



# AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL  
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

**Family History Unit**

Freecall: 1800 352 553

Fax: 02 6261 4287

Email: [familyhistory@aiatsis.gov.au](mailto:familyhistory@aiatsis.gov.au)

## Understanding the challenges

Family history research projects can be complex, time-consuming and frustrating but also rewarding. Tracing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family histories poses a unique set of challenges. Stories passed down through your family and interviews with family members are a key source of information but they may differ from information found in historical records.

You have to be the judge of what's more likely to be right or wrong.

## Finding your history

Researching your family history is like being a detective. You look for pieces of evidence to put together your family' story. This evidence comes in the form of different types of 'records'. Records are the many sheets of paper that officials, professionals or others create about us. Think of the records a doctor or a school might keep about you or your children and the forms and documents that government agencies like Centrelink keep about you. Records may not just be written documents. They can also be photographs, maps, genealogies, oral history and many other things.

### What records might have information?

Records about Indigenous people have been created by a range of organisations and individuals, such as welfare and protection boards, adoption agencies, education and health departments, police forces, churches, missionaries, anthropologists and other academic researchers. See Past caring a paper by Kim Katon (2002).

Many records about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are part of complex recordkeeping systems maintained by governments, churches or other organisations.

Finding records with the information you want can be difficult, even when there are databases, guides, indexes and finding aids to help you. It can be even harder when these types of finding aids have not been developed.

### Family histories and life stories are a good source of information

Since the 1980s many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have recorded their life stories and those of their families and communities. These can be valuable starting points for researching your family and community. Native Title claims may also be a significant source for Indigenous family history researchers. Paperwork associated with these can be often be found online.



## Sometimes the records you want don't exist or can't be found

Unfortunately written evidence or information about family members may not exist because the records have been:

- lost with the passing of time
- destroyed because their value was not recognised, they were regarded as no longer useful or because they were embarrassing or legally dangerous for the people who created them
- never created in the first place – for example, a baby whose birth was not registered will not have a birth certificate.

## The content of historical records may upset you

You might find the content of records upsetting or offensive.

**Offensive.** Historical records reflect the perspectives and attitudes of the people who made them. Records about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people often reflect the biased and racist views of white officials, missionaries, station owners and others. They can contain material that is derogatory and use words and ideas you find offensive.

**Personal.** The records might contain very private and intimate information about you or your family members. They might contradict each other and present conflicting information. They might contain information that you know is wrong or that challenges what you have always believed about your family's past and present history.

**But is it true?** Information written down in an official-looking document seems to have a lot of weight (especially to other officials). But you can challenge the official sources and point out biases and inaccuracies. Understanding why records were created will help you to decide how much significance you are going to give to each record that you find.

## Getting support

Indigenous family history research can take you on a very emotional journey. It's a good idea to make sure that someone is with you for support, debriefing and a 'reality check', especially the first time you get access to sensitive records.

Sometimes you may need support because it is just not possible to find what you want to know about your ancestors. You might not be able to prove who your ancestors were. This can be very frustrating and disheartening.

**The bottom line – Make sure you have support!**