



AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

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Researching one ancestor

The best approach to Indigenous family history research is to start with yourself and work backwards through the generations. However many people want to look for particular people in their family tree and to find out more about them.

This type of research will put you in the same position as a stranger doing research on your ancestors because it means that

- You will only have access to historical information that is publicly available.
- You may not be able to gain access to information where you have to prove your relationship to the person you are researching.

This is frustrating if the reason you want to do research on this person is to prove your relationship to them. This is a very common problem faced by members of the Stolen Generations and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people trying to find out about family members from whom they were separated.

What information do you need?

Our experience at the Family History Unit is that people may already have one or more family names, the names of some places where the people they are researching lived, and perhaps information about when and where they died.

If you are in this situation:

- Write down everything you know about the person and try to be as specific as possible about names, dates and places.
- Think about all possible variations of the names and write these down.
- Ask anyone in your family who might have more information or might have photographs or documents. See Sources at home.
- Try to find out if the people lived on missions or reserves or had anything to do with government or church protection or welfare.

Where do you start?

- Start by searching historical indexes of births, deaths and marriages [BDM]. There is more information about where to find BDM resources in the fact sheet: Sources-birth-death-marriage-records



- Try every possible spelling or name variation. Try very broad searches (just the last name) and scroll through all of the results. If you find something, it will give you a great starting point. If you don't, it suggests that your ancestor's birth, marriage or death was never registered. It might also mean that they used a different name, or the name was misspelled, or the records were lost or destroyed.
 - Do name and place searches in the following indexes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people:
- AIATSIS Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Biographical Index (ABI)
<http://aiatsis.gov.au/research/guides-and-resources/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-biographical-index/search-abi>
- AIATSIS Mura® catalogue <https://aiatsis.gov.au/collections/using-collection/search-collection>
- Centre for Indigenous Family History Studies (CIFHS) – this website draws together information from publicly available records held in the National Archives and various state archives throughout Australia. <http://www.cifhs.com/> You can do searches on this site by typing the phrase – site:cifhs and then your search terms, such as site:cfhs “angelina”
 - If you think there is a chance that one of the people you are researching might have done military service, search the National Archives of Australia RecordSearch database. For tips on how to do this go to <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/a-z/researching-war-service.aspx> For more information check out: Sources-military-service-records.
 - Explore Indigenous family history resources available for each state and territory (see Where to get help). These guides will give you many ideas and resources.
 - There are also other places to try. These are introduced in different sections of this Kit.

If your name searches don't find the exact people you are looking for, they may locate people with same surname in the same location. Depending on the timeframe and how common the name is, others with the same surname may be part of your extended family. These search results might also give you an idea of places that may be significant.

- You can also contact the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family history team in the relevant state or territory. Some of these teams sit within government departments and some work out of State Archives. See Where to get help – state or territory.

Researching places rather than names

Sometimes the best way (or the only way) to find out more about an Indigenous ancestor is to do in-depth research on the places where they lived. Reading histories of places, or histories of people who lived in those places may lead you to information about your ancestor (or at least information about what their lives may have been like).

- The two AIATSIS search engines available on the AIATSIS website -ABI and Mura - will give you a list of material held in the AIATSIS collections about that place. Try and locate life stories of people in a certain place or the history of a family or mission in the area. You can then read about Indigenous people who may have lived at the same time and in the same place as the person you are looking for. If you are fortunate, people in your family might be mentioned in the book.
- A CIFHS search on place will enable you to see if any people are recorded at that place in the CIFHS collection. Remember you need to use the phrase “site:cifhs” and your search term in Google to conduct a search of the records on the site. If you find people at the same place and time, you can then try searching for their names in AIATSIS indexes.

Other sources of information about places are:

- Google search on placename AND Aboriginal. (Type the word AND in capitals to get google to search for both words). You may find reports or community websites or blogs or other information about the Indigenous history of that place. You are also likely to find language and group names associated with that place.
- Many government bodies publish environmental reports on places that include a significant section on the Indigenous history. These histories will name Aboriginal organisations and individuals who contributed information to the report. For example the Western Sydney Airport Environmental Impact statement has a chapter and a Technical paper on Aboriginal Cultural Heritage which includes information about the Aboriginal organisations involved in consultations. <http://westernsydneyairport.gov.au/media-resources/resources/environmental-assessment/index.aspx>
- The AIATSIS Aboriginal Australia map is also a good source of information about the people and language groups associated with specific areas.

- Once you have a language/group name, you can search for Native Title Claims filed by that group. To do so you do a Google search on the name of the language group AND Native title claim: for example Ngadjuri AND native title claim. Alternatively you can search the by typing the language group name in the “Application Name” search box on the Native Title Register. <http://www.nntt.gov.au/searchRegApps/NativeTitleRegisters/Pages/Search-Register-of-Native-Title-Claims.aspx>

Sometimes the information about a claim includes a list of claimants and their line of descent from original traditional owners. See: AIATSIS Pathways Thesaurus for information on languages and groups. <http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/>

Extend your search net to more general resources

- Search the National Library of Australia’s Trove newspaper database
- Search a genealogical database like Ancestry.com.au or FindMyPast. Both of these require paid subscriptions, but most State and Territory Libraries, local libraries, genealogical societies and and/or local family history groups allow free searching on subscription sites. You might also find information in historical Electoral Rolls which are held in State and Territory libraries.

Get help from government record agencies

If you haven’t found information that is accessible to the public in the places listed above, you can also apply for access to records that have ‘access conditions’. Restrictions mean that you won’t be able to have access to some records unless you can prove your relationship to the person the records are about. Different groups of government records are restricted for varying lengths of time. These restriction periods also differ between state, territory and commonwealth records. The best way to navigate this often confusing and frustrating situation is to contact the government departments that assist Indigenous Australians to do family history research or contact the Aboriginal Access Team or other archival reference officers in the government archive where the records are held. (See ‘Where to get help’ for the state where your ancestor lived).

Concerns about privacy and personal records – Access Conditions

It is a source of great frustration to many Indigenous family history researchers that they cannot get access to records they know must be there about their families. Mostly these are government records and mostly they are held by government record authorities such as archives and birth, death and marriage registries.

The record holders must balance the need to protect the privacy of the people records are about – they often contain very personal information – with the needs of the public to have access to information.

Depending on how long ago the records you are seeking were created, you may find that some records are already open access or might become so in a few years. For example with birth, death and marriage records, each year there is a new release of records that fall within the 30 (death), 75 (marriages), 100 (births) year limit. See Sources – birth, death and marriage records for more specific information about Access Conditions.