



# AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL  
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

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## Search for records

Searching for records held by government organisations such as archives, registries and libraries is at the heart of family history research.

### You have already ...

1. Read the information in Before you start.
2. Developed a Research plan.
3. Written down the information you know. See Start with yourself.
4. Written down the information your family knows. See Start with yourself.
5. Collected all of the certificates and documents that you and your family have. See Sources at home.
6. Organised your information and identified the gaps. See Toolkit.
7. Done some Background reading – especially checking whether there are any family histories or life stories that might be useful to you and looking at Research Guides on library and archive websites. See Background reading

**TIP: It really helps to narrow your focus into small chunks.**

## Birth, death and marriage [BDM] records

If you have a good look at your own birth certificate, you will find information on it which can help you apply for access to the birth, death and marriage certificates of your ancestors. If you don't have a copy of your own birth certificate, your first step would be to apply for one.

- For living relatives or certificates that are not historical you will need permission from the person, or to prove your relationship to them. For this reason you will also need your own birth certificate and identity documents.
- You could ask other family members to help you get them or if you are eligible you might be able to become a client of a service – such as Link-Up - who may be able to apply on your behalf. Note that most BDM certificates cost \$30–\$50.
- You can also search for historical BDMs if you know the names of your ancestors and apply for the certificates.

Each BDM certificate you receive will set off a new round of requests – each new certificate will give you additional names and dates. It will also suggest places that were significant in your ancestor's lives.

See Birth, death and marriage records and Where to get help – contact information by state.

**TIP: Don't forget to keep track of your searches and requests.**

## Aboriginal protection and welfare records

Once you have found and applied for access to BDM records, you should try to track down records made by the various government agencies responsible for Aboriginal 'welfare' and 'protection' in the past. See Where to get help guides for each State and Territory in this Kit.

### Quick searches – name indexes

- **Aboriginal Biographical Index [ABI]**. It's worth doing a quick search in AIATSIS's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Index to see if your ancestors are mentioned in any of the missionary or protection board publications. If you find someone, this will not only give you direct information about them, you will also know that there are likely to be records about them. Search ABI index.
- **Centre for Indigenous Family History Studies [CIFHS]**. It is also worth searching the CIFHS website. You may find direct information about your ancestors and references to some government records. Some CIFHS documents include file numbers so you can track down where the original records are held. To search CIFHS, you need to type the phrase "site:cifhs" and the name you are searching in "quote marks" into Google to do a search of the documents on the CIFHS site.
- **National Archives of Australia [NAA]**. If you think any of the people you are looking for (or their partners) might have done military service, search the National Archives RecordSearch database. Military records are a rich source of family history information. See Military service records.

**TIP: Don't forget to note down what you have tried so you can keep track of your searches.**

### Contact Aboriginal records assistance teams

Since the Bringing Them Home report on the Stolen Generations, governments have staffed specific departments – most of these have a number of Indigenous staff – to help Indigenous people find records about themselves and their families.

Records made by protection and welfare boards have very personal information and very strict access conditions. The staff will guide you through their process for accessing records.

See Where to get help – contact information by state

## Other types of records

Once you've completed the research suggested above you can start to search other types of records. You can see from our list of Family history sources that there is a lot to choose from and everyone will follow different pathways.

It is worth remembering that some Indigenous people went to great lengths to avoid contact with officials – this means they also avoided leaving traces of themselves in the records.

The key to making the decision about what pathway to follow is making your best guess about the kinds of officials who might have made records about your ancestor and then searching to see what you can find.

- Use the Records checklist in the Toolkit to help you choose which records might be useful.
- Then find out more about the records in Family history sources.
- Then find out where to get them in Where to get help.
- It is also worth returning to the Background reading and searching for any new names that have come up so far.

## Family history research is slow, circular and methodical

It would be great if were easy to do family history research – but it isn't. It's slow, sometimes tedious and often circular.

Each new piece of information you get – like in a jigsaw puzzle – will add to the whole picture. However in family history it is like doing the puzzle without the picture on the box lid to guide you. Often new information will raise more questions than it answers.

It is really worthwhile to keep revisiting and updating your Research plan. It will help you to track your progress and plan the next steps.

It is also useful to return to the Toolkit periodically. At the beginning the amount of information and advice in the Toolkit may be overwhelming. But as you start collecting information and planning what to do next, you may find the tools more useful.