

# Bounders, Bigamists, and Grass Widows: Using Divorce Records in Genealogical Research

Presented by Karen Wallace Steely

## Family Law Issues

### What You May Find:

- Adultery
  - includes unmarried couples
- Bigamy
  - divorce may not have been an option
- Illegal Marriages
  - interracial, cousins, co-respondents
- Bastardy Cases



## Look for Court Records

- **Court Cases**
  - Divorces are Equity cases - deal with issues of fairness, not guilt or innocence
  - Court type varies by jurisdiction
  - May be a Chancery, Circuit, Ordinary, or District Court

## Look for Other Sources

### Newspapers

- Published divorce petitions
- News articles
- Debt responsibility notices
- **Legislative Records**
  - Mostly applies to early divorces

## Types of Records

- **Records May Include:**
  - Petitions
  - Affidavits
  - Subpoenas
  - Court Journals & Minutes
  - Petitions, Answers, & Cross-Bills
  - Loose Papers (packet)

## Most Frequent Causes for Divorce

- **Divorce Causes (in frequency order)**
  - Desertion
  - Cruelty
  - Adultery
  - Drunkenness
  - Neglect

## Additional Research Clues

### Red-Flag Time Gaps:

- **Females:**
  - **She is missing from the Census prior to or following a known marriage**
  - Remember that many women resumed use of their maiden name, especially if there were no children
- **Males:**
  - **Unexplained relocation or sudden appearance in a new location with no known family ties**
  - Remember that military service can provide both motive and opportunity for a "new life"

## Remain Skeptical -- An Assumption is Really Just a Guess

*Watch for Missing Censuses and Disappearing Spouses*

**Every Time Gap and Disappearance Should be Researched.**

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