

# OPERATION GRANNY FILES

## Mission 17 — The Courthouse Files

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### **Court Records Navigator**

A Quick-Start Guide to Non-Probate Courthouse Records

**Clearance Level: 201 — Record Interpretation**

[operationgrannyfiles.com](http://operationgrannyfiles.com)

## Quick-Grab Summary

You already know the courthouse holds wills and estate files. This guide opens the rest of the doors. Guardianships, divorces, civil suits, criminal dockets, equity cases, name changes, and naturalization petitions — each one captures family details that no census or vital record preserves. Use this navigator to identify which court record types apply to your ancestor, find the right courthouse or archive, and extract the biographical gold buried in legal paperwork.

## Section 1: Court Record Types at a Glance

Record Type	What It Contains	Best For Finding
Guardianship	Children's names, ages, relationships; guardian identity; annual financial accountings	Complete family unit after a parent's death
Divorce	Petition, depositions, decree; marriage date/place, children, property, daily life details	Marriage details, residence, family relationships
Civil Suits	Petitions, depositions, evidence; disputes between parties	Ancestor's own testimony, community relationships
Criminal Dockets	Arrest records, indictments, sentencing	Exact date, location, and associates
Equity/Chancery	Inheritance disputes, property division, complex legal matters	Extended family connections, property details
Name Change	Petition with old and new name, reason for change	Surname shifts between records
Naturalization	Declaration of intention + petition for citizenship; birthplace, port of arrival, family	Immigration details, physical description
Apprenticeship	Indenture binding youth to trade master	Orphan status, family poverty, occupation

## Section 2: Which Court Handled What?

Court names and jurisdictions vary by state. Use this reference to find the right starting point.

State/Region	Probate & Guard.	Civil & Criminal	Equity/Chancery	Naturalization (pre-1906)
New England	Probate Court	Superior Court / Court of Common Pleas	Superior Court	Any court of record
New York	Surrogate's Court	Supreme Court / County Court	Supreme Court (equity side)	Any court of record
New Jersey	Surrogate's Court	Superior Court	Court of Chancery	Any court of record
Pennsylvania	Orphan's Court	Court of Common Pleas	Court of Common Pleas (equity)	Any court of record
Maryland	Orphan's Court	Circuit Court	Circuit Court (equity)	Any court of record
Virginia	Circuit Court	Circuit Court	Circuit Court (chancery side)	Any court of record
Southern States	Probate Court / Ordinary's Court	Circuit Court / District Court	Chancery Court (separate)	Any court of record
Midwest	Probate Court	Circuit Court / District Court	Circuit Court (equity)	Any court of record
Western States	Probate Court / County Court	District Court	District Court	Any court of record
After 1906	—	—	—	Federal courts only

**GRANNY PRO TIP:** *The FamilySearch Wiki has state-by-state guides that map record types to specific courts. Search “[State Name] Court Records” in the Wiki — it’s the best free starting point for sorting out jurisdiction in any state.*

## Section 3: The Court Record Search Process

**Step 1 — Identify the record type.** Review the table in Section 1. Which type of court record might apply to your ancestor’s life events? A parent who died young → guardianship. A marriage that ended → divorce. A property dispute → civil suit or equity case.

**Step 2 — Determine jurisdiction.** Use Section 2 to identify which court in your ancestor’s state would have handled that record type. Remember: jurisdiction depends on the state AND the time period.

**Step 3 — Search the indexes.** Most courts maintained separate plaintiff and defendant indexes. Always search both — your ancestor could appear on either side of a case. Indexes list case numbers, parties’ names, and dates.

**Step 4 — Pull the case file.** The case number from the index leads to the docket book (chronological case progress) and ultimately to the case file — the physical packet of petitions, depositions, bonds, correspondence, and court orders. This is where the family details live.

Step 5 — Check for digitized collections. Search the FamilySearch catalog under the county name + record type. Check the state archives website. Many collections have been microfilmed or digitized — but many remain accessible only in person.

## Section 4: Evidence Extraction Worksheet

Use this worksheet to record the biographical details found in a court record.

Field	Details Found
Record Type	
Court & County	
Case Number	
Date Filed	
Date Resolved	
Parties Named	
Relationship(s) Stated	
Children Listed (names/ages)	
Residence(s) Mentioned	
Occupation(s) Stated	
Marriage Date/Place	
Property Described	
Witnesses Named	
Key Testimony/Details	
Connected Records to Search	

**BONUS INSIGHT:** Court depositions sometimes contain your ancestor's own words — sworn testimony describing events, relationships, and daily life. These are among the most personal documents in any genealogical collection. Transcribe them carefully and note the context: who was asking, who was answering, and what was at stake.

## Section 5: Where to Search — Online Resources

Resource	URL	What It Covers
FamilySearch Catalog	<a href="https://familysearch.org/search/catalog">familysearch.org/search/catalog</a>	County-level court record inventories; microfilm and digital collections

FamilySearch Wiki	familysearch.org/en/wiki	State-by-state court system guides; jurisdiction mapping
Ancestry.com	ancestry.com	Selected county court digitized collections
Fold3	fold3.com	Naturalization records, military court records
State Archives	(varies by state)	Original court records transferred from counties; microfilm collections
County Clerk/Recorder	(varies by county)	Undigitized records accessible in person; current indexes

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**GRANNY SAYS:** *You've been a polite visitor at the courthouse — checking probate, thanking the clerk, and heading home. But there's a whole hallway of doors you haven't tried. Guardianship files that list every child by name. Divorce petitions that describe a marriage from the inside. Civil suits with your ancestor's own sworn testimony. The records are there, love. You just have to know which door to open.*

## Notes

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