isaac Behunin's](#) house. As I had this file on the screen, the man at the computer next to me asked about my project. I shared, and he replied, "Oh yes, I know the [Ephraim Granary](#) well. I'm

researching the painter [C.C.A. Christensen](#).” Are you kidding me? Of all the days, times, and computers, we two were side-by-side looking at files related to my ancestor and one of my colleague’s. ([Read related article: There are no coincidences – prayer and the uncanny](#)).

7 Tips to Maximize Your Time at the Church History Library:

You might get lucky and find what you need already digitized online, but you have to go in person for most records. If you do make a trip, count on running out of time. Here are some tips with that in mind:

1. Research the online database in advance.
2. Watch the training video at home before you go. You can’t enter the reading room until you have.
3. Request restricted items and microfilm first because they will take time to pull.
4. Bring a method to [digitize like mad](#), such as your smartphone and possibly a lightbox/Shotbox. (That’s the combo I use). Wait to read and sort out your treasures at home.
5. Bring a helper, if you can.
6. Respect copyright, cite your sources, and give credit.
7. Watch the clock. Time passes faster than you think.

If you are planning to attend [RootsTech](#), take some time while in Salt Lake City to jump over to the Church History Library.

Rhonda Lauritzen is the founder and an author at [Evalogue.Life – Tell Your Story](#). Rhonda lives to hear and write about people's lives, especially the uncanny moments. She and her husband Milan restored an old Victorian in Ogden and work together, weaving family and business together. Check out her latest book, [Remember When](#), the inspiring Norma and Jim Kier story.

Comments and feedback can be sent to comments@ldsiving.com