

## Adding Social Context to Women Ancestors

Even though you know the names, birthdates, marriages, and death dates of women ancestors, this is just the beginning. If you stop now, you leave her as a one-dimensional person, instead of a woman who lived a full, busy life.

A family history becomes more interesting and readable when you go beyond vital statistics and include information about the time and place where the family lived. While this information can be easier to find for male ancestors—they left more diaries, plus had careers easier to research—this doesn't mean you can't find information about the women in your family tree. Women who lived in a particular time and place with the same economic status shared many experiences in common. County histories often tell what women's lives were like in different time periods as do social histories. Still, none are more personal than letters and diaries women left behind.

Many published diaries are out of print, so while new copies may not be available, used copies are. These as well as many other books about women are available at [www.mygenealogybooks.com](http://www.mygenealogybooks.com).

### Examples of Women Diaries

**Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750** by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. As the author points out, men ruled, and women obeyed. However, while gender roles may have been consistent, regardless of where a woman lived, their lives still differed depending on whether they lived on the frontier, on a farm or in town. Women were responsible for cooking, housekeeping and childcare; in addition to these duties, each woman had outside chores. If you have a Puritan female ancestor, this book will help you understand more about her life.

**Surviving on the Texas Frontier: The Journal of an Orphan Girl in San Saba County** by Sarah Harkey Hall. Sarah's life as a child in early Texas wasn't as unusual as it may seem, especially for those who lived in sparsely populated, remote areas as she did. Children were expected to do a full day's work, just as adults did. When Sarah gathered wild grapes or drove oxen home for the night, the thought of being captured, tortured, or killed by Indians was a real threat. A family made everything they needed, or they did without. What she experienced, wasn't that much different from what other children went through in the early settlement of most states.

**The Life of an Ordinary Woman: Anne Ellis.** While many published diaries were written by wealthy women, Anne is not one of them. She grew up in Colorado moving from mining camp to mining camp as her family searched for gold. First with her biological father as part of the family, until he deserted, leaving her mother with two young children. Her mother's second marriage was also to a miner, so Anne's life didn't change much. Eventually Anne married a miner, who died, leaving her with two young children. If you had an ancestor in a Colorado mining camp, who wasn't wealthy, this book is filled with examples of what life was like for ordinary women and their families.

**A Woman's Civil War: A Diary, with Reminiscences of the War, from March 1862** by Cornelia Peake McDonald. Dozens of Civil War diaries kept by women have been published, so if you had an ancestor living in the South during this time, chances are you can find a diary that will help you understand what they endured. Rich, middle class or poor, many faced the same hardships. At home they struggle with lack of food and clothing, theft, danger from enemy troops, health problems, and concerns about young

children; in addition, they worried about their families who lived elsewhere as well as their husbands, fathers, and sons fighting for the Confederacy. Cornelia writes about all these daily problems, and how she and her neighbors coped.

### **Example of Women's Letters**

**Letters of a Woman Homesteader** by Elinore Pruitt Stewart. After becoming a widow, Elinor supported herself and her daughter by being a housekeeper and washwoman in Denver. What she really wanted, though, was to homestead. To accomplish this end, she accepted a job as a housekeeper for a Wyoming rancher, so she could learn more about homesteading. She ended up marrying the rancher but still acquired her own homestead, doing all the improvements required for ownership. Her first letter to Mrs. Coney, her former employer in Denver, is dated April 18, 1909, the day she arrives at the Wyoming ranch. The last letter is dated November 1913. The letters are entertaining to read while being a good source for daily life as well as joys and hardships the early settlers faced. One of the saddest letters is about the death and funeral preparations of her young son.

### **Women's Autobiographies and Memoirs**

**A Bride Goes West** by Nannie T Anderson & Helen Huntington Smith. Born in 1860 in West Virginia to a wealthy family, Nannie grew up conforming to Southern ways. Her father died at the first battle of Manassas; her mother remarried in 1863, leaving Nannie to be raised by her grandmother. At sixteen, she met her future husband, a cowboy, while visiting an aunt in Kansas. Several years later, they married, and settled on his ranch in Montana. She soon discovered living on a remote ranch, far from a town, was very different from her pampered life in the South. She thrived, though, in the wild west where she was free of Southern social constraints and customs, which limited a lady in what she could do.

### **More Sources**

Other sources include housekeeping books during the time your female ancestor lived. Many of these are available for free on [archives.org](https://www.archives.org). While the mistress of a wealthy household had help with all the housekeeping chores—laundry, cleaning, cooking, sewing—those of more modest means had to do it all: make soap and other cleaning products; plant and keep a garden; make thread for spinning, then weave the cloth and hand sew a garment; care for the sick, after making medicine; and the list goes on and on. These hardy women were experts at multi-tasking, doing what had to be done while caring for children.

Of course, newspapers are usually helpful. Even some of the earliest newspapers had household hints as well as advice about being a proper lady. The ads also paint an interesting picture of what goods and services were available and at what price.

Regardless of the time or place your women ancestors lived, you should be able to find either published books concerning women's work, childcare, and other examples of their lives. If not, university museums have plenty of unpublished diaries, journals, and letters to fill that void. Books written by men often mention women, especially those books written by men travelers.

By Pat Gordon