

RESEARCH GUIDE

NEVADA

by SUZANNE MALEK



NEVADA, LIKE MANY OTHER STATES, HAS A LONG and varied history—from pioneers to high tech, from boom to bust. Known today as America’s Silver State, Nevada has gone through an incredible transition. And it has the distinction of being one of only two states admitted to the Union during the Civil War, giving it the nickname the “Battle Born State.” Read on to learn how to find your ancestors in Nevada.

HITTING THE HISTORY JACKPOT

To appreciate the history of Nevada, you first need to understand what led to Nevada becoming a state. That includes the history of US westward expansion through a series of events in which Nevada played a role.

Indigenous tribes were the first inhabitants of what is now known as Nevada. By the time of European contact, notable tribes included the Southern and Northern Paiute, Mono, Mojave, Washoe and the Western Shoshone. The Department of Health and Human Services has collected a list of websites for contemporary tribes at <dcfs.nv.gov/Programs/CWS/ICWA/NevadaTribalWebsites>.

Beginning in 1598, Nevada was claimed by Spain. From 1804, the region was part of Alta California, a vast province that included what is now Arizona, California, Utah, western Colorado and southern Wyoming. The designation remained until 1821, when the area became part of the newly independent Mexico.

European and Mexican settlement in Nevada was sparse. But interest in the area increased after American explorer John C. Frémont and famed frontiersman Kit Carson traveled through what is now the Great Basin in the 1840s. They reported on its vital trade

routes. Included in their journeys was Eagle Valley, now the location of Carson’s namesake Carson City.

The United States, having acquired western lands in the Louisiana Purchase (1803), the annexation of Texas (1845), and the Oregon Treaty with the United Kingdom (1846), was brought into conflict with Mexico. The end result of the Mexican-American War was the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which transferred more than 336 million acres of Mexican land to the United States.

Around the same time, migrants from other parts of the United States were drawn out west. Latter-day Saint (Mormon) pioneers, driven from their settlement in Illinois, moved to the Salt Lake region of modern Utah beginning in 1847. They founded posts on their way to Salt Lake, including in Genoa. And the California Gold Rush of 1849 attracted prospectors and fortune-seekers from around the country, many stopping in Nevada on their way.

Increased settlement led to a need for more organization. The Territory of Utah formed as part of the Compromise of 1850, encompassing present-day Utah, most of Nevada, western Colorado, and the far southwest corner of Wyoming.

The Comstock Lode, found in the mountains surrounding Virginia City in 1859, was a turning point in Nevada history. Amid the ensuing silver rush, Virginia City quickly grew into a major player in the US economy. Thousands arrived to seek their fortunes, aided by the construction of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad (to Carson City and later Reno). In the 1870s, Virginia City’s population grew to some 30,000, but slowed when the United States moved away from silver and the lode failed later in the decade.

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:
1864

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1860

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1887 (county); 1911 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
from foundation (county); 1968 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:
NV Dept. of Health,
Office of Vital Records

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On 2 March 1861, Nevada Territory was organized out of the existing western part of the Utah Territory. Then, voters approved Nevada's state constitution in September 1864, paving the way for Nevada to become the 36th state of the Union on October 31. Nevada's statehood was expedited given the ongoing Civil War; the area was isolated from conflict, but Nevada did provide some troops to Union.

The 1890s ushered in a 20-year depressed economy. After mining failed, the state turned to its other natural resources for assistance. Depression-era projects, easy divorce laws, gambling, Cold War defense jobs, and the opening up of public land for recreational use (notably, the legalization of gambling and the expansion of Las Vegas) all contributed to turning Nevada's economy around.

LIVING IN THE SILVER STATE

Birth and death records were not required by state law until 1887, and were kept at the county level until 1911. However, some localities kept records earlier than this.

FamilySearch has a dataset starting in 1871 that consists of images of county birth and death registers and certificates acquired from county courthouses <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2053817>. The collection does not include a handful of counties, including Carson County.

Beginning in 1911, state vital record offices have documented vital events. You can order records directly from VitalChek <www.vitalchek.com> or the state's website <dpbh.nv.gov/Programs/BirthDeath/dta/Forms/Birth/Death_Vital_Records_-_Forms>, or schedule an appointment with the office. Only those with a "legal need" or a "direct" relationship by blood or marriage to the person mentioned on the record can receive a copy.

The state didn't mandate marriage or divorce records until 1968. However, records of these events were kept at

the county level much earlier. Nevada's marriage records are open to the public, and you can obtain a copy directly from the county recorder's office. (See a list of offices with contact information at the state's vital records home page.) FamilySearch has a collection of marriage records from 1862 to 1993, but coverage varies by county <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1943751>.

Substitutes for missing marriage or death records include church records, obituaries and other newspaper articles, military records, censuses, cemetery records, and family Bibles.

'SIN CITY' CENSUSES

Nevada was first enumerated in the federal census in 1860 as part of Utah Territory, and subsequently as its own state beginning in 1870. Note that, in the 1860 count, Elko County was then known as St. Mary's County, and "Carson County" included modern Douglas, Lyon, and Storey Counties (plus the former Ormsby County). Federal censuses are widely available on websites such as FamilySearch, Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com> and MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com>.

Nevada took its own censuses in 1862, 1863 and 1875. You can browse images at FamilySearch. (As of this writing, the collection hasn't been indexed.) The Nevada State Library and Archives <nsla.nv.gov/nevada-census-data> holds the original microfilm, and has name indexes to assist your search.

OTHER RECORDS

Many other resources are available for you to research your Nevada ancestors.

- **Newspapers:** These ran a variety of articles important to family history research, from the mundane (who came to a prominent family's dinner on Sunday) to the sensational

TIMELINE

1598

Modern Nevada is claimed for Spain

1804

Spain forms the Alta California province out of Nevada and other regions

1821

Mexico (then including Nevada) gains independence from Spain

1843

John C. Frémont and Kit Carson embark on a highly publicized expedition to the Great Basin and Sierra Nevada

1848

The United States gains vast swaths of land in the Mexican Cession; Nevada is part of Utah Territory from 1850



Valley of Fire State Park
in Clark County

1859

The Comstock Lode sparks a silver rush centered on Virginia City

1861

Nevada Territory is formed

1864

Nevada is admitted as the 36th state

1931

Gambling is made legal in Nevada, setting the stage for Las Vegas' development

1969

Carson City becomes an independent city and Ormsby County is abolished, in the last major change to Nevada's county boundaries

TOOLKIT

Websites

Cyndi's List: Nevada <www.cyndislist.com/us/nv>

FamilySearch Research Wiki: Nevada <www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Nevada,_United_States_Genealogy>

Linkpendium: Nevada <www.linkpendium.com/nv-genealogy>

The Nevada Library Cooperative <nvlibrarycoop.contentdm.oclc.org>

NVGenWeb <www.usgenwebsites.org/nvgenweb>

Publications

Census Substitutes & State Census Records, Volume Five: Western/Pacific States and Nationwide by William Dollarhide (Family Roots Publishing)

Nevada Censuses & Substitute Name Lists, 1855–2015: With a Selection of Nationwide Censuses & Substitutes 1600s–Present by William Dollarhide (Family Roots Publishing)

Nevada Guide to Genealogical Records by Diane E. Greene (Genealogical Pub. Co.)

The Newspapers of Nevada: A History and Bibliography, 1854–1979 by Richard E. Lingenfelter and Karen R. Gash (University of Nevada Press)

Research in Nevada by Stefani Evans and edited by Barbara V. Little (National Genealogical Society)

Archives & Organizations

The National Archives at Riverside <www.archives.gov/riverside>: Materials for Clark County, Nev.

The National Archives at San Francisco <www.archives.gov/san-francisco>: Materials for Nevada except Clark County

Nevada Historical Society <www.nvhistoricalsociety.org>

Nevada State Genealogical Society <nevadastategenealogy.wixsite.com/nsgs>

Nevada State Library and Archives <nsla.nv.gov/home>

TMCC Library, Open Genealogy Lab and Family History Research Room <libguides.tmcc.edu/c.php?g=606579&p=4322229>

University of Nevada, Las Vegas Special Collections and Archives <www.library.unlv.edu/speccol>

(details of local crime). The *Nevada Appeal* claims to be the longest continuously running newspaper in the state, founded on 16 May 1865. Many of Nevada's public libraries allow free access to historical newspapers and obituaries through their online catalogs, and they've pooled their resources into the Nevada Library Cooperative <nvlibrarycoop.contentdm.oclc.org/digital> that has some digitized publications. *Chronicling America*, a US-wide project, offers free access to many of Nevada's historical newspapers <chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>.

- **City Directories:** Notable settlements include Carson City and Las Vegas, directories for which are found on subscription sites MyHeritage and Ancestry.com. When researching them, keep in mind that directories vary greatly based on who published them, and who the intended audience was (for example, for the general public, for businesses, or for professional or religious organizations).

- **Wills and Probate Records:** Probate court records may include wills, guardianships, bonds, petitions, accounts, inventories, administrations, orders, depositions, decrees and distributions. If your Nevada ancestor's probate records precede statehood in 1864, you should start your search at the Nevada State Library and Archives. For post-1864 records, you should contact the clerk in the county district court where your ancestor died. Ancestry.com has a collection of probate records from the early 20th century <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9074>.

- **Land Records:** Nevada, a public-land state, was greatly impacted by laws opening land for settlement. Notable legislation includes the Homestead Act of 1862 (which opened land for private ownership), the Morrill Act of 1862, and mining laws in 1866 and 1872. A good place to start is the Bureau of Land Management <gloreCORDS.blm.gov> and Nevada Division of State Lands <lands.nv.gov/patent-search-tool>, where you can search for original patents. You can also access land patents through the Nevada Library Cooperative <nvlibrarycoop.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/landpatents/search>, and FamilySearch has a collection of Bureau of Land Management tract books <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2074276>.

Suzanne Malek, M.L.I.S., is an academic librarian with over 30 years of experience. She started Reno's TMCC (Truckee Meadows Community College) Library Open Genealogy Lab in 2016 and oversaw the development and collection-building of the library's Genealogy Research Room. She also offers free one-on-one online genealogy research appointments through the library, and is active in numerous genealogical and heritage societies.