

Finding Your Ancestor in Federal Court Records

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Researching your family history in Federal district court records does not have to end with Declarations of Intention, Certificates of Citizenship, or Petitions for Naturalization. To find out if records of the Federal courts hold genealogical treasures for you, ask yourself a few questions:

“Did my ancestor live through a major economic recession or the Great Depression?”

“Were my ancestors business owners?”

Were any of my ancestors ever in trouble with the law, or are there family stories of a relative who spent time in a Federal prison?”

Of course there are many follow-up questions to these. However, if you answered yes to any of these questions, Federal court records may hold some treasures for you.

1. Bankruptcy Records

- Numbers of filings rise during economic downturns, recessions including the Great Depression, regardless of social status
- Cases can be filed by individuals or businesses
- Records contain information about the bankrupt’s occupation, income, property, assets, and debts

2. Civil Case Files

- Lawsuits relating to Federal laws
- Constitutional issues such as civil rights violations, state’s rights
- Trademark, copyright, and patent disputes
- Contract disputes
- Land disputes, including condemnation for eminent domain during war times
- Product liability, personal injury
- Airplane and aviation related litigation
- Conscientious objector status during war time

3. Criminal Case Files

- Cases relating to the violation of Federal laws
- Prohibition
- Racketeering
- Bank robbery
- Draft evasion/conscientious objectors, providing false statements to the Draft Board
- Theft of government property
- Distributing unlawful materials through the mail
- Tax evasion
- Smuggling (narcotics/humans)

Federal court records are maintained at the various field units of the National Archives and Records Administration as well as our office in downtown Washington, DC. Many of the collections are indexed. To find the office that holds Federal court records from the geographic areas you are researching, please visit <http://www.archives.gov/locations/>.