

Columbia County Marriage Dockets on FamilySearch.org

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A previous article described the Columbia County records available free on FamilySearch.org, with specific attention to probate records. In this article, we'll take a similar look at the Columbia County marriage docket records available in the "Pennsylvania County Marriages 1885-1950" collection.

To find the on-line records, first go to the website, www.FamilySearch.org. In the drop-down list near the top of the page, select "Search", then "Records.". Then, on the right-hand side of the screen, under "Research By Location," click on "Browse All Published Collections." Next, use the left-hand navigation list arrow buttons to select "United States of America," then "Pennsylvania." The resulting list includes "Pennsylvania County Marriages 1885-1950" and "Pennsylvania Probate Records" (both near the top – the probate records used to be near the bottom, but they apparently read our previous article and have now put them in closer proximity).

Marriage dockets

The collection name "Pennsylvania County Marriages 1885-1950" is somewhat misleading. Although counties statewide began recording marriage license applications in 1885, not all counties are included in this collection (a few, such as Lycoming and Philadelphia, are missing completely, although there are separate collections just for Philadelphia). For those that are included, the range of years covered in the on-line collection varies considerably from county to county. For Columbia County the range is roughly Oct 1885 to Aug 1907 (so, roughly one generation). For neighboring counties, the ranges are: Montour 1885-1909, Northumberland 1885-1907, Lycoming (missing), Luzerne 1885-1950, Schuylkill 1885-1950. To find details for other locales, after clicking into the collection, click on "Learn more" and then "Coverage Table" (although to say the table is difficult to decipher is an extreme understatement).

These marriage records are dockets (license applications), not marriage certificates. The primary date on the record is the date the license application was filed, rather than the date of the marriage itself (although sometimes both events occurred on the same day). The FamilySearch index generally keys on the date of the marriage, unless it's missing from the docket, in which case the date of filing is used. Inspecting the image of the original document will determine which date is being used in the index. It's also good practice to view the images of a few dockets before and after a particular target docket, as in some cases, the filing and/or marriage date is entered incorrectly on the original (the wrong month, or even the wrong year – just as when the new year passes, we sometimes continue to write the old one on our checks, county clerks very occasionally continued to write the old year on the dockets).

The license application portion of the docket often includes details not found on the final marriage certificate, such as, dates of birth and occupations for the bride and groom, and information about previous marriages of either of the participants (sometimes including a date of death for a previous spouse). Dockets for other counties may also include parents' birthplaces, residences and occupations (often noting if a parent was deceased at the time of the marriage). Columbia County dockets include spaces for either the participants' dates of birth or their ages

(in years, months and days, although often the months and days were left blank). Parents' names can only be inferred in those cases when one of them provided consent (and sometimes not even then, as the consenting party may be identified only as "the father" or "the mother"), or occasionally if the marriage was held in a parents' home and named on the docket. For example, the 1894 marriage of J. H. Mensch and Harriet Richart was performed "at William Richart's" according to the docket (vol. 4, #2363).

The docket also usually includes an indication of when, where, and by whom the marriage was performed, and when the certificate copy was returned by the official to the courthouse. Some records indicate the return of the certificate, but not the date and location of the marriage, in which case other sources (such as church records or newspaper announcements) would need to be consulted to pinpoint the precise date. In other cases, the docket includes neither a marriage date nor a certificate return—such cases should be studied carefully, as it sometimes means that the participants never went through with the marriage—or, on the other hand, maybe just that the official misplaced the certificate copy, or that the clerk neglected to update the docket book. For example, on the 1893 docket for Clarence Yocum and Laura Cherington (vol. 4, #2220) the section for recording the marriage and the certificate return is completely blank, but we can assume the marriage did occur—in the 1900 Roaring Creek census, they're listed with two children, reportedly married for six years.

The data entered on the original dockets sometimes contain errors. The 1895 docket for George Price and Amelia Hopper (vol. 4, #2855) was filed 26 Aug 1895, and the certificate returned 10 Sep 1895. But the official who performed the ceremony (a Justice of the Peace, in this case, rather than a minister) reported that the marriage occurred on 19 Aug 1895 – a week before the license was issued. The filing dates for the dockets preceding and following are all consistent, so the filing date appears correct. Possibly the official meant that the marriage occurred on August 29, rather than August 19, but it's impossible to know – and in this case there probably isn't even a church record to use for verification. All we know for certain is that the marriage occurred on or after August 26, and before September 10.

The ages of the bride and groom as listed on the license application should sometimes be treated with a little skepticism. In particular, if the ages of bride and groom were listed as 18 and 21, respectively, it's possible that one or the other (or both) fudged their age a bit to avoid the need for parental consent. There are also cases where one or both parties gave their age as "21" when they can easily be proven to have been much older ("over 21" is also sometimes seen).

If either the bride or groom was not of legal age, consent of a parent or guardian was required. Consent was usually provided by the father. Consent by the mother may indicate that the father had passed away, and consent by a guardian very likely so. The 1904 docket for Frank P. Billig and Edna A Billman (vol. 9, #5809) lists that consent for the bride was provided by "her mother Rebecca Fisher." It's unlikely that her mother would have been listed on the docket by her maiden name—more likely, the mother was widowed or divorced, then re-married. Searching the marriage dockets for the name "Rebecca Billman" turns up Rebecca's 1893 marriage to I. J. Fisher—both parties are listed on the docket as "widowed," his previous wife having died "about 8 months ago" and her previous husband (presumably Edna's father) "about 2 yrs ago."

Marriage license applications generally inquire about any relationship between the two parties (meaning familial relationship). The 1887 marriage license docket for Charles W. Fisher and Clara Mourey (vol. 1, #410) lists the relationship “second cousin,” a valuable clue which led to the discovery that Charles’ father and Clara’s grandmother were siblings, both children of Jacob Farlee Fisher and Elizabeth Parkes (so Charles and Clara were not precisely second cousins, but rather first cousins once removed).

The digital index for the marriage docket records introduces additional errors (transcription errors, typos, etc.). If a search on a particular name doesn’t turn up the expected results, a researcher may need to be extremely creative in constructing a query which results include the target name. The records are indexed as the names appeared on the dockets (or as closely as the indexers were able to transcribe them). So if Mary was called “Polly,” or if Thomas James signed his name “T. J.”, or if one of them commonly used their middle name rather than their first name, it may appear that way on the docket, and therefore in the index. The search engine is generally pretty good about matching with common given name variations (Sarah/Sallie, Henry/Harry, etc.), but sometimes even a minor spelling change will fall outside its range.

For example, searching for the marriage of Winthrop Bryfogle turns up several records with variations on the surname Bryfogle, but no Winthrop. Searching instead on the name of the bride, Clarissa Mensch, finds the correct record (even though her name was spelled “Clara” on the docket), but also reveals that Winthrop’s name was mis-transcribed into the index as “Winthrope C. Boyfogle.” Searching only with the given names “Winthrop” and “Clarissa” will also find the correct record (vol. 2, #998).

The index search will first try to match against full names, then against initials (so, if it can’t find “Thomas”, it will then suggest anyone with the initial “T.” within the other search constraints). Searching for the marriage of Abraham Yocum returns the correct record in the results (vol. 1, #482), even though he’s listed as “A. H. Yocum” on the docket and in the index. Unfortunately, there’s no mechanism for suggesting corrections or variations on the names in the index for the benefit of future searchers.

Searches can be constrained in a variety of ways - using surnames or given names only, marriage date (by year range), marriage place (which, in some cases, may mean the docket filing place),

GS film #	digital folder #		
955623	004266933	images 001 – 410 vol. 1 07 Oct 1885 - 27 Aug 1888	pp. 1 - 700
“	“	images 411 – 819 vol. 2 28 Aug 1888 - 07 Feb 1891	pp. 701 - 1400
955624	004267913	images 001 – 401 vol. 3 09 Feb 1891 - 20 Mar 1893	pp. 1401 - 2100
“	“	images 402 – 795 vol. 4 21 Mar 1893 - 14 Jun 1895	pp. 2101 - 2800
955625	004811796	images 001 – 397 vol. 5 15 Jun 1895 - 26 Aug 1897	pp. 2801 - 3498 [1]
955821	004267916	images 001 – 404 vol. 6 28 Aug 1897 - 14 Nov 1899	pp. 3501 - 4200
“	“	images 405 – 827 vol. 7 20 Nov 1899 - 26 Dec 1901	pp. 4201 - 4900
955822	004267918	images 001 – 436 vol. 8 26 Dec 1901 - 16 Oct 1903	pp. 4901 - 5600
955823	004267919	images 001 – 427 vol. 9 19 Oct 1903 - 23 Sep 1905	pp. 5601 - 6300
“	“	images 428 – 827 vol. 10 29 Sep 1905 - 14 Aug 1907	pp. 6301 - 7000

birthdates of bride and groom, parents' names, etc., if (a) the information is included in the docket, and (b) it was transcribed correctly in the index. When constraining a search by place name, notice how such names are used in the index (i.e., how they appear in the search results). Be aware that "Columbia" also refers to a place in Lancaster County. Even when using the index's preferred "Columbia, Pennsylvania" as a place constraint, stray records from other counties may still show up in the search results.

If all other search options fail to produce the hoped-for results, the microfilm images can also be browsed directly. The digital index can be bypassed completely from the collection search page. Near the bottom of the page, just under "View Images in this Collection", clicking on "Browse through [some large number] images" will show a long list of "digital folder" numbers. Each "digital folder" corresponds to a microfilm reel, but the folder and reel numbers aren't the same, and neither set is entirely consecutive for Columbia County. For this collection, reel numbers, digital folders, and docket books are associated as follows (date ranges refer to docket filing dates, rather than marriage dates, which may have occurred later):

[1] Pages 3499 & 3500 are missing from the microfilm, with the notation "taken out for sample."

[Note: this table is not available on the FamilySearch website, or anywhere else, to the best of my knowledge.]

For Columbia County, page numbers and docket numbers are the same (page numbers continue from one volume to the next), which is not typical of most counties. Other counties generally start each new docket volume with page 1, and either number certificates consecutively starting with 1, or number within volumes using the volume number as a prefix on the certificate. Some other counties include more than one docket per page, so page numbers and docket numbers will be very different (on the other hand, Montour County dockets span two pages with the same page number).

Each Columbia County docket book includes an index at the front of the book, just before the dockets themselves (actually two indices – one for brides and one for grooms). These indices are organized by first letter of surname, then chronologically (all dockets for surnames starting with 'A' are listed in the chronological sequence that the dockets were filed). Be aware that when entries for a given surname letter run longer than a page, the continuation isn't always on the next page – it may be on the previous page, or at the end of the index, or anywhere else there was room for it. Since these original indices were created at the same time as the docket entries themselves, it's far less likely that names were misspelled or misfiled, than with the digital index.

If browsing the docket book microfilms still turns up no result, it's possible that the target couple filed elsewhere. Even if bride and groom both lived in Columbia County, they didn't always file there and/or marry there. Sometimes the groom was living or working elsewhere, and the docket was filed at that place, even though the marriage itself was local. Marriages of county residents sometimes took place as far away as Philadelphia (which marriages are in a collection of their own). And, then as now, some couples just eloped, and preferred to do so a bit further from home.

There may have been other compelling reasons not to file in Columbia County. Edwin Minnich and Frances Millard were both residents of Centralia, and were married in Centralia 23 Jun 1898 - but the marriage was registered in Lehigh County (for reasons unknown, but possibly related to the notation on the docket regarding the bride's previous "illegal marriage, Columbia County, Pa., 3 or 4 years ago").

Although only available for a relatively small range of years, the marriage dockets available in the FamilySearch.org "Pennsylvania County Marriages" collection, both for Columbia County and others, provide an invaluable research tool (and it's free!).