

Federal Land Records: GLO Records Website

United States “How to” Guide, Intermediate Level: Instruction

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GOAL

This guide will teach you about land records created by the United States federal government, the contents of the records, where to find those records, and how to find land patent records on the General Land Office (GLO) Records website.

INTRODUCTION

From the late 1700's to the early 1900's, the United States federal government sold millions of acres of public land for a variety of reasons—to pay off federal debts, offered as an incentive for military service, or to encourage settlement of sparsely populated areas. Records were created whenever these land transactions occurred. Finding these records can help you understand more about your ancestor who obtained the land.

Land descriptions: Township and Range

The federal government established a grid system to survey and sell land. This system divided land into **townships** measuring 6 miles by 6 miles, totaling 36 square miles. Townships were measured based on east-west lines of latitude (the equator is an example of a latitude line) and north-south lines of longitude (the International Date line is based on a longitude line). A point was established, usually one per state, through which the **baseline** (an east-west line) and the **meridian** (north/south) passed. Townships were measured from this point. The distance east or west was labeled as **Range**, while the distance north or south was labeled as **Township**.

Townships were divided into one square mile numbered **sections**, measuring 640 acres. Sections were divided into halves (320 acres), quarters (160 acres), and eighths (80 acres), and their location was described within the section using compass points. Each piece of land was described from smallest to largest. For example, a land description of SW $\frac{1}{4}$ of the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of S29, T4N, R3E would mean the SouthWest quarter of the SouthEast quarter of Section 29, the 4th Township North and 3rd Range East of the established point.

For more information about township and range, including visual diagrams that can help you understand how the federal government measured land, see the Wiki article found here: https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Rectangular_Surveys.

HOW TO

Types and Contents of Federal Land Records

Patents

A patent is the official document transferring ownership of land from the federal government to

the buyer. Patents were issued by the General Land Office (GLO) and signed by the current U.S. president (through 1833). Though the original patents were given to the buyer, copies were maintained by the General Land Office (GLO). For more information about land patents, go to: https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Land_Patent_Search

The information found on patents usually includes:

- Name of buyer, usually called the patentee
- Land office issuing the patent
- Land description and county (To learn how land is described by rectangular surveys on a township and range grid, go to: https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Rectangular_Surveys)
- Date of patent (several months after the final certificate was issued)
- Signature of the current U.S. president (usually done by a secretary, not the president)
- Original surveys and field notes for many townships throughout the United States

Land Entry Case Files

All paperwork associated with an individual land entry was grouped into a land entry case file. The content of land entry case files varies by type of land sale or grant, including private land claims, credit/cash sales, preemptions, homesteads, or bounty land warrants. Documents also vary depending on the federal government act under which the land was purchased. Following the closure of individual land offices, these files were sent to the General Land Office (GLO). The GLO has since deposited land entry case files with the National Archives (NARA). Packets exist for both complete and incomplete transactions. For more information on land entry case files, go to: https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Land_Entry_Case_Files.

Tract Books

Tract books index the land sales by land description. They are used to identify land descriptions and to order case files. Organized by township, range, and section, tract books list every person who made claim on a tract of land, regardless of whether they completed the process and obtained a patent. Some tract books are missing (notably for Missouri and Alaska). For more information on tract books go to: https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Tract_Books

For more information about the types of Federal Land Grants see:

[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Grants_from_the_Federal_Government_\(Public_Domain\)](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Grants_from_the_Federal_Government_(Public_Domain))

Finding Federal Land Records

Finding Patents

- **General Land Office (GLO) Records: Eastern States Office** – The Bureau of Land Management (formerly the General Land Office) has indexed and is currently uploading digital scans of all patent copies from federal land sales. Also available are original survey plats and field notes for many townships throughout the United States, along with land status records and control document index records. Their website can be found at: www.glorerecords.blm.gov/. Not all scans have been uploaded yet.

Finding Land Entry Case Files

- **National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)** – The National Archives holds all original land entry case files. You can order copies of Land Entry Case Files for \$50.00 and Military Bounty-Land Warrant Application files for \$30.00. Their website can

be found at: <https://eservices.archives.gov>

- **Fold3** – Fold3 has digitized the land entry case files for fifteen Nebraska land offices. Their website can be found at: www.fold3.com. You must purchase a subscription to use Fold3.

Finding Tract Books

- **General Land Office (GLO): Eastern States Office** – The Eastern States Office holds the original tract books for the eastern federal states (AL, AR, FL, IL, IN, IA, LA, MI, MN, MS, MO). Their website can be found at: www.glorerecords.blm.gov/
- **National Archives and Records Administration (NARA)** – The National Archives holds all the original tract books for the western states (AK, AZ, CA, CO, ID, KS, MO, NE, NV, NM, ND, OK, OR, SD, UT, and WA). Their website can be found at: <https://eservices.archives.gov>

FamilySearch – FamilySearch has digitized (but not indexed) all surviving tract books. This collection can be found at: <https://familysearch.org/search/collection/2074276>. Tract books are also available on microfilm, found at: <https://familysearch.org/search/catalog/607931>.

Using the Government Land Office (GLO) website

As you have read, many land records are available from the Government Land Office (or GLO) website, especially land patent records. You will learn how to search for land patent records. Be sure to look at the website for other record types. To search the GLO website, follow these steps:

1. Go to the GLO website, found at www.glorerecords.blm.gov.
2. From the main page, click on **Land Patents**.
3. This is the main search screen. Enter in your search terms. Make sure to select the appropriate state. Once you have entered in the information you wish to view, click on **Search Patents**, found in the orange box near the bottom of the website.
4. If your search returns any results, you will see them listed alphabetically. The following chart will help you understand what each column means:

Image	Accession	Names	Date	Doc #	State
Link to an image of the land patent certificate.	The unique land patent file number.	Names of the grantee, or person receiving the land.	Date the land patent certificate was signed.	Land patent certificate number.	State where the land is located.

Meridian	Twp – Rng	Aliquots	Sec #	County
The north-south line of longitude used to survey and describe land.	The Township (Twp) and Range (Rng) measurements from the baseline and meridian.	The fractional portion describing the location of land within a Section.	The Section number within the Township described in the Twp – Rng column.	Gives the county where the acquired land is located.

5. Identify the land entry you are interested in.
6. To view the original land patent, click on the page icon under the Image column.
7. You can also view the location of each tract of land on a map. Click on the hyperlink number under the Accession column to view the details of the land patent. Under the heading Land Descriptions, you will see one or more entries. Under this heading, you will see a zoomable map of the United States. To see the location of an entry, click on the box under the Map column. The map will zoom into the corresponding location. You may see multiple colored boxes. The largest colored area is the Township; the mid-sized colored area is the Section. The smallest area is the actual land being patented.

PRACTICE

1. Go to the GLO Records website, found at: www.glorerecords.blm.gov/search/.
2. Do a land patent search for Thomas W. White of Lincoln County, Wyoming.
3. Click on Accession no. [MV-0703-444](#) and find the answers to the following questions:
 - When was the patent issued? **23 December 1907**
 - What is the name of the land office? **Evanston**
 - What is the date and name of the authority (government act) under which this land was granted? **March 3, 1877: Desert Land Act (19 Statute 377)**
 - What is the document number? **682**
 - What is the number of total acres of this land acquisition? **160.00**
 - Under Land Descriptions, what does Aliquots SE $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ Section 11 mean? **The southeast quarter of the northwest quarter of Section 11.**
 - Under the Map column, click the box to the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$ Section 11 land description. On the map, what is the name of the nearest town to the land acquired? **Thayne**
4. Click the back arrow to the previous screen and click the Image icon next to Accession no. [MV-0703-444](#) and answer the following:
 - What is the certificate number? **682**
 - When was the certificate issued? **23 December 1907 (found at the bottom of the document)**
 - Who was the current U.S. president? **Theodore Roosevelt**
5. Now, click the back arrow to the previous screen and click the Accession No. [MV-0705-265](#) and answer the following questions:

- When was the patent issued? **2 January 1908**
 - What is the name of the land office? **Evanston**
 - What is the date and name of the authority (government act) under which this land was granted? **May 20, 1862: Homestead EntryOriginal (12 Statute 392)**
 - What is the document number? **1373**
 - What is the number of total acres? **160.00**
 - Under Land Descriptions, Aliquots, what does SW¼NE¼ Section 12 mean? **The southwest quarter of the northeast quarter of Section 12.**
6. Click the back arrow to the previous screen and click the Image icon next to Accession no. **MV-0705-265** and answer the following:
- What is the homestead certificate number? **1373**
 - When was the certificate issued? **2 January 1908 (found at the bottom of the document)**

ACTIVITY

Now, test your skills you have learned in this “How to” Guide. The Activity is a way to check your knowledge and let you know you’ve mastered the Guide! [Click here](#) to try out the Activity.