



“Finding Your Way through Penn’s Woods”

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Census

There are no state census records for Pennsylvania, None! Records or books that purport to be a Pennsylvania state census, the information was taken from tax lists or city directories.

Vital Records

The keeping of vital records began late in Pennsylvania history. There are some for the mid-1850s but because compliance was poor recording ceased.

- Birth records were kept at the county level beginning in 1893. Some larger cities began keeping birth records earlier:
 - i. Philadelphia, 1860
 - ii. Pittsburgh, 1870
 - iii. Reading, 1876
 - iv. Scranton, 1878

In 1906 the state began to record births.

- Marriage records were kept by the counties beginning in 1885. Again, the larger cities began at earlier time periods.
- Death records at the county level began in 1893 and the state took charge in 1906. Earlier records may have been kept in the larger cities.

Records of birth, marriage or death prior to the above dates may be recorded in church records.

Birth records for 1906-1912 and death records 1906-1967 have been released to the general public. The indexes are on-line at the Pennsylvania Archives.

- <http://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/Vital-Statistics.aspx>

Certificates are available at the Pennsylvania State Archives also on-line at Ancestry.com.

- Birth Records: 1906-1908
- Death Records: 1906-1964

Church Records

Due to the lack of vital records in Pennsylvania it is of great importance that a researcher use church records. These records, depending on the denomination, may include:

- baptism or christening
- marriage
- burial
- confirmation and membership records.

Not all church records are on-line or listed in the Family History Library Catalog. Church records may be kept in the church itself or copies may be found in local historical and genealogical societies. Denominational repositories may also house records for a defunct church. Check the FamilySearch Research Wiki for contact information for denominational repositories. A review of county histories may help determine what denominations are in your particular county and where the churches are located.

If the records are kept at an existing church, call ahead before visiting. Most churches allow access to their records. While many churches do not require a payment before checking their records, it is always a nice gesture to give a donation.

Cemetery Records

These records should be used along with church records. There are a number of on-line sites to locate cemetery records. Two of most popular are Find A Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/> and Billion Graves, <https://billiongraves.com/>. Three types of cemeteries located in Pennsylvania are: church, city or town, corporate or private cemeteries.

- Church cemeteries usually do not have an office to assist in finding where your ancestor was buried. You will usually have to walk the cemetery row by row and hope that the stone still stands. Many stones may have deteriorated with time or fallen over and been buried.
- City or Town cemeteries are usually not associated with one denomination and may have an office to help you locate the place of burial. These cemeteries are usually very large and some wish you to call ahead if you are doing genealogical research. Beware, they may ask you about paying for perpetual care!
- Corporate or private cemeteries usually have the same rules as city and town cemeteries.

Land Records

Land records are very useful to identify the location where your ancestor lived within a county. They may also be useful in making family connections in the absence of church or vital records. After searching census records and locating where in Pennsylvania your ancestor lived, search the county land records.

It is a good idea to search the county level first and work back in time. The first purchaser of a piece of property usually obtained his land from the proprietors or the colonial government. This involved a five step process:

- Application
- Warrant
- Survey
- Return of Survey
- Patent

An important guide to understanding Pennsylvania land distribution is Donna Bingham

G. Munger's Pennsylvania Land Records: A History and Guide for Research
(Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1991; FHL book 974.8 R2m)

Many Pennsylvania county land records are now available online. A good land and property overview is found at:

- https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Pennsylvania_Land_and_Property

Probate and Court Records

Probate records can include wills, administrations, inventories and accounts. Among other things, these court records can reveal family relationships, economic status, and religious affiliation. Some common courts found in Pennsylvania include:

Orphan's Court: Orphan's court was to inspect and take care of the estates, usage and employment of orphans. Usually these records were kept when no will was made and property needed to be distributed to heirs. However, other records were also kept within the Orphan's Court system. Information found in these records can include:

- Approximate dates of death
- Names of survivors
- Location of property
- Marriage records (since 1885)
- Some births (1893-1905)
- Adoptions (since 1925)

Register of Wills: Wills are filed in each county in the "register of wills". They are indexed and may include:

- Records relating to the Probate of Wills
- Granting of Letters of Administration and Testamentary
- Responsible for collecting state inheritance taxes
- Estate inventories
- Administrator, Trustee, and Guardian Bonds
- Executor and Administrator Oaths

Prothonotary: The chief clerk and record keeper, or prothonotary is responsible for all filings related to civil cases, including:

- Filing, recording and processing all civil actions
- Equity actions
- Judgements
- Divorce
- Naturalization
- Federal and local tax liens
- Family court matters
- Arbitrations
- License suspension appeals
- Applications for passports

Ancestry.com now has Pennsylvania probate records on their website.

Newspapers

Newspapers provide a fabulous source of information, particularly if your ancestor lived in a small community. Of great importance are the obituaries. More and more newspapers are being made available on the Internet. Some sites to use are Google News, Newspaper Archives, Newsbank, Penn State and newspapers.com.

- **Google News:** To search Google News, from the Google homepage, type in advanced google search. Click on the first link and it will take you to the archive page. You can type in the name of the newspaper to see if it is available and for what time period. Some are subscription websites.
http://news.google.com/archivesearch/advanced_search
- **Newspaper Archives** is a subscription site but can be used free at the Family History Library.
<http://www.newspaperarchive.com/>
- **Newsbank** has more current newspapers but can be used for free by using a Salt Lake County Library card. <http://www.slcolibrary.org/rr/rnge/>
- **Penn State** has a few papers on-line and can be found at:
<http://digitalnewspapers.libraries.psu.edu/>
- **Newspapers.com**, a subscription site, can also be used.

If the newspaper you are looking for is not online contact the library in the county or town where your ancestor lived. Do not contact the newspaper directly. In many cases you will need to make a trip to the library to search and obtain the information you are seeking.

County Histories

Many counties published local histories. These histories may include:

- Lists of early settlers
- Migration information
- Information about churches and ministers in the area
- Vital record information
- Names of missing ancestors
- Historical context for the family

Some counties have multiple histories and it is important that all available histories be used. Township histories may provide greater detail concerning the aforementioned subjects. Also, histories of the major cities in a county may prove useful.

Index to Pennsylvania County Histories. This is a 75,000-card index to people of western Pennsylvania. The index is located at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. The staff will search for two or three specific names, and there is a fee if photocopies are requested.

Maps

Pennsylvania had many boundary issues over its history. Their disputes were usually with Virginia, Connecticut and Maryland. Some early land records may be located in the archives of the state that had the dispute with Pennsylvania. For example, Virginia distributed land to inhabitants in southwestern Pennsylvania. Land records for individuals

living in the area known as the District of West Augusta, may be found in Virginia or the Pennsylvania archives.

County boundaries constantly changed as colonists moved west. Some counties, when first created, were very large in land area. As time passed, these large areas were divided into smaller counties. It is possible an individual lived in three counties during their lifetime but never moved. Some resources to use for maps are:

- **“The Pennsylvania Line,”** by William and Shirley Iscrupe, FHL book 974.8 D27p. This publication contains maps of the county boundaries both past and present, names of townships and their dates of creation, names of populated places during the turn of the 19th to 20th century, lists of streams, and their locations and other useful articles.
- **Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission** website.
<http://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/Land-Records-Overview.aspx>
Check FamilySearch Wiki website links for additional maps.
- **Penn Pilot** The site includes historical aerial photographs dating from 1937 to 1972. No genealogical information is included on the site but you can view the lay of the land as it changes over the years.
<http://www.pennpilot.psu.edu/>

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