

Where, Oh Where, Are the County Court Records?

by Paula Gammell

Do you remember when to get court records we had to make a separate trip to each court house in each county seat? Then we had to wa-a-it for an employee to look up...

Well, no more. Not only is that approach unnecessary but also it is not the best use of your time.

In our Info Sheet #8, "Does My Court Record Exist?" we saw how to determine which court records exist, we learned that most of them have been microfilmed (<http://tn.gov/tsla/preservation/microfilmindex.htm>), and we found out how to get the microfilm to come to you (borrow here <http://tn.gov/tsla/history/county/ill-list.htm> or purchase here http://tn.gov/tsla/preservation/microfilm_order.htm).

Now we will see how you can go to the microfilm.

Make your first stop the Calvin M. McClung Historical Collection. It is a branch of the Knox County Public Library System and is located in downtown Knoxville, in the East Tennessee History Center. You will likely find here *all* of the microfilmed county records that you need. (Of course they have much more besides microfilm.) If you are comfortable doing so you can help yourself to the microfilm reels you want and load the microfilm on readers; if you need help the staff is glad to assist you. To get copies you fill out a form, pay, and they make the copies for you.

Except: About the only thing McClung does *not* have is Knox County court records. This is usually not a problem: Knox County court records are in the Knox County Archives which is located in the same building. However, the Knox County Archives keeps different hours from the McClung Collection, and they are not open on weekends, so plan accordingly: if its Knox County court records you seek then go during the week.

Tip: The McClung Collection actually *does* have a handful of microfilmed Knox County records, including some early deed books. Check there first before going to the Archives and if you have a choice then get your copies made at McClung – the Archives' microfilm readers are older and not very good and the copies they make for you are 'way overpriced.

So if you want, say, a Jefferson County will, Sullivan County deed, and Blount County probate record don't spend a couple of days driving here and there; just go to the McClung Collection and get them all before noon! See why I advise you to start here?

But there are more options. In lower East Tennessee the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Library has a large genealogical section, including many microfilmed county records. And in upper East Tennessee, try ETSU's Sherrod Library, in Johnson City, and the Archives of Appalachia within it.

Let's go smaller: Just about every county has at least one library, usually but not always located in the county seat, with a genealogical section that includes *their own* microfilmed county records, as well as *some* of the microfilmed county records from adjoining counties. (Some of these are tiny, but others are larger than one might expect – libraries in Greenville, Rogersville and Morristown come to mind.)

A few courthouses have established some type of in-house archives, usually staffed by volunteers and open limited hours, designed to help genealogists access their county court records. (Courthouses in Dandridge and Clinton come to mind.)

I'm sure you've heard of – or experienced yourself – courthouse clerks being unhelpful and even outright rude towards genealogists. We have our share of those here, I'm afraid. But let's not give them any justification for this behavior. There's usually a better way to obtain the court records you need other than showing up at a court house office unprepared. And using the McClung Collection, smaller local libraries, and county archives are all a 'better way.' Have fun!