

STATE GUIDE

GEORGIA

by DAVID A. FRYXELL

THE FIRST STEP in tracing your Georgia ancestors might be to shake your preconceptions of this state, which presents many different faces to history: Georgia was the last of the original 13 colonies, a frontier where settlers pushed Indian tribes out of the way, as well as the jumping-off point to the Old Southwest of Alabama, Mississippi and beyond. It was the core of the Confederacy, yet today it epitomizes the “New South.” Whichever face of Georgia your family saw, your genealogical research efforts are sure to bear fruit.

A SLICE OF EARLY HISTORY

The Peach State started as a buffer between British and Spanish colonial ambitions. The British chartered a Georgia province in 1732; the next year, James Oglethorpe and 35 families founded Savannah. Oglethorpe had promoted the colony to British debtors threatened with imprisonment, but few actually settled there. Instead, the colony became a haven for poor English and Scottish tradesmen, as well as Protestant and Jewish refugees from Switzerland, Germany and Italy.

After slavery was legalized in 1751 and Georgia became a royal colony in 1752, settlers from Virginia and the Carolinas began to drive population growth there. That triggered the dizzying divvying up of Georgia into a patchwork of counties: The two original counties formed in 1740 became 12 parishes between 1758 and 1777, when they merged into eight counties.

Almost all the surviving pre-1777 vital, land, court and other public records are in the Georgia Archives <www.georgiaarchives.org>. Its

Virtual Vault <vault.georgiaarchives.org/digital> includes Colonial estate and conveyance records, plats and warrants and wills.

STATEHOOD BLOSSOMS

Ten years after achieving statehood in 1788, Georgia’s western portion split off into the Territory of Mississippi (today’s Alabama and Mississippi). Since then, the state’s been further divided into today’s crazy quilt of 159 counties (many with names similar to towns located in other counties—the city of Macon, for example, isn’t in Macon County). Georgia GenWeb’s county list <thegaproject.org/county-list> is a good starting point for unscrambling the patchwork.

Revolutionary War soldiers from Virginia and the Carolinas who had fought in Georgia fueled the state’s postwar growth. Land lotteries in 1805, 1807, 1820, 1821, 1827, 1832 and 1833 doled out chunks of newly opened territory. The state archives has original records of the lotteries; read about researching them at <www.georgiaarchives.org/research/land_lottery>. Some indexes have been posted at <usgwarchives.net/ga/galand.htm>. The 1827 and 1832 lottery records are searchable at Ancestry <www.ancestry.com>, which also has various subsequent land and tax records. FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org> has microfilmed these and other early Georgia land records, and 157,000 images are searchable at <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1914217>.

The pressure on American Indian lands intensified with the 1828

FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1788
- ★ **First federal census:** 1820
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1919
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** 1952
- ★ **State-land state**
- ★ **Counties:** 159
- ★ **Contact for vital records:** Georgia Department of Public Health, Vital Records, 1680 Phoenix Boulevard, Suite 100 Atlanta, GA 30349, (404) 679-4702, <dph.georgia.gov/vitalrecords>

GEORGIA



timeline

1733

James Oglethorpe and 113 colonists found Savannah

1754

John Reynolds becomes Georgia's first royal governor

1778

British troops capture Savannah

1793

Eli Whitney invents the cotton gin at Mulberry Grove Plantation

1838

The Cherokee begin their journey along the Trail of Tears

1861

Georgia seizes Fort Pulaski and secedes from the Union

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discovery of gold near Dahlonega, culminating in the 1838 forced removal of thousands of Cherokee to Oklahoma. An estimated 4,000 Indians died along the Trail of Tears. The 1832 Creek and 1835 Cherokee censuses are available from FamilySearch and searchable at <www.accessgenealogy.com/native/census>.

RIPE FOR CONFLICT

With the growth of “King Cotton,” the mainstay of Georgia’s economy, came an explosion of slavery. By the start of the Civil War, slaves made up 44 percent of Georgia’s population. FamilySearch has almost 109,000 images of Georgia Freedman’s Bureau <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2331267>, set up to help slaves freed after the war.

During the Civil War, more than 100,000 Georgians fought for the Confederacy. The Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System <www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>, an index to 6.3 million Union and Confederate soldier names, is a good starting point for Civil War ancestors. Research Confederate soldiers in the Georgia Archives’ Virtual Vault collections of muster rolls and pension applications. The subscription Fold3 site <fold3.com> has extensive digitized collections of muster rolls and pension files, and MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com> has an index from card abstracts of muster rolls.



FRUITFUL RESOURCES

When you’re ready to pursue Georgia ancestors in person, start at the Georgia state archives. It has tax digests, private papers, church and cemetery records, newspapers, family Bibles, land grants and maps; check out the finding aids at <find.georgiaarchives.org/archon>. Its General Name File, an index to mostly pre-Civil War military records that started as a WPA project, is now also available via the Virtual Vault. Another important repository is the Middle Georgia Archives <mgaarchives.com>.

1870

Georgia is the last state to be readmitted to the Union

1929

Martin Luther King Jr. is born in Atlanta

1936

Margaret Mitchell publishes *Gone With the Wind*, which takes place in Georgia

1980

Ted Turner launches CNN in Atlanta

1996

Atlanta hosts the Summer Olympics

TOOLKIT

Websites

Digital Library of Georgia <dlg.usg.edu>

GA Genweb Project <www.thegaproject.org>

Georgia Archives Virtual Vault <vault.georgiaarchives.org/digital>

New Georgia Encyclopedia
<www.georgiaencyclopedia.org>

Publications

A Gazetteer of the State of Georgia by Adiel Sherwood (Genealogical Publishing Co.)

Historical Collections of Georgia by George White (Clearfield)

A History of Georgia edited by Kenneth Coleman (University of Georgia Press)

Archives & Organizations

Atlanta History Center 130 West Paces Ferry Road NW, Atlanta, GA 30305, (404) 814-4000, <atlantahistorycenter.com>

Georgia Archives 5800 Jonesboro Road, Morrow, GA 30260, (678) 364-3710, <www.georgiaarchives.org>

Georgia Genealogical Society Box 550247, Atlanta, GA 30355, <gagensociety.org>

Georgia Historical Society 501 Whitaker St., Savannah, GA 31401, (912) 651-2125, <georgiahistory.com>

Georgia State University Library Special Collections and Archives 100 Decatur St. SE, Atlanta, GA 30303, (404) 413-2880, <library.gsu.edu/special-collections>

Middle Georgia Archives 1180 Washington Ave., Macon, GA 31201, (478) 744-0821, <mgaarchives.biblib.org>

National Archives at Atlanta 5780 Jonesboro Road, Morrow, GA 30260, (770) 968-2100, <www.archives.gov/atlanta>

University of Georgia Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library 300 S. Hull St., Athens, GA 30602, (706) 542-7123, <www.libs.uga.edu/hargrett>

biblib.org> in Macon, notable for its Colonial collection, family and business papers, club and organization records, and photos.

Here are other key records to check out:

★ **CENSUSES:** Tax and property records often can substitute for the 1790, 1800 and 1810 US censuses of Georgia, all of which are lost (except Oglethorpe County's 1800 count). Consult *The Reconstructed 1790 Census of Georgia* by Marie De Lamar and Elisabeth Rothstein (Genealogical Publishing Co.), searchable on Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/48008>. Let records of the 1805 land lottery stand in for the 1800 census—entrants had to be in the state by 1802 to qualify; these can be found in the book *The 1805 Georgia Land Lottery* by Virginia S. and Ralph V. Wood (Greenwood Press). Other census substitutes have been compiled and are searchable at <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3542>. Federal census records begin with 1820 (except for Franklin, Rabun and Twiggs Counties, which start later).

The state took censuses of various counties between 1798 and about 1879; see a list at <www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Georgia_Census>. These are held at the archives and some are on Family History Library microfilm. Property tax records can also be used as a census stand-in; Ancestry has a collection at <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1729>.

★ **VITAL RECORDS:** Counties kept marriage records starting in 1804; Georgia attempted statewide vital registration in 1875 but didn't achieve it until 1919. Even then, it was 1928 before most counties complied. (You may be able to find county-level birth records before 1919. Search the FHL catalog by county, then look in the vital records category.) The state has marriage records from 1952 on; earlier ones are at the county probate courts that issued the licenses, and many can be accessed at FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1927197> or the Virtual Vault. You can request vital records following the instructions at <dph.georgia.gov/ways-request-vital-record>.

Death records are searchable online at FamilySearch (three collections, beginning in 1914) and Ancestry.com (two collections, beginning in 1914). The Virtual Vault has images of many death certificates up to 1927.

★ **NEWSPAPERS:** Georgia has some of the most complete newspaper archives in the nation, ranging as far back as 1763. The Georgia Historic Newspapers project of the Digital Library of Georgia <gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu> has digitized more than a million pages dating as far back as 1786. Ancestry.com offers the digitized, searchable *Atlanta Constitution* dating from 1870, with some gaps. The Georgia Newspaper Project <www.libs.uga.edu/gnp> has microfilmed more than 2,500 titles.

With all these resources, you'll have a peachy keen time researching your Georgia roots. ●