

## RESEARCH GUIDE

# MICHIGAN

by KATHERINE R. WILLSON



TWO PENINSULAS MAKE UP THE “GREAT LAKES State” that straddles both the largest group of freshwater lakes and the Canada-US border. Whether your family members were “Yoopers” from the Upper Peninsula or residents of the state’s famous Motor City, these genealogical resources will help you find your Michigander ancestors.

### WOLVERINE HISTORY

Prior to the 17th century, the area now known as Michigan (from the Ojibwe word *Michigama*, or “great water”) was home to several American Indian tribes, including the Chippewa/Ojibwe, Odawa/Ottawa, Potawatomi, Menominee, and Wyandot/Huron. Some county names pay homage to the indigenous populations: Gogebic, Keweenaw, Menominee and Washtenaw.

In the early 1600s, French-Canadian explorers, fur-traders and missionaries created small settlements in the Upper Peninsula, and some county names are evidence of that French influence: Charlevoix, Lapeer, Marquette, and Presque Isle. Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan’s oldest city, was founded in 1668 as part of New France (which included present-day eastern Canada and the Great Lakes region). Larger French settlements in the sparsely populated frontier began with Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit (modern Detroit) in the Lower Peninsula, founded in 1701.

French rule over Michigan ceased at the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, when France ceded its North American lands to Great Britain. The new United States acquired the land when it won independence from Britain, then organized it into the Northwest Territory in 1787.

The Northwest Ordinance paved the way for Michigan statehood, which first

became a territory in 1805. The Erie Canal’s opening in 1825 facilitated a massive influx of agricultural settlers primarily from New England and New York, helping achieve the necessary population for statehood. Boundary disputes between Michigan and Ohio postponed statehood and led to the bloodless 1835–1836 Toledo War. Michigan gave up the Toledo Strip in exchange for the Upper Peninsula, and was admitted to the Union as the 26th state in 1837.

Michigan’s plentiful land, as well as agricultural, lumber, mining, and shipping employment opportunities, attracted a flood of immigrants in the 1830s to 1850s (especially Cornish, Dutch, Finns, French-Canadians, Germans, Norwegians and Swedes). The late 1800s to early 1900s saw the arrival of Irish, Poles and Italians seeking political and economic freedom.

The rise of Michigan’s auto industry in the early 1900s led many African Americans from the South to move to Detroit as part of the Great Migration. Though the loss of manufacturing jobs (particularly in Detroit) in the late 20th and early 21st centuries hampered the state, Michigan remains a populous state, with booming tourism and agriculture industries.

### VITAL RECORDS

Michigan births and deaths were to be filed at the county clerk’s office beginning on the date of a county’s organization. This rarely happened, however, until a state law in 1867 required that these events be recorded in ledgers, and copies sent to the state. Even after that, general compliance didn’t occur until about 1915.

Vital record copies can usually be obtained through a county clerk’s office at a lower cost than from the

### FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD: 1837

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:  
1820 (as territory); 1840 (as state)

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:  
1867

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:  
1805

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:  
MI Dept. of Health & Human Services,  
Division of Vital Records

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state. Order state copies from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services’ Division for Vital Records and Health Statistics <[www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/0,5885,7-339-71551\\_4645---,00.html](http://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/0,5885,7-339-71551_4645---,00.html)>. Privacy laws restrict access to vital certificates less than 100 years old, and only those mentioned in the records (such as the subject or a parent or child) or their eligible heirs can request those records. You can find digitized copies of Michigan death certificates that are 75 years or older from the Archives of Michigan <[www.michiganology.org/vital-records](http://www.michiganology.org/vital-records)>.

Marriage records were kept more consistently, with a law requiring them in 1805. (As with birth and death records, officials were required to send copies of marriage records to the state beginning in 1867.) Divorce records didn’t begin until 1897. Marriage and divorce records over 100 years old can be ordered from the department of health; find pre-1867 marriage records at the clerk’s office in the county in which they were created.

FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)> has name indexes and copies of most of these county and state records. Find them by selecting Michigan as the Place option in the site’s collection list <[www.familysearch.org/search/collection/list](http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/list)>, then choose entries for Birth, Marriage, & Death. You can find additional, nondigitized collections via the Catalog <[www.familysearch.org/search/catalog](http://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog)>.

Subscription site Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)> has its own collections of Michigan vital records, including some 15 million marriage records from 1867 to 1952 <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9093](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9093)>.



### COUNTING MICHIGANDERS

Michigan appeared in the federal census as early as 1800, but its records for that count and most of the 1810 census have been lost. Look for Michigan first as a territory in 1820, then as a state after 1840. Many major genealogy websites have federal censuses: Ancestry.com, FamilySearch, Findmypast <[www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com)>, and MyHeritage <[www.myheritage.com](http://www.myheritage.com)>.

Fortunately, Michigan also took several of its own territorial or state censuses, first in 1827, then in 1834 and 1845, then every 10 years from 1854 to 1904. Michiganology <[www.michiganology.org](http://www.michiganology.org)>, a site sponsored by the Archives of Michigan and the Library of Michigan, hosts searchable collections of state and territorial censuses

## TIMELINE

### 1668

French missionary Jacques Marquette founds Sault Ste. Marie on the “Upper Peninsula” of Michigan

### 1701

The French found Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit, which becomes modern Detroit

### 1763

Ownership of French lands in North America passes from France to Great Britain

### 1783

The United States gains what is now Michigan upon independence; the region is organized into Northwest Territory in 1787

### 1800

Western Michigan becomes part of Indiana Territory



**Sleeping Bear Dunes  
National Lakeshore,  
near Empire, Mich.**

from 1827 through 1894. (Note that some censuses are incomplete, or only count males over age 21.) A statistical summary of the 1904 census is at Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/18559](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/18559)>.

### OTHER RECORDS

Find your Michiganders in other types of records, such as those listed here.

- **City and Business Directories:** These are primarily kept at local and state libraries and archives. Digitized copies can be found at the following websites, using the search field enter a city, followed by the words *city directory* or *business directory*, and the year: Google Books <[books.google.com](http://books.google.com)>, the Internet Archive <[www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)>

and HathiTrust <[www.hathitrust.org](http://www.hathitrust.org)>. Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2469](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2469)>, FamilySearch and MyHeritage <[www.myheritage.com/research/collection-10705/us-city-directories](http://www.myheritage.com/research/collection-10705/us-city-directories)> also have some directories.

- **Court Records:** County court records (including naturalizations and divorces) are generally kept by county clerks or circuit court clerks, but many have been acquired by the Archives of Michigan. Search the Library of Michigan's online catalog <[magic.msu.edu/search~S37](http://magic.msu.edu/search~S37)> for county holdings, or contact the archives directly.

- **Land Records:** As a public-land state, Michigan had its lands granted to individuals by the federal government via patents. Michigan was surveyed using the rectangular

## 1805

The Territory of Michigan is established, then including modern Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota, as well as part of the Dakotas

## 1835

Ohio and Michigan fight over Michigan's southern border in the mostly bloodless Toledo War

## 1837

Michigan becomes the 26th state in the Union

## 1891

Dickinson County is created in the last major change to Michigan's county boundaries

## 1903

Henry Ford founds the Ford Motor Company in Detroit; General Motors and the Maxwell Motor Company (Chrysler) are also active in the area

## TOOLKIT

## Websites

**Cyndi's List: Michigan** <[www.cyndislist.com/us/mi](http://www.cyndislist.com/us/mi)>

**FamilySearch Research Wiki: Michigan** <[www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Michigan,\\_United\\_States\\_Genealogy](http://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Michigan,_United_States_Genealogy)>

**Linkpendium: Michigan** <[www.linkpendium.com/all-mi-genealogy](http://www.linkpendium.com/all-mi-genealogy)>

**Michigan Biographical Index** <[www.michlist.com/index.html](http://www.michlist.com/index.html)>

**Michiganology** <[www.michiganology.org](http://www.michiganology.org)>

**MIGenWeb** <[www.migenweb.org](http://www.migenweb.org)>

## Publications

**Michigan Genealogy: Sources and Resources**, second edition by Carol McGinnis (Genealogical Publishing Company)

**Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections, 1876–1929**, 40 volumes

**Michigan Place Names: The History of the Founding & Naming of More Than Five Thousand Past and Present Michigan Communities** by Walter Romig (Wayne State University Press)

**Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State**, third edition by Willis F. Dunbar & George S. May (Eerdmans)

**Research in the States Series: Michigan** by Shirley DeBoer & Brenda Leyndyke (National Genealogical Society)

## Archives &amp; Organizations

**Archives of Michigan** <[michigan.gov/archivesofmi](http://michigan.gov/archivesofmi)>

**Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan** <[bentley.umich.edu/resource/digitized-collections](http://bentley.umich.edu/resource/digitized-collections)>

**Clarke Historical Library, Central Michigan University** <[www.cmich.edu/research/clarke-historical-library](http://www.cmich.edu/research/clarke-historical-library)>

**Detroit Society for Genealogical Research** <[www.dsgr.org](http://www.dsgr.org)>

**Historical Society of Michigan** <[www.hsmichigan.org](http://www.hsmichigan.org)>

**Library of Michigan** <[www.michigan.gov/LibraryofMichigan](http://www.michigan.gov/LibraryofMichigan)>

**Michigan Genealogical Council** <[www.mimgc.org](http://www.mimgc.org)>

**National Archives at Chicago** <[www.archives.gov/chicago](http://www.archives.gov/chicago)>

survey system (townships, ranges and sections). Randy Majors' website has an excellent mapping tool to identify the appropriate segments of land <[www.randymajors.org/township-range-on-google-maps](http://www.randymajors.org/township-range-on-google-maps)>. Find land patents at the Archives of Michigan or the Bureau of Land Management's General Land Office <[glorerecords.blm.gov](http://glorerecords.blm.gov)>. Subsequent transfers of land ownership used deeds recorded at a county's register of deeds office. Many counties (in collaboration with local genealogical societies) have made grantor/grantee indexes available online at the county website.

● **Maps:** The Archives of Michigan and the Library of Michigan both have large collections of maps. Copies of many Michigan maps (including Sanborn fire insurance maps) can be found at Michiganology, the Library of Congress <[www.loc.gov/maps](http://www.loc.gov/maps)> and the David Rumsey Map Collection <[www.davidrumsey.com](http://www.davidrumsey.com)>.

● **Newspapers:** The Library of Michigan holds the largest collection of Michigan newspapers <[www.michigan.gov/LibraryNewspapers](http://www.michigan.gov/LibraryNewspapers)>. *Chronicling America* <[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov)> and the Clarke Historical Library <[digmichnews.cmich.edu](http://digmichnews.cmich.edu)> each have large collections as well. Kenneth Marks shares more resources in a post on his blog, *The Ancestor Hunt* <[www.theancestorhunt.com/blog/michigan-online-historical-newspapers-summary](http://www.theancestorhunt.com/blog/michigan-online-historical-newspapers-summary)>.

● **Probate Records:** The Archives of Michigan has collected probate files from around the state, though some remain at the county level. FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2013878](http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2013878)> and Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8793](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8793)> each have collections of Michigan probate records from the late 1700s to the 20th century.

● **Religious Records:** Obtain these from the religious institution itself, or its archive. County genealogical and historical organizations can provide information on where records from specific congregations are held. Both the Library of Michigan and the Detroit Public Library's Burton Historical Collection <[digitalcollections.detroitpubliclibrary.org](http://digitalcollections.detroitpubliclibrary.org)> have large religious record collections, with the latter boasting multiple Roman Catholic collections. Find FamilySearch collections in that site's catalog, which includes a listing for the Work Projects Administration's 1940 survey *Inventory of the Church Archives of Michigan* (17 volumes).

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