



Pre-1850 Research

Mindsets for Success

- Be aware of your focus and unnecessary restrictions
- Do not limit yourself by what you expect to find (and where)
- Question your assumptions
- Pursue all leads
- Know that a general year/place/ etc. may be the best you can do

Resources

[Atlas of Historical County Boundaries](#)

[FamilySearch Research Wiki](#)

Redbook (book by Alice Eichholz)

[General Land Office Records](#)

[National Archives](#)

[Fold3*](#)

[Immigration Servants Database](#)

[Chronicling America](#)

[Newspaper Archive*](#)

[19th Century U.S. Newspapers*](#)

[Newspapers.com](#) (\$) 7-day free trial available

[GenealogyBank](#) (\$) 7-day free trial available

[Periodical Source Index \(PERSI\)](#) on [Allen County Public Library](#)

[Google Books](#)

[Internet Archives](#)

[WorldCat \(Interlibrary Loan\)](#)

*PPLD database. More are available on our website, ppld.org

Why Pre-1850?

Researching ancestors in the United States before 1850 can be a challenge. Census records prior to 1850 contain only the names of heads of households, vital records are less standardized, and time has taken its toll on documents, photographs, and grave markers.

What's happening in the U.S. before 1850?

This is a period of colonization, conflict, and movement. Research the time and place your ancestors lived to learn more about the historical context of their lives. Were they early settlers? Did they serve during a war? As the U.S. expanded westward, did your family move west too?

Research Strategies

Study the location

County, state and territory boundaries changed, as did the laws for record keeping. Even if you ancestor never moved, land boundaries may have changed around them, impacting where/if records were kept.

Use the Atlas of Historical County Boundaries, the FamilySearch Research Wiki, and the Redbook (book) to study locations.

Cluster research (the FAN club)

Pay attention to the friends, associates, and neighbors in your ancestor's life. Find records for the people in these "clusters" to see if they contain information about your ancestors.

Collateral research

Research indirect, or collateral, ancestors. These are your direct ancestors' siblings, in-laws, cousins, nieces and nephews, and aunts and uncles. Their records may mention your direct ancestors.

Consider different types of evidence

Direct Evidence directly answers a research question.

Indirect Evidence provides information that, when combined with other information, can support an argument.

Negative Evidence emerges when information we expect is missing, and an inference can be drawn.

Create a timeline

If you are looking at a problem too closely, you may miss important details or leads. List your ancestor's life events in chronological order to look for contradictory information, indirect evidence, gaps, and leads.

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Last revised date: 7/11/2023

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Pre-1850 Records and Resources

Census

Between 1790 and 1840, the U.S. Federal Census only lists heads of household by name. To navigate these tricky records: allow for spelling variations; consider how the census' tallied categories compare with the family composition you expect to see; remember that unrelated people/extended family often lived together, check neighbors for shared surnames or maiden names, and don't forget to use cluster (FAN club) and collateral research.

Vital records

In earlier periods, vital records may be incomplete, lost or damaged, or not kept at all. Research the location to learn which records may be available and where they are kept. Marriage records tend to be kept earlier than other vital records (look for bonds, intentions, and banns, in addition to licenses), and consider these alternatives: church records, tombstones, family Bibles, and diaries and letters.

Probate

Probate records are legal records created around an individual's death and include documents like wills, inventories, administrations, estate sale records, and guardianship or orphan court records. These are often kept at the courthouse where they were created (practices varied widely by location) and more than one court may have handled a single individual's death (e.g., county court, civil court, orphan's court, court of common pleas, etc.).

Land and Property

If you're doing pre-1850 research, you must look for land records! These can include deeds, federal land records, and bounty land records. Land research can help you track the movement of you family, in addition to providing insight into relationships and vital information. While most women could not own property, they may have provided a dower release.

Military records

Service records, pension files, and bounty land records can provide details about an ancestor's military service, as well as vital information and relationship details. Check with ascendancy/lineage organizations (e.g., DAR, SAR) for membership files, Fold3 for records, and the FamilySearch Research Wiki for research guides.

Taxes

Governments have collected taxes in North America since the colonial era. Tax records can provide information about residence, relationships, and the year a person died or left an area. Males were of taxable age at age 16, 18 or 21 (depending on the location). Note when they first appear on tax records to determine approximate age and birth year.

Voting records

Voting records like poll books (used to track voter registration) help establish your ancestor in a location and time, and may also provide age and proof of property ownership. Voting rights varied, but were typically dictated by a person's property, race, and gender. The right to vote was often limited to property-owning or tax-paying white males.

Indentured servant records

In the 1700s, many immigrants of European descent were indentured servants. Since this process involved another person paying for their passage to North America and a contract of service spanning several years, we tend to have better documentation for indentured servants than for travelers or immigrants listed on a simple passenger list.

Newspapers

Obituaries are not common prior to 1850, but you may find your ancestor in a newspaper birth, marriage, or social announcement, local news or biography, and probate or estate sale listings.

County Histories

Many towns and counties have published histories and/or local biographies. Also search regional periodicals and articles published by local, state, or national genealogical societies. Search for your ancestors' relatives too!

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Last revised date: 5/24/2021

