

Well behaved women rarely make history

Women who challenged social expectations, protested injustice, broke barriers, or came into contact with the criminal justice system often left traces in the historical record. Their stories can be found in court files, police gazettes, prison records, newspapers, government correspondence, and personal papers. Searching the Catalogue for the Library's collections, together with Trove and our eResources, can help you uncover these lives and explore how women were represented, judged, celebrated, or forgotten.

Understanding the records

Women who challenged expectations or came into contact with authorities often left traces across many different record types. Together, these records can help build a deeper picture of a person's life.

Court and trial records

Court records can include trial transcripts, depositions, court lists and bench books. While original records are often held by state and territory archives, the Library holds some indexes, transcriptions of records and related publications. Trial records for convict ancestors from England and Wales have been digitised on Trove as part of the Australian Joint Copying Project (AJCP).

See our [Court records research guide](#) for more information.

Prison records

Admission registers, description books, discharge records and gaol journals. Search the [Catalogue](#) for "gaol entrance book" or "prison register" to locate records for individual institutions.

Colonial correspondence

Correspondence with colonial authorities can include applications for convict labour, petitions for sentence mitigation and enquiries from family members.

The Library does not hold original records but you can search using our Family History [eResources](#).

Police gazettes and reports of crime

Reported crimes, warrants, missing persons, escaped prisoners and court proceedings. Search the [Catalogue](#) for "police gazette" to find resources by different Australian states. The [New South Wales Police Gazette and Weekly Record of Crime](#) has been digitised and can be viewed on Trove.

Hospital records

As part of a process of criminal conviction, instead of a gaol a woman may have been sent to an asylum or hospital. Search the [Catalogue](#) for "Index to hospital admissions". Admission registers can also be searched using some Family History [eResources](#).

Transportation records

Transportation records document the movement of convicts from Britain and Ireland to Australia. Convict indents record details about transported prisoners, while muster rolls list everyone aboard a ship, including prisoners, crew and passengers. [Transportation records for convicts from Ireland to Australia](#) have been digitised on Trove as part of the Australian Joint Copying Project (AJCP). Transportation records can be also be accessed via our Family History eResources.

See our [Transportation & arrival research guide](#) for more information.

Family History databases such as *Ancestry* and *FindMyPast* contain many of these records. They can be accessed onsite at the National Library, as well as at many state, territory, and public libraries.

Search tip: in the Library's [eResources portal](#) you can find a dedicated *Family History* section under the 'Research Tools' menu.

Newspapers and gazettes

While crimes were recorded in government-kept records, they were also splashed across the newspaper headlines as a record of public interest. Newspaper coverage can reveal contemporary attitudes towards women, crime and social expectations.

Search for digitised newspapers on [Trove](#) using a person's name or terms such as "Court Proceedings", "Trial proceedings" or "Police court". Or try searching "female criminal" and see how women were described. Terms such as notorious, radical, rebel, hardened, stylish and extraordinary can reveal attitudes towards women who stepped outside expected social roles.

The Library's Australian press clippings collection includes indexed files on crime and criminals from the 1960s to the 1990s. Search the [Catalogue](#) for "Crime and Criminals" together with a state, for example "Crime and Criminals -- Victoria".

Research guides

The Library has developed [research guides](#) to provide you with search tips and strategies for navigating our collection in particular subject areas. These guides may be useful in researching women and crime

- [Convicts](#) and [Female convicts](#)
- [Court records](#)
- [Transportation & arrival](#)
- [Trial records research guide](#)
- [Tickets of leave/Certificates of freedom/Pardons](#)

Books

If you are interested in researching women who challenged authority, search the Catalogue using [Subject](#) searches rather than keywords alone. Subject headings can help uncover related material that may not appear in a simple keyword search. Try searching subjects such as:

- [Women prisoners -- Australia](#)
- [Women convicts -- Australia -- Biography](#)
- [Women social reformers -- Australia -- Biography](#)

Many catalogue subject headings follow similar patterns. For example:

- [Crime -- \[State\] -- Periodicals](#)
- [Criminals -- \[State\]](#)
- [Police -- \[State\] -- Periodicals](#)

Sample stories from the collection:

Defiant voices: how Australia's female convicts challenged authority: 1788-1853 by Babette Smith

The Forgotten Rebels of Eureka by Clare Wright

Heroes, rebels and innovators: inspiring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from history by Karen Wyld and Jaelyn Biunaiwai

Razor: Tilly Devine, Kate Leigh and the razor gangs by Larry Writer

Sheilas: badass women of Australian history by Eliza Reilly

Join the Library to request material, or [Ask a Librarian](#) for help with designing search strategies, navigating the collection, locating hard-to-find material, and understanding what you've found.