Trace Your Filipino Roots

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Let our guide get you started discovering your roots in the Philippines.

The Philippines represents a rich mix of native, Spanish and Asian cultures, but since 1898, its history has also been intertwined with that of the United States. In just the 30 years after the Spanish-American War, more than 63,000 Filipinos immigrated to Hawaii and another 45,000 came to the US mainland. As residents of a US overseas territory, Filipinos were exempt from restrictions that limited other Asian arrivals. Following the Philippines’ key role in the Pacific during World War II, thousands of Filipino war brides led a fresh wave of immigration. Today, nearly 4 million Americans have some Filipino heritage and Filipino-Americans are the second largest population of Asian-Americans, with concentrations in California, Washington state, Hawaii, metropolitan New York City, Texas and Illinois.

Because so many Filipinos arrived fairly recently, you may be able to quiz first- or second-generation Filipino-Americans in person to learn when your family arrived in the United States and their origin in the Philippines—two necessary details for finding records there. Also look for this information in US census, immigration and passport records, and old family letters or paperwork. Philippines emigration and passport records, some of which FamilySearch has microfilmed, could prove helpful, too (find these in the online catalog under the county, then Emigration and Immigration).
Indeed, you might be surprised by the number of resources available for researching Filipino roots, which resembles research in other Spanish-speaking countries more than it does Asian genealogy, due to the islands’ early Spanish colonization and the dominance of the Catholic church. Roadblocks may crop up, though: Many records were destroyed during World War II, while others have been lost to careless handling and improper storage. Filipino naming patterns can be confusing and make it difficult to single out your ancestors. Our guide will help you get past these obstacles and on the way to discovering your Filipino heritage.

Surname surprises

Your early Filipino ancestors followed naming traditions that seem very strange to us: A person might take his family name from one of his children, so someone named Pitik with a son named Timbo might be called Pitik, amá ni Timbô. Other names might derive from physical characteristics, such as being tall or having only one good eye.

After Catholic missionaries arrived in 1565, Filipinos started using saints’ names as surnames so enthusiastically that Spanish authorities grew concerned about keeping straight all the San Joses, San Antonios and so forth. In order to keep such surnames, families had to prove they’d been using a name for several generations. The continuation of the confusing tradition of siblings taking different surnames also vexed the authorities.

Finally, in 1849, Governor General Narciso Clavería ordered a systematic surname redistribution, using approved names from a Catalogo Alfabetico de Apellidos. Civil servants went from town to town, assigning new last names in alphabetical order. In small towns, all the new surnames might begin with the same letter. The Clavería Decree was inconsistently applied, however, and some original Filipino surnames persisted.

Another Spanish influence on names—useful to genealogists—was the adoption of the custom of making the mother’s maiden name the child’s middle name. So the offspring of Rufina Juarez and Pablo de la Cruz might be named Vicente Juarez de la Cruz.

Church treasures

The earliest Philippines records were kept by the Catholic church, and include baptisms and christenings, marriages, burials, confirmations and other membership records. The Catholic faith was the official state religion for three centuries, and local priests usually served both as ecclesiastical and civil authorities. Even today, 85 percent of the people of the Philippines belong to the Catholic church.
The Family History Library (FHL) has microfilmed many early Spanish and church records, along with later records from the United States and independence era. Find them in the library’s online catalog by running a place search under the municipality’s name; look for a heading such as Philippines, Cagayan, Enrile—Church records. The boundaries of religious and civil jurisdictions usually were the same, but you also may want to check for records in neighboring localities. The Catholic Directory of the Philippines, available at the FHL, can help identify your relatives’ parish, and will list when a parish was founded. Check for earlier records in the parent parish. It’s also possible that records may have been sent to the diocese, which the directory also will list.

Several searchable databases on FamilySearch.org are derived from church records; they include transcriptions, but not images. Their coverage varies by locality and year, and includes Philippines deaths and burials (1726-1957), births and baptisms (1642-1994), marriages (1723-1957) and Lingayen-Dagupan Catholic archdiocese parish registers (1615-1982). The La Union, Diocese of San Fernando de La Union (1801-1981) database, although only browsable as yet, does contain images of records.

Though not perfect, church records are among the most accurate sources you can find for your ancestors in the Philippines. Most contain names not only of parents but also grandparents. Baptism, confirmation and marriage records typically also list an individual’s godparents, which may provide further clues: If they come from another town, for example, that locality might be the family’s place of origin.

You also may find cemetery records among church records, although only a few of these have been microfilmed. Note that exhumations are common in the Philippines, so it’s possible your ancestors’ remains may have been moved (which may in turn also create an exhumation record).

**Vital information**

In 1889, Spanish officials first required parishes to submit detailed vital records to a central office. After the revolution of 1898, church and state were separated and vital record-keeping became the job of individual municipalities. These records had to be submitted to the Chief of the Division of Archives beginning in 1922. The forerunner of today’s National Census and Statistics Office started keeping these civil registration records from 1932 on, although most prior to 1945 were destroyed during World War II.
FamilySearch has microfilmed all extant 20th-century civil registration records from the national office up to 1988; find these in the online catalog under the name of the province. Local registrations also may have been microfilmed, and may be indexed; search for these under the name of the city or town.

Recent additions to the FamilySearch.org free online records include various collections of Philippine civil registration records. These come from the Spanish period (1706-1911), the archives (1902-1945) and national census (1945-1982) collections, and local offices (1888-1982). Manila civil registrations from 1899 to 1994 also are available. All these collections contain record images, but they haven’t yet been indexed, so they aren’t searchable. The images may, however, contain pages of original indexes to these records or be organized by place and/or by year. That enables you to zoom in on the right sections of what otherwise could be an unmanageable morass of images—6.5 million in the local collection and more than 17 million in the national collection, for example. Here, it’ll be helpful to know what town and province an ancestor lived in, as well as to have an informed guess about the year of a vital event.

Exploring the local civil registration images, for example, you’ll first see a list of provinces, each linked to a list of municipalities within that province for which there are record images. Then you’ll choose a type of vital record, such as birth index cards, which links to a list of years or year ranges. Only then do you arrive at the actual images, by which time your browsing might be narrowed down to a semi-manageable 500 or so pages.

Notable records resources

FamilySearch.org also has a collection of browsable images of more than a half-million Philippines court records (1838-1936). Court records in general may prove difficult to use; turn to these only after you’ve exhausted church and civil registration records.

FamilySearch has an extensive microfilm collection of notarial records, mostly from Manila (1700-1970). A notary would create these records when an individual employed him to make a document official. These, too, can be challenging—especially without a good command of Spanish—but they may unlock family history clues unavailable elsewhere.

The Bureau of Records Management holds probate records from the Spanish period, and some are microfilmed and indexed at the FHL. More-recent probate records tend to be rare. FamilySearch has filmed many land records from each province, as well as indexes to land transactions published in the Manila Gazette.
A variety of censuses, dating to the Spanish colonial period, also are helpful; these include both civil and church enumerations. To find microfilmed census records in the FamilySearch online catalog, look under the locality. You’ll have the best luck if your ancestors lived in the Luzon and Central Visayas regions.

Another resource not to overlook is local histories, which may include many pages of biographical information and mention as many as a quarter of an area’s families by name. The Bureau of Public Schools began collecting local histories in 1952, and today they’re in the National Library’s Filipiniana collection.

What if you’re still stumped? You may be able to make progress by seeking clues in online family trees. FamilySearch and MyHeritage are good sources for these because of their global reach. Keep in mind that a general search of FamilySearch.org doesn’t include its user-submitted family trees; you’ll first have to enter what you know about your ancestors at familysearch.org and study the resulting hits. With a little luck, you’ll get a jump-start on finding your own Filipino family tree.

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