

## RESEARCH GUIDE

# WEST VIRGINIA

by PEGGY LAURITZEN



SEVERAL IMAGES MIGHT COME TO YOUR MIND when you think of West Virginia: moonshine stills, coal mines, or the Hatfield-McCoy feud.

But there's another, less-obvious topic that *should* come to the genealogist's mind: the state of Virginia. "Old Dominion," as it's called, once claimed parts of many states. Modern West Virginia only split in 1863. As such, much of West Virginia's history and genealogical records are tied up with its eastern counterpart.

Here's what you need to know about researching in West Virginia, the Mountain State.

### MOUNTAINS OF HISTORY

Various indigenous communities lived or migrated through what is now West Virginia in colonial times: notably, the Shawnee, Delaware, Monongahela, Iroquois and Cherokee.

From the founding of Jamestown in 1607 to the 1730s, most of Virginia's population lived east of the Blue Ridge Mountains. After the French and Indian War, King George III forbade all settlement west of the "proclamation line of 1763," which followed the Appalachian Mountains.

That constraint didn't much hamper immigrants, however, who flocked to British North America. Many who came through Philadelphia to Virginia were German Palatines and Scots-Irish. The latter brought with them their fierce independence and cultures of clans, and tended to migrate down the Great Wagon Road to the northern Shenandoah Valley.

Many researchers cite differences over slavery as the main historical distinction between Virginia and West Virginia. (Indeed, many "Mountaineers" worked small farms and didn't own slaves.)

But they also differed geographically and economically. The eastern part of the region is flatter, making large farms more viable. In contrast, West Virginia has deep hills and hollers, a unique terrain defined by mountain ranges and rivers and apt for mining.

Indeed, those mountains made West Virginia resource-rich. Settlers found bituminous coal along a tributary of the Kanawha River as early as 1742, and a mine opened in 1810 near Wheeling. West Virginia holds an estimated 62 individual seams of coal, with deposits in all but two of its 55 counties. Coal initially fueled just local businesses and homes, but river travel and railroad expansion allowed the industry to grow throughout the 1800s. Other major resources include salt and natural gas.

Cultural, economic and political differences between the "two Virginias" came to a head in 1861, when Virginia seceded from the Union over heavy opposition from its western counties. Those counties voted to create their own state and constitution, leading to their ultimate succession from Virginia and statehood in 1863. West Virginia was admitted as the 35th state, and provided some 32,000 soldiers to the Union during the Civil War. (About 9,000 West Virginians served for the Confederacy.)

Given the danger of mining, West Virginia has often found itself at the center of both safety regulations and passionate (even violent) labor disputes. Unionized mine workers clashed with coal companies throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, culminating in 1921's "Battle of Blair Mountain" (in which dozens were killed). The West Virginia Mine Wars Museum <[www.wvminewars.org](http://www.wvminewars.org)> curates exhibits of stories, photos and other artifacts from the era.

### FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:  
1863

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:  
1790 (as part of Va.); 1870 (as W.V.)

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:  
1853 (county); 1917 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:  
from founding (county); 1964 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:  
W.V. Health Statistics Center

# Mountains made West Virginia resource-rich.

## TAKE ME HOME, VITAL RECORDS

Any pre-1863 West Virginia vital records were created in the state of Virginia. Fortunately, Virginia mandated county-level record-keeping in 1853, and counties retained their records when the states separated 10 years later.

As a result, you can expect to find birth, marriage and death records for West Virginia counties from 1853, if not sooner. County-level marriage records were kept even earlier, usually from a county's founding.

The state didn't begin keeping copies of birth and death records until 1917, and marriages until 1964. Access to birth and death records is restricted by year; only direct descendants of those mentioned in records can request copies of records less than 100 years old (birth) and 50 years old (death) from the Health Statistics Center <[www.wvdhhr.org/bph/hsc/vital/birthcert.asp](http://www.wvdhhr.org/bph/hsc/vital/birthcert.asp)>. A fire destroyed state copies of records for 1917 to 1921, so you'll need to request documents from those years from the county clerk.

FamilySearch partnered with the West Virginia State Archives to create the West Virginia Vital Research Records Project, a free database of images for out-of-privacy-laws records <[archive.wvculture.org/vrr](http://archive.wvculture.org/vrr)>. You can also find vital record indexes at FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)>, Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)>, and MyHeritage <[www.myheritage.com](http://www.myheritage.com)>.

You should also search for pre-1900 adoption records at the county level, using probate and guardianship records. Maternity homes may also have information. Later adoptions are recorded by the state.

## COUNTING WEST VIRGINIANS

West Virginia first appeared in a federal census in its own right in 1870. From 1790 to that year, West Virginia settlements would have appeared as part of Virginia. Federal

New River Gorge  
National Park



SEAN PAVONE/ISTOCK

## TIMELINE

**1609**

A second charter of Virginia encourages settlement on the western frontiers

**1624**

Virginia becomes a royal colony

**1731**

Morgan Morgan, recognized as the first white settler in the region, builds a home in modern Berkeley County

**1763**

French land west of the Appalachians is ceded to Great Britain; a royal proclamation forbids white settlement west of the Appalachians

**1776**

In a prelude of things to come, settlers in the western Virginia region lobby for a new state of "Westsylvania"



## 1788

Virginia ratifies the U.S. Constitution

## 1810

The first coal mine in modern West Virginia opens near Wheeling

## 1859

Abolitionist John Brown tries to start a slave revolt by raiding the US armory at Harpers Ferry, W.V.

## 1863

The western counties of Virginia secede and become the 35th state, West Virginia

## 1895

Mingo County is created from Logan County, the last major change to West Virginia's county boundaries

## TOOLKIT

## Websites

**Cyndi's List: West Virginia** <[www.cyndislist.com/us/wv](http://www.cyndislist.com/us/wv)>

**FamilySearch Research Wiki: West Virginia**

<[www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/West\\_Virginia\\_United\\_States\\_Genealogy](http://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/West_Virginia_United_States_Genealogy)>

**Linkpendium: West Virginia** <[www.linkpendium.com/wv-genealogy](http://www.linkpendium.com/wv-genealogy)>

**West Virginia Vital Research Records Project** <[archive.wvculture.org/vrr](http://archive.wvculture.org/vrr)>

**WVGenWeb** <[www.wvgenweb.org](http://www.wvgenweb.org)>

## Publications

***Hardesty's West Virginia Counties: Early West Virginia***

by Jim Comstock (self-published)

***History of West Virginia, Old and New, in One Volume***

by James Morton Callahan (The American Historical Society) <[www.archive.org/details/historyofwestvir01call](http://www.archive.org/details/historyofwestvir01call)>

***Making a State: Formation of West Virginia*** by Edgar B. Sims (State of West Virginia)

***Timesaving Aid to Virginia-West Virginia Ancestors*** by Patrick G. Wardell (Iberian Publishing Company)

***West Virginia Heritage Encyclopedia*** by Jim F. Comstock (self-published)

## Archives &amp; Organizations

**Clarksburg-Harrison Public Library** <[www.clarksburglibrary.org](http://www.clarksburglibrary.org)>

**Library of Virginia: West Virginia Records** <[www.lva.virginia.gov/public/wv](http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/wv)>

**Marshall University Morrow Library** <[www.marshall.edu/library/libraries/morrowstacks](http://www.marshall.edu/library/libraries/morrowstacks)>

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

**Virginia Museum of History and Culture** <[www.virginiahistory.org](http://www.virginiahistory.org)>

**West Virginia Archives and History** <[www.wvculture.org/research/archives-and-history-research-databases](http://www.wvculture.org/research/archives-and-history-research-databases)>

**West Virginia University: West Virginia and Regional History Center** <[wvrhc.lib.wvu.edu](http://wvrhc.lib.wvu.edu)>

censuses are widely available at sites like FamilySearch, Ancestry.com and MyHeritage, though its records for the 1790, 1800 and 1890 censuses have been lost or destroyed.

Certain West Virginia counties would have also been part of Virginia colonial and state censuses, taken between 1782 and 1786. These are available at Ancestry.com and the Internet Archive <[www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)>.

Tax records can be used as substitutes for censuses. Virginia created tax lists of land and personal property as early as 1782, and they may include ancestors who lived in what is now West Virginia or those who would eventually move there. Learn more at the Library of Virginia <[www.lva.virginia.gov/public/wv](http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/wv)>.

## OTHER RECORDS

Find your West Virginian ancestors in these other kinds of documents. For more county-level resources, see the West Virginia Archives & History's county-by-county map <[archive.wvculture.org/history/teacherresources/countiesmap.html](http://archive.wvculture.org/history/teacherresources/countiesmap.html)>.

- **Military Records:** West Virginia was born from the Civil War, and you can find records of soldiers who fought in it through the Soldiers and Sailors database <[www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm](http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm)>. West Virginians also fought in later conflicts, including World Wars I and II. Find draft registrations cards from those conflicts on FamilySearch, Ancestry.com or Fold3 <[www.fold3.com](http://www.fold3.com)>.

- **Land Records:** In colonial times, the Virginian government offered as many as 1,000 acres per family to settlers in western Virginia—in total, more than 2.5 million acres by 1754. The Virginia Land Office also began awarding military bounty land warrants in 1782, though many were later sold to speculators. FamilySearch has land records, some of which must be viewed at a local FamilySearch Center or an affiliate library.

- **Historical Maps:** West Virginia University has a collection of some 1,300 maps dating from the 1600s to 2006 <[wvrhc.lib.wvu.edu/collections/maps-atlases-and-gazetteers](http://wvrhc.lib.wvu.edu/collections/maps-atlases-and-gazetteers)>. Other sites that have historical maps from the state include the David Rumsey Map Collection <[www.davidrumsey.com](http://www.davidrumsey.com)> and the Atlas of Historical County Boundaries <[digital.newberry.org/ahcb](http://digital.newberry.org/ahcb)>.

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She is the author of several guides on Appalachian family history, a columnist for *Reminiscence* magazine, and a genealogy instructor. She is a Fellow of the Ohio Genealogical Society, and currently serves on the boards of the Utah Genealogical Association and the Association of Professional Genealogists. In 2018, she received the Laura G. Prescott Award for exemplary service to professional genealogy.