

Genealogy Dictionary

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Below is a selected definition of words as they apply to genealogy.

4to. abbreviation of quarto, the size of a rare book made by folding an old printer's sheet of paper to form four leaves. A quarto book is typically 11 to 13 inches tall. The size can vary somewhat depending on whether the pages were trimmed.

8vo. abbreviation of octavo, the size of a rare book made by folding an old printer's sheet of paper to form eight leaves. An octavo book is typically 8 to 9 inches tall.

advowson (England) the right to nominate a vicar or rector to a church.

aeg all edges gilt. Used in the description of a rare book that contains gilt (gold foil) on the edges of the pages.

affinity in genealogy this refers to a relationship by marriage.

ag. Lab agricultural labourer (an abbreviation often seen on census returns).

almoner a person who gives to charity or those in need.

amercement (England) a monetary penalty imposed in Medieval times. It is similar to a fine except that it was imposed by a local council that was not a formal court.

ancient parish (England) a parish that dates to at least the Middle Ages.

app apprentice (an abbreviation often seen on census returns).

armiger (abbreviation arg. or ar.) - a person who bears the armour of a knight, more commonly called a squire.

artificer an inventor or craftsman.

ashery worker a person who works in an ash pit making potash (a fertilizer).

assizes (England) a criminal court used to try serious offences such as murder. Assizes were introduced in 1166 and finally abolished in 1972 when they were replaced by crown courts. Assize courts were sometimes called eyre courts.

attestation the administration of an oath or evidence given by a witness. Commonly used for military enlistment.

bachelor a journeyman or craftsman who had not yet achieved master status. The title was often applied to junior members of a guild.

badger a person who buys and sells basic commodities acting as a middleman in a transaction.

bailiff an officer of the court who executes court orders.

banns a public notice or announcement, usually in church, of an intended marriage.

barker a person who removes bark from trees for use in tanning.

bawd a woman who runs a brothel.

baxter a baker.

beerhouse a premise that was licensed to sell beer.

beneficiary someone that benefits from something. It is often the person designated to receive proceeds or benefits from a will.

billy piecer a wool mill worker who collects broken yarn.

blacksmith a metalworker who fabricates items made out of iron and steel.

blocked a tree that has been marked for survey purposes.

block maker maker of pulley blocks that are used to lift heavy loads.

bluejacket an enlisted seaman.

BMD birth, marriage, death records.

bn born (date of birth).

boniface an innkeeper.

bowyer someone who makes bows for archery.

boyar (Russia) a member of Russian nobility.

brakeman a railway worker who operates and maintains brakes on a train.

brazier a metalworker who works with brass.

British school the name given to 19th century schools organized by nonconformists and based on the educational principles of Joseph Lancaster. They were abolished in England by the Education Act of 1902.

brogger a wool trader.

bur date of burial.

burler a linen mill worker who removes defects from cloth.

dsp from the Latin *decissit sine prole*, died without children.

cadastral a public record showing ownership of land.

cadger a beggar.

call the compass direction and distance that defines the perimeter of a piece of property. A property will have several calls.

canon law law of the church.

census a count of the population, usually includes various statistics about the population.

centenarian someone who lives to be 100 years old.

chain a measuring device traditionally used by a land surveyor to measure the size of a property. A chain is 66 feet.

chainman a surveyor.

chain migrant a person joining family members who have already migrated.

chaisemaker a maker of horse carriages.

chanceling a notation on a parish baptism record denoting an illegitimate child.

chancery case the term for a special legal case not specifically covered by the law of the time. Chancery cases are rich in genealogy information because they often involved land disputes, resolution of wills, divisions of estates and (in the US) buying and selling of slaves.

chandler a person who makes and sells candles.

Chapman Codes three letter abbreviations used to identify historic administrative counties in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

chiffonnier a maker of wigs.

chimney sweep a person (usually a child or small adult) that cleans and removes soot from chimney flues.

Christian name	the first and middle name given to a child at birth or baptism. Also called the given name.
circuit	a group of Methodist churches run by a single minister.
citation	1) a formal reference to a source of information. 2) an official summons to appear before a court.
cite	to quote an authority.
clothier	a person involved in the selling of cloth.
cobbler	a person who mends shoes (as opposed to a shoemaker who makes shoes). {see cordwainer}
codex (plural codices)	Latin for block of wood, it is a very old document (pre-1650) that is the precursor to a book, with separate pages bound together and given a cover. Most codices are religious documents.
codicil	a supplement to a will.
cognate	a variation of the same name in another language.
col'd (abbreviation)	colored. Often found on old marriage records.
collier	a worker in a coal mine.
consanguineous	related by blood. For example, a consanguineous marriage is a marriage between blood relatives (the most common form being the marriage between cousins).
cooper	a barrel maker.
copyhold	(England) a term that dates to the Middle Ages regarding land ownership. It is similar to freehold land except that a notional rent had to be paid to the local Manor. The Law of Property Act of 1925 converted all copyhold land to freehold land.
cordwainer	a shoemaker.
cubit	an historic measure equal to the length of a man's arm from the elbow to the fingertips. A cubit can range from 44.5 to 52.3cm (17.5 to 20.5 inches).
consideration	a payment given in return for a good or service.
Dade Register	named after Rev William Dade, vicar of several Yorkshire parishes, they are English baptism records with more information than normal such as father's occupation, mother's name and names of both grandparents.

dauphin (France) the eldest son of the king and the next in the line of succession.

decedent the deceased person.

deed a legal transfer of title.

deltiology the collecting of antique postcards.

deodand an object or thing forfeited to the state because it had caused the death of a person. A deodand was often subsequently used for pious purposes.

descendant originating from an ancestor.

descendant chart a chart that lists all the descendants of an individual.

devise a clause in a will that grants real property. The devisee is the person receiving the land.

diaspora a large scale migration or scattering of a people away from their ancestral homeland, often done by force.

dip (slang) a pickpocket, from the action of placing a hand in someone's pocket.

docent a teacher at a college or university.

dom domestic servant (an abbreviation often seen on census returns)

dowager a widow holding property or assets from her deceased husband. Also known as a tenant in dower.

dower the portion of a deceased husband's estate that is allotted to the wife.

dower chest a wedding chest, also known as a hope chest.

dowry the money or property that a woman brings to a marriage.

dowser a person who uses a stick to find water.

dreng a free peasant who has land held for them in return for a service (usually military service to the local lord).

dyer a mill worker who dyes cloth.

exact (England) the term used to describe the process of taking money and possessions from a person usually before the person was outlawed for a serious crime.

executor the person responsible for carrying out the terms of a will.

factor agent (Scotland) a bailiff of an estate.

farrier a person who shoes horses.

fell monger a person who removes hair from a hide in preparation for leather making.

feme covert a married woman.

feme sole a single woman.

fl. from the Latin *floreant*, means an approximate date (used in the absence of a precise date).

fletcher a person who makes arrows.

foundling an abandoned child with unknown parents. Foundlings were typically left at a safe location, such as a church.

freebooter a pirate.

freehold in absolute possession of the land.

fs. female servant (an abbreviation often seen on census returns)

fuller a worker in a wool linen mill who moistens and presses cloth to make it more full.

furrier a maker of furs.

fwk. framework knitter (an abbreviation often seen on census returns).

galligaskin baggy trousers worn by sailors in the 17th and 18th century, often used to refer to sailors themselves.

ganger (England) the foreman of a gang of workers.

gaoler a jailer or a person who managed the jail.

given name the first and middle name given to a child at birth or baptism. Also called the Christian name.

glazer a person who cuts and fits window glass.

goodman the male head of a family.

governess a nanny and teacher of small children.

grange a farmhouse belonging to a church.

grantee the person receiving a property either through a gift or purchase.

grantor the person giving a property either by a gift or through a sale.

grave similar to a reeve, the lead administrative official in a small community.

greensmith a metalworker who works with copper. The name comes from the fact copper sulphidizes or turns green in the presence of small quantities of sulphur in the air (due to various industrial processes, such as the burning of coal, which was common during the Industrial Revolution). [Note: it is often mistakenly thought that copper turns green due to oxygen, which is not true. If there is no sulphur in the air, copper oxidizes by turning a dark brown]

haberdasher a dealer of men's clothing.

hacker a maker of farm hoes.

half-timer a child who worked half a day in a factory and attended school for half a day.

handfasting an informal folk practice in England and British colonies that was generally a form of common-law marriage. Sometimes called a broomstick wedding or mop wedding.

hausfrau (German) housewife.

haymonger a dealer in hay.

hide an Anglo-Saxon measure for a unit of land. A hide was enough land to sustain one family. It varied in size depending on the quality of the soil, but was generally 15 to 30 acres.

hillier a roof tiler.

hind a farm worker.

homesteader (US) a settler who was granted freehold title to undeveloped land outside the original 13 US colonies.

hooper a person who makes metal hoops for barrels and casks.

hope chest a wedding chest, also known as a dower chest.

hosier a maker of stockings.

hostler a person who took care of horses at an inn.

hugger a quarry worker who carries stones.

hulk	the term used for a prison ship during Victorian England times. Hulks were often decommissioned warships retrofitted with prison cells.
hundred	an administrative subdivision that existed in southern English counties prior to the 1974 government reorganization of the counties (<i>see also wapentake</i>). It was the amount of land required to sustain 100 families and would normally be 1500 to 3000 acres.
ibid	term used to identify a document that has already been referenced.
IGI	International Genealogical Index. A database of genealogical records maintained by the Mormon Church used to track temple ordinances for the deceased.
inclosure	(England) the process of dividing up common land into strips.
incomer	an immigrant.
ind	independent means (an abbreviation often seen on census returns).
indentured servant	a person bound by indentures (contract) to a term of servitude.
indiaman	a British sailor who engaged in trade with India or the East Indies.
inst.	the current month. Often seen in old letters, such as "We received your letter on the 18th inst."
intestate	a person who dies without making a valid will.
ironmonger	a dealer in iron goods and other hardware.
issue	a person's children or offspring.
itinerant	a person who performs their trade by travelling from place to place e.g. itinerant cobbler.
j	journeyman (an abbreviation often seen on census returns).
jack	a sailor.
joiner	a carpenter who makes furniture.
JP	Justice of the Peace.
Junker	(German) a member of the Prussian aristocracy.
keeler	a bargeman.

kempster a person who combed wool in a linen factory.

kith friends and acquaintances.

Lady Day (England) the first day of the New Year, which until 1752 was March 25th. Lady Day was close to the first day of spring, or the Spring Equinox. *{see also Michaelmas}*.

lamebegot a notation on a parish baptism record denoting an illegitimate child.

lardner a keeper of stored food.

lavender a woman who washes clothes.

lederer (German) a leather maker.

letter patent an open letter issued by a government granting certain rights to a person such as an official title, a government office or land.

lime burner a person who makes lime by burning limestone.

lorner a maker of horse gear and tackle.

m date of marriage. m2 would indicate date of second marriage.

malefactor a criminal.

maltster a brewer who makes malt for beer.

matrilocality the custom in some ethnic and social groups where a couple settles in the woman's home or community after marriage. *{see also patrilocality}*

manciple a medieval steward in charge of food.

mason a person who builds with brick or stone.

mender a person who inspects and repairs defects in woven cloth.

merrybegot a notation on a parish baptism record denoting an illegitimate child.

messuage a house plus associated outbuildings and yard mentioned in a will.

Michaelmas (England) September 29th, close to the first day of autumn, or the Autumn Equinox. *{see also Lady Day}*

midshipman a naval officer in training.

milkmaid a woman who milks cows.

- Miracode** also known as American Soundex, it is a slight variation on Russell Soundex. See the article [What is Soundex and How Does Soundex Work](#) for a complete description.
- miscellany** a collective mixture of writings on various subjects usually contained in one book. Miscellanies were popular in the 1400-1800s when paper was very expensive and often predate diaries for families as a form of recording everything from recipes to poems to scripture to day-to-day activities.
- ms.** male servant (an abbreviation often seen on census returns)
- navvy** (England) a labourer who builds roads and canals.
- nd.** no date. Used to indicate that a document has no date.
- née** identifies a woman's maiden name, from the French word for born.
- new date** a date recorded using the Gregorian Calendar, it was often written in old records and documents in the abbreviated form of n.d. See [article](#) for more details. {see also *old date*}
- nk.** not know (an abbreviation often seen on census returns).
- none** mid-afternoon prayer.
- nuncupative will** an oral will given by a dying person in front of witnesses.
- ob.** deceased, from the Latin obit.
- oblate** devoted to a monastic life. In reference to children, it means that the parents devoted the child to a monastic life. Parents who could not look after their children sometimes did this instead of turning children over to orphanages or poorhouses.
- old date** a date recorded using the Julian Calendar, it was often written in old records and documents in the abbreviated form of o.d. See [article](#) for more details. {see also *new date*}
- onomastics** {also known as *onomatology*} - the study of the forms and origins of names.
- otp.** of this parish.
- palimpsest** pieces of parchment that were reused by washing off the original text and then rewriting new text. The practise was common in the Middle Ages.
- patent** the first title deed to a property, usually granted by a government.

patrilocality the custom in some ethnic and social groups where a couple settles in the man's home or community after marriage. {see also *matrilocality*}

perch A unit of area used in Anglo-Saxon countries. A perch equalled to an area of 16.25 feet by 16.25 feet. A total of 160 perches equalled one acre. A total of 40 perches equalled one rood. See also rood.

peruker a wig maker.

petty session (England) a lower court that tried minor cases. Petty sessions were replaced in 1972 by Magistrate courts.

posthumous after death. Sometimes children are referred to as posthumous, which means the child was born after the father's death.

probate a copy of a legally valid will, usually held by a regional court.

Prosopography a study of the collective characteristics of an historic group based on an examination of the individuals within the group.

proximo used to refer to a date in the following month, from the Latin for 'next'.

public house a premise licensed to sell alcohol.

pyeman a person who makes and sells pies.

puddler a wrought iron worker.

pugilist a professional boxer.

quarrier a quarry worker.

redact edited for publication, typically used where certain sensitive information is blacked out so it cannot be read (in genealogy it is commonly used on birth certificates of adoptees to mask the identity of biological parents).

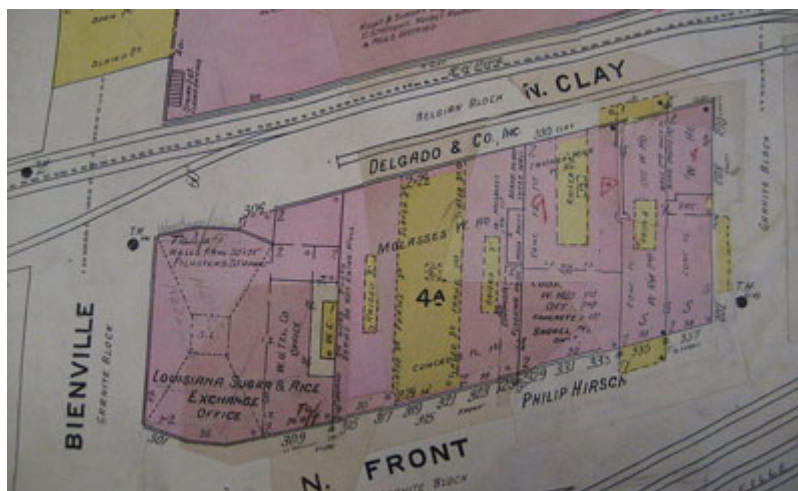
redsmith a jewellery maker who works with gold alloyed with copper.

reeve the chief administrator of a small community. {see also *grave*}

regnal year commonly seen on wills prior to 1837, it marks time by when a particular monarch assumed the throne. For example, "the 23rd day of September in the 5th year of the reign of our Gracious Queen Anne". To figure out the calendar year, simply consult an online source to determine when a particular monarch began their reign.

relict the surviving spouse in a marriage.

- relieving officer** (England) the officer in charge of a workhouse for the poor.
- riding** an administrative division of Yorkshire, from the old Danish word 'thriding' meaning a third part. Yorkshire was divided into North Riding, West Riding and East Riding.
- rod** a unit of length used in Anglo-Saxon countries. A rod was 16.25 feet. Four rods made a chain of 66 feet. A square rod (16.25 feet by 16.25 feet) was known as a perch. See also rood.
- rood** an Anglo-Saxon measure of area. A rood is 1/4 acre. In old documents such as wills, 'rood' is often (mis)spelt as 'rod'. See also rod.
- saddler** a person who makes horse saddles and related equipment for a horse.
- sampler** a piece of embroidery used to showcase the needlework skills of an individual. It often included the name and date of the person who sewed the piece.
- Sanborn map** first created by the Sanborn Fire Insurance Company in the US in the 1800s. These detailed maps enabled insurance companies to determine the risk of fire to buildings based on the building size, shape, function and structural material (see image below). Sanborn maps are particularly valuable to genealogists because they show specific details on individual buildings as well as showing how buildings relate to one another and how neighbourhoods are constructed. They are an excellent source for identifying how neighbourhoods, towns and cities have evolved over decades. Note: the term Sanborn map is only used in the United States. Similar maps exist in other countries and are usually called fire insurance maps.



- sawyer** a person who works in a sawmill.
- scapebegot** a notation on a parish baptism record denoting an illegitimate child.

schepen (Dutch) an alderman or town councillor.

schumacker (Dutch) a shoemaker.

scrivener a person who makes written copies of a document.

selion a small patch of land owned by a religious house that was rented to a peasant farmer.

sext midday prayer.

sexton a church, congregation or synagogue officer charged with the maintenance of a graveyard and associated buildings.

sharecropper a tenant farmer who gives a share of the crop to the landlord in lieu of rent.

sic usually found within a quote, it usually indicates an unusual spelling, phrase or fact that may be incorrect.

slater a tradesman who covers buildings with slate.

sol. (abbreviation) an attorney or solicitor.

Soundex a filing system used in old US censuses where the family name was filed by the sound it made. It was used to cross-reference similar sounding names such as Smith and Smythe. See the article [What is Soundex and How Does Soundex Work](#)

strumpet a prostitute.

tanner a worker who cures animal hides into leather.

taphophilia a love of funerals, graves and cemeteries.

tapster a bartender.

tatter a person who makes handmade lace.

tenter a person who stretched cloth on a machine while it dries.

testament written instructions in a will as to the disposition of property and the body of the deceased.

testator the person who made the will.

textor a weaver.

Thegn (England) an official one step below an Earl.

- tinsmith** a metalworker who fabricates items made of tin.
- tithing** (England) a group of ten households liable for paying fees to support the local parish church.
- Tutor** guardian of an underaged person.
- unm.** unmarried.
- victualler** the keeper of a restaurant, tavern or inn who supplied food and provisions to the British army or navy.
- virgate** an Anglo-Saxon measure for a unit of land. A virgate was one quarter of the land required to sustain one family (known as a hide). It varied in size depending on the quality of the soil, but was up to 7 acres. {see also hide}
- vital record** a document issued by a government that provides proof of a major life event. The most common vital records are for birth, marriage and death.
- wainwright** a wagon maker.
- waive** (England) the process of removing a woman from the protection of the law.
- wapentake** an administrative subdivision of northern English counties (primarily Yorkshire) prior to the 1974 government reorganization of the counties. The word is Danish in origin and was used primarily in regions of England historically controlled by the Norse. Also known as a hundred, it was the amount of land required to sustain 100 families. {see also hundred}
- wheelwright** a maker and repairer of wheels for wagons.
- whitesmith** another name for a tinsmith, or someone who works with tin. Tin is a white metal.
- winder** a person working in a textile mill who winds yarn onto spindles or bobbins.
- writ** a written order issued by a court.
- yardman** - a railway worker.
- yeoman** a farmer who owns their own small piece of land.

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