

ORPHANS COURT RECORDS IN COLUMBIA COUNTY

William Baillie

Have you sometimes been frustrated when searching for family members who lived before 1850? Before that date the decennial federal census listed the names of only the heads of households; all other family members are represented only by numbers in age groupings. County tax records similarly listed landowners and single adult males but usually ignored wives and children.

But in Pennsylvania one set of early public records, from the Orphans Court, often *named names* of the then-living descendants of a deceased person. Now the names of over 5,100 individuals mentioned in these records for Columbia County from 1814 to 1849 are included in the CCH&GS website's database "SEARCH BY NAME." In addition, principals in over 1,000 real estate transactions from the same era are included among the "Land Records" section of that database.

In Columbia County the original handwritten Orphans Court Records are stored in the courthouse basement. The entries are difficult to access, since the indexes are scattered and incomplete. The volumes are available and searchable online through FamilySearch, but the contents have not been entered systematically in their databases. Now all the entries up through the year 1849 can be searched readily on the Society's website. (Note that Columbia County in that era was much larger than today, including townships now in Montour and Northumberland Counties.)

In Pennsylvania, the Orphans Court is a branch or function of the Court of Common Pleas; as such, in the Nineteenth Century a body of three jurists met quarterly in each county to protect the inheritance interests of children and other legal dependents. The judges ruled on petitions brought to them in writing by heirs, estate administrators, or others. Some kinds of petitions routinely listed *all* of the heirs of a deceased, since state law specified that the heirs of intestates included all the children or, if a child had died with issue, the grandchildren and in a few cases even great-grandchildren. For married female heirs, the petitioner would name the woman's husband, since under common law he was the person responsible for her inheritance. Thus the NAMES index now includes Orphans Court records of as many as forty related individuals of a given family over several generations.

The petitions were generally of three kinds: 1) to appoint Guardians of minors, under age 21, to administer minors' property until they were of age; 2) for permission to sell heirs' real estate if money was needed to pay off the deceased's debts or to provide maintenance for the children; 3) for oversight of disposal of estates, such as dividing up real property among heirs or prodding overdue accountings by administrators. (For just one session, in October of 1817, the court ruled also on applications for naturalization.)

While the entries are normally formulaic and routine, some suggest heart-tugging stories. In the April 1824 term, for example, teenagers William and Elizabeth Fisher of Catawissa Township

report that their father John Fisher “has been absent for fourteen years and is supposed to be deceased.” Another petition in that same term comes on behalf of Joseph Armstrong, father of five, who “is extremely poor and unable to support either himself or his children”; he asks for maintenance money for the children from funds left them by their grandfather but sequestered until each reaches age 21. In April of 1842 is the touching petition of the widow of Jacob Ale, who left ten minor children, no income, and debts exceeding \$1000 (when \$25 per year was a normal allowance for the care of one child).

In the NAMES database, this kind of information is abstracted in the “Notes” column for many individuals. For real estate transactions, the entries include Grantor and Grantee, location, acreage and selling date and price when available.

Most of the individual names did not previously appear on the Society’s databases. A great number of the names, perhaps a large majority, are absent also from the huge online databases in Ancestry and FamilySearch.

So, if you’ve hit a “brick wall” in searching for early Columbia County residents, check it out! (On the Society website, click on SEARCH DATABASES, then on SEARCH BY NAME, then type in the individual name and press “Name Search.”)