

Locating and Using Religious Records in New York City

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand why religious records are important for New York City research.
2. Learn to identify potential religious institutions in New York City.
3. Explore methods to locate and find religious records related to New York City.

WHY RELIGIOUS RECORDS?

For those tracing ancestors in New York City, religious records are a critical substitute for civil vital records and other materials in the 1800s (and beyond). A comprehensive search of religious records is necessary to conduct a thorough and exhaustive search for New York City families. Religious records can include:

- Births/baptisms, marriages, burials/deaths
- Meeting minutes
- Minister's personal records
- Membership lists
- Journals, diaries, and letters

When using religious records, it is important to remember that membership in a particular religion does not always indicate participation, and some regular members might rarely (if ever) appear in meeting minutes and other records. Search multiple denominations and look for migration patterns tied to religious beliefs.

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Step 1: Research Local Denominations

Before searching records online or on-site, identify a listing of religious organizations in the location(s) and period(s) where an ancestor lived. Identify any pertinent historical details, key leaders, and other attributes where possible. Use city directories, such as those provided online by the New York Public Library (NYPL) at <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/new-york-city-directories>, to complete this step and other resources as needed.

Step 2: Locate Records for Research

Because religious records can reside in various locations, it is important to use several resources to identify them. Some might reside with local congregations or parishes, whereas others might be in archives, libraries, or even in private collections.

Begin by examining titles published under the Inventory of Church Archives of New York City, created by the Historical Records Survey Project, Works Progress Administration (WPA), at

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<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/online-records/collection/wpa-historical-records-survey-new-york-state-research-volumes>. Volumes are separated by denomination and include:

- Eastern Orthodox Churches and Armenian Apostolic Church (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/online-records/wpa-historical-records-survey-new-york-state-research-volumes/572-001/1>)
- Lutheran (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/online-records/wpa-historical-records-survey-new-york-state-research-volumes/572-005/1>)
- Methodist (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/online-records/wpa-historical-records-survey-new-york-state-research-volumes/572-002/1>)
- Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/online-records/wpa-historical-records-survey-new-york-state-research-volumes/572-004/1>)
- Protestant Episcopal Church, Brooklyn and Queens (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/online-records/wpa-historical-records-survey-new-york-state-research-volumes/572-006/1>)
- Protestant Episcopal Church, Manhattan, Bronx, Richmond (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/online-records/wpa-historical-records-survey-new-york-state-research-volumes/572-007/1>)
- Reformed Church in America (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/online-records/wpa-historical-records-survey-new-york-state-research-volumes/572-008/1>)
- Roman Catholic Church, Archdiocese of New York (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/online-records/wpa-historical-records-survey-new-york-state-research-volumes/572-009/1>)

In addition, examine WPA reports and other guides accessible through the NYG&B, including:

- WPA Guide to Vital Statistics, Borough of Brooklyn Churches (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/online-records/wpa-historical-records-survey-new-york-state-research-volumes/572-010/1>)
- WPA Guide to Vital Statistics, Borough of Queens Churches (<https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/online-records/wpa-historical-records-survey-new-york-state-research-volumes/572-011/1>)

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Numerous compilations, abstracts, and transcriptions of New York's religious records have been created. Some are published in genealogical society publications, such as *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* (*The NYG&B Record*). Examine county guides found in volume 2 of the *New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer* for publications and articles that include religious records.

Specific resources include:

- The Vosburgh Collection, available online from the NYG&B. Includes various religious records from the New York City region and 17 counties in New York State. See <https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/blog/royden-woodward-vosburghs-religious-record-transcriptions> for further details.
- Search the article and location index to *The NYG&B Record*, including keywords such as “church” or “religious,” to locate articles that abstract or transcribe religious records and examine references cited within any specific articles that could be used in your research.

Online resources, such as *Ancestry.com*, *FamilySearch.org*, and the NYG&B website at *newyorkfamilyhistory.org* contain many New York State religious records. These collections might not represent every available record for a particular institution and should be supplemented where necessary with data from the guides and other tools discussed above. A selected list of sample general collections available online by denomination is below.

Congregational

Congregational Library and Archives, <http://www.congregationallibrary.org/researchers>.

Dutch Reformed and other reformed (French, German, Huguenot, Walloon)

Ancestry.com, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/6961>.

Episcopal

Ancestry.com, New York, Episcopal Diocese of New York Church Records, 1767–1970
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61224>.

Lutheran

Ancestry.com, U.S., Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Swedish American Church Records, 1800–1947
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61584>.

Ancestry.com, U.S., Evangelical Lutheran Church in America Church Records 1781–1969
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60722>.

Methodist

Ancestry.com, New York and Vicinity, United Methodist Church Records 1775–1949
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9188>.

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Presbyterian

Ancestry.com, U.S., Presbyterian Church Records, 1701–1970

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61048>.

Society of Friends (Quakers)

Swarthmore Library, Hazard Index, <http://www.swarthmore.edu/library/friends/hazard/>.

In addition, be sure to search online articles and guides provided by the NYG&B that include specific topics related to religious records of New York City. Search online by article title at <https://www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/kb/index>. Also be sure to spend time examining resources (including printed abstracts and transcriptions) referenced in chapter 14 of *The New York Family History Research Guide and Gazetteer, revised edition* which includes information on the following:

- Baptist
- Catholic
- Congregational
- Eastern Rite Catholic and Eastern Orthodox
- Episcopal
- Jewish
- Lutheran
- Methodist
- Mormon (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)
- Presbyterian
- Quaker (Society of Friends)
- Reformed (including Dutch, German, and French or Huguenot)