Tennessee Marriage Records

Finding marriage records in Tennessee is much like finding those records in other states, but it might be helpful to follow the paths to discovery.

Be sure to look in the right county

The records found in local repositories will vary by location. Jurisdiction is the power given legally to an officer or an elected official over some defined territory. Jurisdiction also refers to the location or area where a government agency or office has authority. The Tennessee State Legislature had given the authority and jurisdiction of marriage in Tennessee to the County Court and records were created by this Clerk's office.
Marriage records in Tennessee began before statehood in 1796, when these counties were part of the Colony and later State of North Carolina. These Tennessee counties have marriage records beginning before statehood with the year of their earliest extant marriages: Blount 1795; Davidson 1784; Greene 1780; Jefferson 1792; Knox 1792; Sumner 1787; Washington 1787.

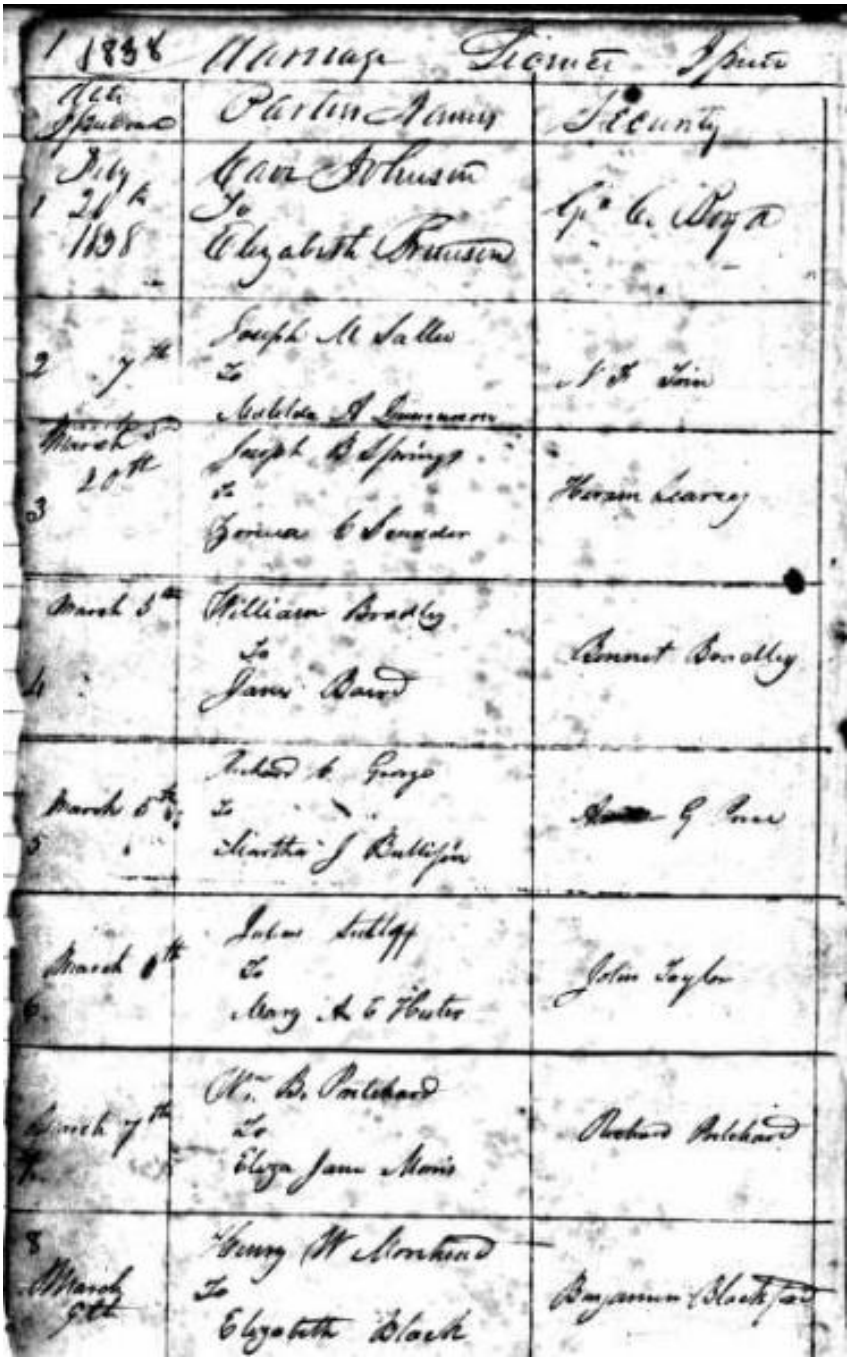
Determining where a marriage record is located also means determining where it was created. Tennessee's county boundaries have changed over the years since statehood. The Newberry Library in Chicago has compiled these county changes into a wonderful site called the Atlas of Historical County Boundaries. (http://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/) This site displays the historical boundaries over the modern boundaries, in a format than can be printed or saved. Using this tool we can determine in which county the marriage occurred.

One published resource used by many researchers is *Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources* edited by Alice Eichholz. This resource provides details about a variety of record types focusing on their availability by location. This resource was digitized in 2010 by Ancestry.com and made available as a foundational resource to learn more about the history and records of Tennessee [http://www.ancestry.com/wiki/index.php?title=Tennessee_Family_History_Research]

Learn what Tennessee marriage records contain

The process of obtaining a marriage license included a marriage bond (parental approval when required), license was issued, return by officiate indicating marriage ceremony. In some jurisdictions, it is possible that more than one of these record types were created in a given timeframe, and in some cases all of these records may exist in some format. You should examine each record for a given marriage.
Marriage Book / Marriage Register; Marriage Bond Book/ Marriage Bonds; Marriage Certificate Book Marriage /Minister/Officiate Returns; Marriages Licenses (loose papers); Parent/Guardian Permissions (loose papers).
Declaration of Marriage (or Freedman's Declaration Book) or Freedman's Marriage Register are available for Memphis (Shelby County) and Wilson County. Since Tennessee declared all marriages created during slavery to be valid without registration, these are not as common as in some states.

Early marriage records often consist of a marriage register like the following. The first entry recorded the marriage of Cave Johnson and his bride, Elizabeth Brunson on 20 February 1838. The right side of the page has the return of the minister, Reuben Ross. This also contained the name of the bondsman who provided security on the marriage bond.



No.	1838 Marriage Bonds	Parties Names	Security
1	July 26th 1838	Gain Johnson To Elizabeth Brunson	Gp. C. Boyd
2	July 7th	Joseph M Sallee To Melinda A Gunnam	Jno Sims
3	March 20th	Joseph B Springs To Lorina C Snyder	Hiram Searcy
4	March 3d	William Bradley To James Baird	Emmet Bradley
5	March 6th	Richard C Grace To Martha J Bullington	[illegible] Grace
6	March 6th	John Sublett To Mary A C Hunter	John Taylor
7	March 7th	Mr. B. Pulchard To Eliza Jane Mann	Richard Pulchard
8	March 9th	Henry W Stonhead To Elizabeth Black	Benjamin Blackford

[Marriage Book 1, p 1, Montgomery County, Tennessee, image Ancestry.com, database 1169]
A bond is a written promise to pay a sum of money. If there are no conditions, the bond amount will have to be paid. In the case of the marriage bond, there are conditions that make the bond null and void. That means no bond amount will be paid.

A transcription of a marriage bond from Robertson County, Tenn. from the year 1896 indicated the following:[1]

State of Tennessee, Robertson County
Know all Men, That we, [groom and bondsman] of said County and State of Tennessee, are held and firmly bound unto the State of Tennessee in the sum of Twelve Hundred and Fifty Dollars, to which payment, well and truly to be made, we bind our heirs, executors, and administrators, and each and every one of us and them, both jointly and severally, firmly by these presents.
The Condition of the above Obligation is such, That, whereas, [groom] hath prayed and obtained a License to marry [bride]: Now, if there shall not hereafter appear any lawful cause why the said [groom] and [bride] should not be joined together in Holy Matrimony as husband and wife, then this obligation to be void and of no effect; otherwise to remain in full force and virtue.
Witness our hands and seals, the [day] of [month], [year]
[signature of groom] (L.S.)
[signature of bondsman] (L.S.)

The $1250 amount indicated on this marriage bond would only have been paid if conditions for a lawful marriage were not present. (i.e. Groom currently in a marriage relationship.) The bride would collect through a court action.
After 1838, counties were required to bind marriage records in books. Most counties used printed marriage registers which recorded on one page all documents created for a couple. In many cases the loose records have also survived. Note that most Tennessee marriages do not supply information about birth locations or parents of the couple.

[1] "Marriage Entry of James Harris and Mary Sholders," solemnized 7 Sept 1896, Robertson County, Tennessee, Marriage Book 14, p 13, Robertson Co. Tenn. Archives, Springfield, Tenn. This book combined a copy of the marriage bond, license issued by the Clerk and a notation of the return information on one page.

State of Tennessee, Robertson County.

Know all Men, That we, James Nave & David Turner of said County and State of Tennessee, are held and firmly bound unto the State of Tennessee in the sum of Twelve Hundred and Fifty Dollars, to which payment, well and truly to be made, we bind our heirs, executors, and administrators, and each and every one of us and them, both jointly and severally, firmly by these presents.

The Condition of the above Obligation is such, That, whereas, James Nave hath prayed and obtained a License to marry Mary Sheldon: Now, if there shall not hereafter appear any lawful cause why the said James Nave and Mary Sheldon should not be joined together in Holy Matrimony as husband and wife, then this obligation to be void and of no effect; otherwise to remain in full force and virtue.

Witness our hands and seals, the 7th day of Sept, 1896.

James Nave (L. S.)

David Turner (L. S.)

State of Tennessee, Robertson County.

To any Minister of the Gospel having the care of Souls, Jewish Rabbi, Justice of the Peace of said County, Judge or Chancellor—GREETING:

You, or either of you, are hereby authorized to solemnize the Rites of Matrimony between James Nave and Mary Sheldon of your County, agreeably to the direction of the Act of Assembly in such case made and provided; Provided always, That the Rite of Matrimony be solemnized in this County; otherwise these shall be null and void, and shall not be accounted any license or authority to you, or either of you, for the purpose aforesaid, more than though the same had never been prayed or granted, etc.

Given at the Clerk's office of said County, this 7th day of September, 1896.

J M Dean, County Court Clerk.

, D. C.

I solemnized the Rites of Matrimony between the within named parties on the 7th day of September, 1896.

Jas Stewart J.P.

[Marriage Book 14, p 13, Robertson County, Tennessee. Image Archives.com]

Genealogists regularly look for the dates of marriages. As researchers, we must strive to look at the complete record whenever possible. Unfortunately, we often miss finding the complete picture when examining marriage records.

Since Tennessee was the western territory of North Carolina, the earliest marriages created would have been considered that colony. Many early marriage were recorded by a bond and the" thrice publication of the banns" or declaration of intent to marry. [1741, North Carolina Acts] Other early marriage edicts supplied prior to the statehood of Tennessee include: A lawful and proper authority for a solemnization of marriage. A person duly qualified by the acts of the Assembly to solemnize the marriage, a justice of the peace of one county has no authority to solemnize the marriage ceremony in another county, a second marriage during the existence of the first marriage of one of the parties renders the second marriage void, the Clerk of the County Court to issue license with a fee of fifty cents.

Finding Aids for Tennessee Marriages

When we use online or published indexes, we should remember that all not records are included in this resource. Perhaps the record years we seek are different from those included in the database. If we visit the database, Tennessee State Marriages, 1780-2002 [database id 1169], we see the following screen. [http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=1169&path=]

Notice that we also have the ability to browse the collection by County and Year. If we browse Shelby County, we learn the database contains the year 1881, but nothing after that year until 1948. This means the years 1882-1947 are not included in this Ancestry.com database or the index shared on FamilySearch.

If we lived in Memphis, we could visit the Shelby County Archives to view these records, but before that drive, we might consider other options:

Search the Tennessee State Archives catalog to determine if these records have been microfilmed and are available. The website for the Tennessee State Library and Archives offers a wide option of choices. [http://www.tennessee.gov/tsla/]

On the left, choose the "Research & Collections" link under FOR THE PUBLIC. Once there we see a list of topics. We should choose COUNTY RECORDS and a list of additional topics expand. Now let's choose "Inventories of County Records on Microfilm." We now see the list of Tennessee counties available. Once we choose "Shelby" a PDF copy of available records will open in your browser. If you are researching in Shelby County, TN then this list might be helpful to you later and may be printed or saved to your computer.

The table of contents indicates that Marriage Bonds and Licenses will be found on pages 5-11 under the County Clerk's records. Once we turn to these pages, we will see index books and marriage bond books. Since we don't know the specific date, we might want to view the index books to determine the date of the marriage and specific book where the marriage was recorded. Many counties of the TNGenWeb project (www.tngenweb.org) have also created online indexes of local marriage records.

Once we've determined the record exist on microfilm, we can determine where we can view this resource. It could be local, Tennessee State Library and Archives [http://www.tennessee.gov/tsla/], Family History Library (Salt Lake City) or other libraries.

Looking Closely at Tennessee Marriages

Since Tennessee marriages do not contain lots of family information, we must extract all the information contained within the record. As you review the record, consider these questions;

What information is provided in the record? (names of bride and groom, bondsman, minister or officiate, parent(s) when underage permission is provided)

What information is inferred but not provided? (approximate age of individuals, location of couple at this time)

Religious Affiliation or connection (research minister or officiate in local history, etc., consider location of church building or Justice of the Peace residence within county)

Wrapping Up and Starting the Search

The best way to learn more about these wonderful records in Tennessee is a search through the collections and a careful read of what's available. There are some records loss in Tennessee, but the majority of marriages are extant and available. Consider what you have learned and take a look at Tennessee Marriages using these online collections.
FamilySearch.org (1790-1959) https://familysearch.org/search/collection/1619127
Ancestry.com (1780-2002) http://search.ancestry.com/Browse/list.aspx?dbid=1169&path=