

# How Original Source Public Records Can Save Your Case

By Jane Cracraft, CCDI

When the assignment is tough, investigators need to go beyond digital records. Digging deeper and actually examining documents can lead to surprising detail. There are public records available at the town hall, in the court house, at the state capitol, and in federal archives that don't show up on databank searches.

Don't just note that your subject filed for bankruptcy. Go to the courthouse or federal archives to read the file. You'll see how much money was at stake and who were the creditors. When conducting background research, ask yourself whether your subject needed a business license or a professional license. Both the application and the disciplinary file may be public records.

When trying to track down a young, itinerant carpenter who moved from one Colorado ski town to another, I was completely stumped. I had noticed that many young construction workers had big dogs riding along in their pickup trucks, so I checked with town clerks in the two places where I thought the carpenter might be living. One had a recent registration for a dog license – listing both a post office box and a physical address.

I found another missing witness by looking at the poll book for his neighborhood after a recent election. Yes, he voted at his precinct that day. So did 12 other people who lived in his apartment house. One of them knew he was a young musician who had just moved to Nashville.

Trying to identify associates of an informant in a drug case, I checked on his recent stay in a county jail and then examined the jail visitor log. Sure enough, two of his friends had visited him.

Investigating a financial fraud case, I suspected that there was a relationship between two women associated with the case, but they denied it. I looked up their marriage licenses and examined the signed marriage certificates with signatures of the witnesses to the ceremonies. Also, I looked at their applications for marriage licenses to get their dates of birth, previous marriages and the names of the parents of the bride and groom. I could prove that these two women were sisters-in-law.

In another case, I was trying to find an eye witness to a crime who had moved with no forwarding information. All I could learn from neighbors was that this older woman had retired and sold her home to move out of state to live with a daughter. I went to the office of the County Clerk & Recorder. When the house was sold, the clerk recorded the warranty deed and mailed the original copy to the woman – at her new address in Kansas, which was her daughter's home.

I became a public record specialist during my 20 years as a newspaper reporter. The skill came in handy in my long PI career. If you train yourself to think in terms of public records, you can find all kinds of leads and solve the assignments that seem impossible.

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