

STATE GUIDE

OKLAHOMA

by MAUREEN A. TAYLOR

OKLAHOMA'S CITIES SPRANG up in rather dramatic fashions. On April 22, 1889, an estimated 50,000 settlers lined up at the edge of the 2-million-acre “Unassigned Lands,” now in central Oklahoma. At noon, a shotgun blast sent them racing to claim land plots. By the end of the day, Oklahoma City and Guthrie each had about 10,000 residents, street plans, and the beginnings of municipal government. Within a month, there were five banks and six newspapers in Oklahoma City.

Those who'd jumped the gun and hidden out on choice homesteads earned Oklahoma its Sooner State nickname. You can get a similar head start on your Oklahoma genealogy by following our research advice.

TRIGGERING SETTLEMENT

Oklahoma, then called Indian Territory, had long been the US government's chosen location for eastern American Indian tribes. The Trail of Tears (which ran from southeastern states to Oklahoma) traces the forced migration of the Five Civilized Tribes—Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek/Muscogee and Seminole—after the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

Throughout the 19th century, thousands of others passed through the area on the way West or—for cowboys driving herds—north to railroads in Kansas. Ranchers grazed cattle; “squatters” set up farms. Pressure grew to open the Unassigned Lands that the Creek and Seminole had given up after the Civil War. The Indian Appropriations Bill made it possible. Squatters were kicked out, and the 1889 land run began.

The next year, the Organic Act incorporated the Unassigned Lands into Oklahoma Territory. Guthrie became the new territory's capital (later moved to Oklahoma City). Five more land runs took place before statehood in 1907. Oklahoma's population has grown ever since—except during the Great Depression, when so many farmers left for California that even migrants from elsewhere were called “Okies.”

SHOOTING FOR CENSUSES

Since Oklahoma is a relatively new state, you won't have centuries of documents to discover. Your first genealogy research target should be a mix of territorial, state and Indian censuses.

The first US census for lands west of Arkansas, including part of present-day Oklahoma, took place

in 1860. But it's not complete: Enumerators included only residents of towns near missions, government agencies or military posts. But that census *does* include a partial slave schedule for Indian Lands, which counts slaves held by Indians. Look for these records in the Arkansas schedules.

Oklahoma's 1870 and 1880 censuses are missing (as is the 1890 enumeration, which was ruined due to fire and flood). The 1890 schedule of Union veterans and their widows survived the fire, though; look for it with other US census records. The 1900 federal census separated the former Indian and Oklahoma territories.

A special 1890 Oklahoma Territory census, indexed at <www.okhistory.com.

FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1907
- ★ **First federal census:** 1860
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1908
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** none
- ★ **Public-land state**
- ★ **Counties:** 77
- ★ **Contact for vital records:** State Department of Health, P.O. Box 53551, Oklahoma City, OK 73152, (405) 271-4040, <www.ok.gov/health/Birth_and_Death_Certificates>

OKLAHOMA



The National Archives has an online index to the Dawes Rolls at <www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/rolls/final-rolls.html>, as does Access Genealogy, FamilySearch and Ancestry.com.

Before searching Dawes rolls for a possible tribe member, find him and his family in the 1900 federal census first. If your family doesn't appear in Oklahoma during that enumeration—or if they weren't alive between 1896 and 1906—they likely won't be in the Dawes Rolls.

JUMPING THE GUN

Beginning in 1819, the Army stationed troops—including the post-Civil War African American units called the Buffalo Soldiers—at Oklahoma frontier forts. If your ancestor was among them, see an index to Indian War pension files from 1815 to 1891 on FamilySearch. Pension files are available from NARA.

Oklahoma wasn't yet a state during the Civil War, but many Cherokee, Creek and other tribes sided with the Confederacy and provided soldiers. Search for soldiers on the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System <www.nps.gov>.

1940

Okemah native Woody Guthrie pens "This Land Is Your Land"

1953

Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma" becomes the state song

1995

Domestic terrorists bomb the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City

2011

Oklahoma City reports its longest drought since recording began

2017

A US district court rules that descendants of slaves held by Cherokee have a right to Cherokee citizenship

TOOLKIT

Websites

Access Genealogy: Oklahoma <www.accessgenealogy.com/oklahoma-genealogy>

The Chronicles of Oklahoma <www.okhistory.org/publications/chronicles>

Civil War in Indian Territory <rootsweb.ancestry.com/~itcivwar/civilind.htm>

Cyndi's List: Oklahoma <www.cyndislist.com/us/ok>

Oklahoma Digital Prairie <digitalprairie.ok.gov/cdm>

Oklahoma GenWeb <www.okgenweb.net>

University of Oklahoma Western History Digital Collections <digital.libraries.ou.edu/homehistory.php>

Publications

Guide to the Historical Records of Oklahoma, revised edition by Bradford Koplowitz (Heritage Books)

Guide to Manuscripts in the Western History Collections of the University of Oklahoma by Kristine L. Southwell (University of Oklahoma Press)

Historical Atlas of Oklahoma by Charles Robert Goins (University of Oklahoma Press)

Oklahoma: A History of Five Centuries by Arrell Morgan Gibson (University of Oklahoma Press)

Archives & Organizations

Cherokee National Historical Society 21192 S. Keeler Drive, Park Hill, OK 74451, (918) 456-6007, <www.cherokeheritage.org>

The National Archives at Fort Worth 1400 John Burgess Drive, Fort Worth, TX 76140, (817) 551-2051 <www.archives.gov/fort-worth>

Oklahoma Genealogical Society Box 12986, Oklahoma City, OK 73157, (405) 637-1907 <www.okgensoc.org>

Oklahoma Historical Society 800 Nazih Zuhdi Drive, Oklahoma City, OK 73105, (405) 522-0765, <www.okhistory.org>

Oklahoma State Archives and Records Management 200 NE 18th St., Oklahoma City, OK 73105, (405) 521-2502, <libraries.ok.gov/state-government/archives-and-records>

Get a head start on your Oklahoma genealogy by following our research advice.

gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm> (leave the State field blank, since Indian Territory isn't an option) and order service records from NARA. For more recent wars, run your relative's name through the Oklahoma Military Casualties database at <www.okhistory.org/research/mildeaths>.

LOADING UP ON LAND RECORDS

Before he could call a piece of land claimed under the Homestead Act of 1862 his own, your ancestor had to "prove up" his claim by living on it and making improvements, such as farming or adding a house or a fence. Oklahoma's land runs and the scarcity of laws attracted many who had trouble getting land elsewhere, such as women, African Americans and those with questionable pasts.

Until statehood, the area was called the Twin Territories: Indian Territory to the east, and Oklahoma Territory to the west. Indian Territory was communal tribal land until 1902, but Oklahoma Territory land was administered by the US government from 1889. Learn how to search Oklahoma Territory federal tract books at <www.sirinet.net/~lgarris/swogs/tract.html>, then use the index at Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9244>. Order case files from NARA.

Search for your Oklahoma ancestors' post-statehood patents through the General Land Office <www.glorerecords.blm.gov>.

AIMING FOR VITAL STATISTICS

You're more likely to find pre-1940s Oklahoma births and deaths mentioned in the newspaper than in vital records. Vital registration laws of 1908 and 1917 were widely ignored, and state-level vital records are closed to all but next of kin and legal representatives.

OHS has a growing digital collection of newspapers from all counties and many Indian Tribes at <gateway.okhistory.org/explore/collections/ODNP>. More than 300,000 pages of Oklahoma newspapers are searchable free at Chronicling America <chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>.

For marriage records since each county's formation date, contact the court for the county where the marriage took place. You can also search digitized images on FamilySearch (which has coverage for some Indian tribes, too).

With all this research ammunition, you can start your genealogy run with a bang. ●