

# RESEARCH GUIDE

# IOWA

by RICKI KING



DO YOU VIEW IOWA AS A FLYOVER STATE? OR perhaps your ancestors considered it a “passthrough” state, traveling through Iowa by wagon on their way farther West?

Hopefully, we can change your mind. Plenty of settlers made permanent homes in Iowa, and the state is well known today for its corn and soybeans. But Iowa is more than farmers, pigs, and cows. Here, you’ll find fields and fields of genealogy records, and a rich history that will make you want to learn even more about the Iowans in your family.

## HAWKEYE HISTORY

Like other Great Plains states, what is now Iowa was claimed by France in the 1600s. Frenchmen Louis Jolliet and Jacques Marquette, who explored the region in 1673, were the first Europeans documented as having been to what is now Iowa. European settlement in the 17th and 18th centuries was sparse, limited mostly to fur traders.

The “Louisiana” region changed hands from France to Spain in 1762 and back again just before 1803, when the United States purchased it. Iowa was part of various territories throughout the early 19th century, with territorial governance shifting as new states were created: Louisiana (1803–1812; briefly administered by Indiana Territory), Missouri (1812–1821), “unorganized territory” (1821–1834), Michigan (1834–1836) and Wisconsin (1836–1838).

The westward movement of US settlers sparked conflict with indigenous populations already living there, notably the Fox (Meskwaki) and Sac (Sauk). Sac leader Black Hawk led allied tribes in the “Black Hawk War” against the US government in 1832. At its conclusion, the

tribes were forced to concede the “Black Hawk Purchase,” a 40-to-50-mile stretch of land that ran along the Mississippi River—altogether, some 6 million acres. The combined Sac and Fox are the only federally recognized tribe in the state today, and live on an 8,600-acre settlement; other tribes (including the Sioux and the state’s namesake Iowa people) were forced out of Iowa.

Settlement began in earnest after these land cessions. Iowa’s first two cities, Dubuque and Burlington (territorial capital from 1834), were founded soon after the end of the Black Hawk War. Iowa’s 1836 population was roughly 10,500 residents, growing to 43,000 by 1840 and 192,000 by 1850. Iowa became a territory in its own right in 1838, and included parts of Minnesota and the Dakota. Iowa then became a state (with its modern borders) in 1846.

Though known for being a “free state” (and admitted to the Union at roughly the same time as Florida, a slave state), Iowa included populations of the enslaved who were brought to the area. At least one sale took place in Iowa City before statehood, and the 1840 census shows several enslaved people in the territory, including 11 who held by then-Surveyor-General George Wallace Jones.

The first Iowa Supreme Court case involved Ralph Montgomery, an enslaved man sent to Iowa Territory who sought his freedom. (In the 1839 case, the court ruled in Montgomery’s favor.) Even after statehood, the enslaved could be brought into the state without automatically becoming free if they came only for short periods, a significant loophole.

Following the Fugitive Slave Act, the Iowa legislature passed a law “prohibit[ing] the naturalization of free negroes into this state.” Alexander Clark, Sr., who went on to become one of the first

## FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:  
1846

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:  
1840 (as territory); 1850 (as state)

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:  
1880

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:  
from formation (county); 1880 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:  
IA Dept. of Public Health

Black men to graduate from the University of Iowa, organized a petition for the law to be repealed. Though the legislature rebuffed him, Clark (and his son) became a lawyer, and successfully sued for his daughter to attend a school that had been segregated by race.

Iowa remained in the Union during the Civil War. Though no major battles took place there, Iowa sent large supplies of food (as well as some 76,000 troops, a huge percentage of its comparatively small population) to the war effort.

The majority of Iowans, historically as well as today, are white, with notable populations of English, German, Dutch, Norwegian and Irish descent. However, the state also has sizeable Black, Native American, Latino, Asian and Pacific Islander communities. Many Black workers and Italian immigrants were drawn to Iowa in the 1880s to work in the coal mines and on railroads. And in 1975, Iowa welcomed the first refugees from Vietnam and Laos.

Iowa was also a state of several firsts for women and African Americans, often leading the way in court decisions regarding civil rights: one of the first states to allow interracial marriages (1851), the first to prohibit racial segregation in schools (1868), and the first to grant a woman the right to practice law (1869).

### VITAL RECORDS

Iowa first mandated vital registration in 1880, but it's estimated that only about 50 percent of births and deaths from that year through 1921 were actually recorded. Some communities kept documents before the state mandate; a chart from the IAGenWeb Project indicates when records began for each of Iowa's 99 counties <[www.iagenweb.org/state/research/bmdguide.htm](http://www.iagenweb.org/state/research/bmdguide.htm)>.

The State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI) <[www.iowaculture.gov/history](http://www.iowaculture.gov/history)> has collections of county vital records, with microfilm collections for mostly pre-1940 events. Researchers can access birth records more than 75 years old and—thanks to a 2018 change in access law—death records more than 50 years old.

You can also request copies of post-1880 vital records (including those more-recent than the ones held by



SHSI) from the department of health <[idph.iowa.gov/health-statistics/vital-records](http://idph.iowa.gov/health-statistics/vital-records)>. The same privacy restrictions as at SHSI apply here. As of 2022, adoptees can access noncertified copies of their original, birth certificates.

Marriage records were kept earlier and with more consistency than birth and death records. Individual counties documented marriages as early as 1835; get copies from the county clerk of the district court office or (for post-1916

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## TIMELINE

**1673**

Louis Jolliet and Jacques Marquette explore the upper Mississippi River Valley, the first Europeans documented as having done so

**1803**

The United States purchases Louisiana; Iowa is organized into Louisiana Territory

**1832**

At the end of the "Black Hawk War," the Fox and Sac people cede major tracts of land to the US government; more land cessions follow

**1834**

After years of being "unorganized," Iowa is part of the Territory of Michigan, then Wisconsin Territory two years later

**1838**

Iowa Territory is incorporated



Covered bridge in  
Madison County

marriages) the department of health. Marriage records more than 75 years old are open to the public. Divorce records were first created at the county level in 1834, with state registration beginning in 1906.

FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)> and Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)> each have collections of Iowa vital records for various years. Of note, FamilySearch has a collection of pre-1934 county marriage record images <[www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1805551](http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1805551)>.

## IOWA ENUMERATIONS

Iowa is especially strong for census records, which go above and beyond Iowa's first federal census as a state in 1850. The government conducted territorial censuses in Iowa in 1836, 1838 and 1844, though not all counties participated in every enumeration. And a special census was taken of the Sac and Fox Nation between 1836 and 1840.

Iowa state censuses were taken between from 1846 through 1851, then every two years from 1852 to 1856.

### 1846

Iowa joins the Union as the 29th state

### 1851

The Iowa state government creates 49 new counties in the western part of the state

### 1857

Humboldt County is created from Webster County, the last major change to Iowa's county boundaries; the capital moves to Des Moines

### 1942

The Sullivan family from Waterloo makes national headlines when five of their sons die on the same day while serving in World War II

### 1972

Iowa becomes the first contested state in the presidential primary season, attracting national media attention every four years

## TOOLKIT

## Websites

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

**Des Moines Cemetery Interment Search** <[cemeterysearch.dsm.city](http://cemeterysearch.dsm.city)>

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

**IAGenWeb** <[www.iagenweb.org](http://www.iagenweb.org)>

**Iowa Culture YouTube channel** <[www.youtube.com/c/IowaCulture](http://www.youtube.com/c/IowaCulture)>

**The Iowa Heritage Digital Collections** <[www.iowaheritage.org](http://www.iowaheritage.org)>

**Iowa Land Records** <[iowalandrecords.org/portal](http://iowalandrecords.org/portal)>

**Linkpendium: Iowa** <[www.linkpendium.com/ia-genealogy](http://www.linkpendium.com/ia-genealogy)>

## Publications

**Annals of Iowa** (State Historical Society of Iowa)

**Iowa Atlas of Historical County Boundaries** edited by John H. Long (Charles Scribners Sons)

**Iowa: The Middle Land** by Dorothy Schweider (University of Iowa Press)

## Archives &amp; Organizations

**Des Moines Public Library** <[www.dmpl.org](http://www.dmpl.org)> (Research > Local History & Genealogy)

**Iowa Digital Library (University of Iowa)** <[digital.lib.uiowa.edu](http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu)>

**Iowa Genealogical Society** <[www.iowagenealogy.org](http://www.iowagenealogy.org)>

**Iowa Women's Archive** <[www.lib.uiowa.edu/iwa](http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/iwa)>

**National Archives at Kansas City** <[www.archives.gov/kansas-city](http://www.archives.gov/kansas-city)>

**State Historical Society of Iowa** <[www.iowaculture.gov/history](http://www.iowaculture.gov/history)>

**University of Northern Iowa: Special Collections** <[scua.library.uni.edu/classification-schedule](http://scua.library.uni.edu/classification-schedule)>

A decennial (every-10-year) state census from 1885 to 1925 helps complement the federal census, notably the destroyed 1890 federal enumeration. The 1925 census is especially detailed in asking for parents' names and mother's maiden name.

Ancestry.com has a collection of Iowa territorial and state censuses from 1836 to 1925 (including the Sac and Fox census) <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1084](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1084)>. FamilySearch has state censuses from 1856 to 1925. (Only FamilySearch has 1905 state census images; Ancestry.com has just an index for that year's census.)

You can find federal census records at each of the major genealogy websites. The most recent enumeration is the 1950 census, and the 1890 census has largely been lost.

## OTHER RECORDS

Find your Iowan ancestors in other documents, including:

- **Land records:** Iowa is a public-land state, and a general survey using the township-and-range format began in the 1830s. Patents could be purchased from the US government, but some settlers simply encroached on land as Native Americans left it. Iowa Land Records <[iowalandrecords.org/portal](http://iowalandrecords.org/portal)> has statewide deeds, with coverage varying by county. Request patents from the Bureau of Land Management's General Land Office <[gloreCORDS.blm.gov](http://gloreCORDS.blm.gov)>.

- **City directories:** Ancestry.com, FamilySearch and MyHeritage <[www.myheritage.com](http://www.myheritage.com)> all have Iowa city directories. Archive.org <[www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)> and the Des Moines Public Library <[www.dmpl.org/research/local-history-genealogy/historic-city-directories](http://www.dmpl.org/research/local-history-genealogy/historic-city-directories)> have published Des Moines directories from as early as 1866. Find Dubuque directories from 1856 at <[cityofdubuque.advantage-preservation.com](http://cityofdubuque.advantage-preservation.com)>.

- **Governor and prison records:** These include documents from the governor's files, many of them pertaining to pardon or clemency requests. Such petitions might include character witnesses and names of relatives or neighbors—maybe even of a whole town. Also included in governor's files are trial transcripts (which can contain genealogically useful personal information) and reports on the whereabouts of recently released prisoners. Likewise, prison records include registers of convicts, which you can supplement by looking for case records at the county. SHSI holds governor's records, and Ancestry.com has some prison records <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60384](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60384)>.

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