

RESEARCH GUIDE

ARKANSAS

by JANE WILKERSON



A STATE OF DIVERSITY, ARKANSAS AND ITS SIX distinct regions attracted a variety of travelers, settlers, developers and economic mainstays. For those with ancestors from Arkansas, genealogical adventures await.

NATURAL (STATE) HISTORY

Spaniard Hernando de Soto led the first European voyage into modern Arkansas in 1541. His party meandered through Arkansas' savannas and forests seeking gold, but they weren't traversing uninhabited land: The area supported a number of indigenous peoples. They lived in all six major geographic regions: the Ozark Plateau, the Arkansas River Valley, the Ouachita Mountains, the Mississippi River Alluvial Plain, the Gulf Coastal Plain, and Crowley's Ridge.

After De Soto, few Europeans visited the area until French missionary Jacques Marquette and fur trader Louis Jolliet explored the mouth of the Arkansas River in 1673. They were followed in 1681–82 by René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, who claimed the region for France.

By that time, the region was home to three major Native American nations: the Quapaw, the Caddo, and the Osage. It's not clear to historians if these were the same tribes that De Soto and his men encountered a century prior, but early European contact (followed by claims of annexation) foretold adverse consequences for Arkansas' Native nations.

La Salle's party founded "La Poste d'Arkansaë" (Arkansas Post) in 1686, the first European settlement in what is now Arkansas. But settlement remained slow; a 1749 census of the post listed just a few dozen inhabitants. France ceded Louisiana (including modern Arkansas) to Spain in the 1762 Treaty of

Fontainebleau. Spanish authorities focused on its settlements in New Orleans and Florida, making Arkansas Post something of a colonial backwater.

France briefly recovered the land in 1800, only to sell it to the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. US President Thomas Jefferson commissioned an expedition that traveled up the Ouachita River, which noted increased settlement and documented the region's environment.

More settlers trickled into the newly acquired Louisiana Territory, leading Congress to create "Missouri Territory" out of everything except the new state of Louisiana. "Arkansaw" (later renamed Arkansas) became a territory in its own right in 1819, then including most of what is now Oklahoma. Arkansas Post was its first capital. (The capital moved to its current location, Little Rock, in 1821.)

Once the federal government opened Arkansas for Euroamerican settlement, new arrivals tended to settle in the regions most similar to those they had left. Thus, settlers from the Appalachians (Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, etc.) took root in the mountainous Ozarks and Ouachitas. But river folk from the Deep South (Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and Louisiana) as well as Virginia preferred the Arkansas River Valley, the Mississippi or Gulf Coast plains, or Crowley's Ridge.

Many migrants were of English, Irish and Scottish ancestry and brought some cultural traditions from their respective "old countries." Many also brought with them more recently-acquired habits of livelihood, including a dependence on enslaved labor.

New Euroamerican settlements increasingly displaced Native nations already living in the region. In addition to

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:
1836

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1830 (as territory); 1840 (as state)

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1914

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
from foundation (county); 1917 (state)

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

the Quapaw, Caddo, and Osage who had been established in Arkansas, elements of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek and Seminole nations (themselves already displaced from their homelands in the American Southeast) also had come to the area. Of these newer arrivals, the Cherokee were most prominent, particularly along the St. Francis River.

The territorial and federal governments had a large hand in removing Native peoples from the land. Though the Quapaw had relatively good relationships with the French and Spanish, they had little leverage with the United States. The tribe faced removal under several different treaties between 1818 and 1833, resulting in the Quapaw giving up over 30 million acres of their land and forcibly moving to Oklahoma or Louisiana. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 solidified efforts to remove tribes from the American Southeast, and the infamous Trail of Tears passed through Arkansas on its way to “Permanent” Indian Territory in modern Oklahoma and Kansas. These removals were essential in the Arkansas’ development, bringing federal money into the state, opening the land for white settlement, and irrevocably shaping the area’s economic and ethnic makeup.

Arkansas became the 25th state in the Union on 15 June 1836. Per the Missouri Compromise, Arkansas was designated a slave state. Rich soil in the river valleys made conditions perfect for cotton culture, and enslaved African Americans provided essential labor for Arkansas’ economy. By 1860, the enslaved numbered over 100,000 out of Arkansas’ population of 435,000. Unsurprisingly, in light of its dependence on enslaved labor, Arkansas joined other Southern states in seceding from the Union in 1861. Notable battles that took place there include the Battle of Elkhorn Tavern. The Union captured Little Rock in 1863, and the state was readmitted in 1868.

The decades following the Civil War saw another influx of immigrants to Arkansas, notably from Germany, Italy, China and Eastern Europe. Individual companies (including railroads and mining companies) directly recruited Europeans, promising prosperity through agriculture, industrial work and the emerging timber community. Immigrants tended to settle near each other, creating small

enclaves (Little Italy, Slovaktown, etc.) where Old World traditions such as winemaking are practiced to this day.

Arkansas suffered greatly during the Depression Era, with economic instability, the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, and droughts throughout the 1930s. Racial discrimination and strife led many African Americans to leave the South in large numbers as part of the Great Migration of the 1920s and mid-20th century. The state was twice in the national spotlight during desegregation: first for the successful integration of Hoxie schools over some public opposition in 1955, then for the Little Rock Crisis in 1957. During the latter, President Dwight Eisenhower deployed the 101st Airborne Division to protect the “Little Rock Nine,” the first African American students to attend the previously all-white Little Rock Central High School.

VITAL RECORDS

Vital records are among the most highly-sought genealogical resources. But in Arkansas, central collection of such records did not begin until 1914. (And even then, some counties didn’t fully comply until the 1930s.) Before 1914, only Little Rock and Fort Smith kept consistent birth and death records; find these at the state archives, and any other pre-1914 records from individual counties.

Existence of records is one thing; access to them is another. Arkansas law requires that a death record be 50 years or older before being considered public, and birth records, 100 years old or more. Records that don’t fit that criteria can only be ordered from the department of health by direct relatives of the person involved. The state archives have a searchable death records index <digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/death-records-index>.

Though not formally required until 1917, marriage records were generally kept with more regularity, sometimes back to the foundation of each county. Request records pre-1917 records from the county clerk of court where the marriage was filed. FamilySearch and Ancestry.com each have collections of county marriage records.

COUNTING ARKANSANS

Arkansas first appears as a state in the US federal census in 1840, and as a territory in 1830. (Though the region

TIMELINE

1541

Spaniard De Soto’s expedition enters Arkansas

1682

France claims the Mississippi River Valley; four years later, Arkansas Post is founded

1762

France cedes Louisiana Territory to Spain

1803

The United States purchases the Louisiana Territory from France, who had reacquired it from Spain a few years earlier

1819

Arkansas Territory is formed, including much of modern Oklahoma



Buffalo National River
in northern Arkansas

1836

Arkansas is admitted as the 25th state

1861

Arkansas secedes from the Union

1883

Cleburne County is created, the last major change to Arkansas' county borders

1927

The Mississippi River floods, killing nearly 100 people in Arkansas alone

1957

President Eisenhower deploys the 101st Airborne to protect the "Little Rock Nine" at Little Rock Central High School

TOOLKIT

Websites

Cyndi's List: Arkansas <www.cyndislist.com/us/ar>

The Encyclopedia of Arkansas <www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net>

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

Linkpendium: Arkansas <www.linkpendium.com/argenealogy>

Publications

Arkansas: A Narrative History, second edition by Jeanne M. Whyne, Thomas A. DeBlack, George Sabo and Morris S. Arnold (University of Arkansas Press)

Colonial Arkansas, 1686–1804: A Social and Cultural History by Morris S. Arnold (University of Arkansas Press)

Documenting Arkansas: The Civil War, 1861–1865 by Wendy Bradley Richter (Arkansas History Commission)

Historical Atlas of Arkansas by Gerald T. Hanson and Carl H. Moneyhon (University of Oklahoma Press)

The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin by Carl H. Moneyhon (Louisiana State University Press)

Archives & Organizations

Arkansas Digital Archives <digitalheritage.arkansas.gov>

Arkansas Genealogical Society <www.argensoc.org>

Arkansas Historical Association <www.arkansashistoricalassociation.org>

Arkansas State Archives <www.arkansasheritage.com/arkansasstatearchives/home>

National Archives at Fort Worth, Texas <www.archives.gov/fort-worth>

Roberts Library of Arkansas History, Central Arkansas Library System <www.robertslibrary.org>

Sequoyah National Research Center, University of Arkansas at Little Rock <ualr.edu/sequoyah>

appeared in the 1810 and 1820 censuses, most of the relevant records have been lost.) Note that 1890 federal census records for nearly the whole country have been destroyed.

The state has taken none of its own true censuses. “Sheriff’s censuses” were conducted every two years from 1823 to 1827, but most records have been lost. Ancestry.com has compiled a collection of surviving sheriff’s censuses, tax lists, veteran schedules, slave schedules and more <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3534>. FamilySearch has a 1911 census of Confederate veterans on microfilm.

OTHER RECORDS

Find your Arkansas ancestors in these other kinds of records:

- **Land Records:** Once it came under US ownership, land in Arkansas (a public-land state) was evaluated using the rectangular survey system. (It had earlier been surveyed using the “metes-and-bounds” system.) Those who settled in Colonial times (or who were looking to have Colonial-era land grants honored by the US government) needed certificates to prove ownership, with land described in the traditional metes-and-bounds system. These proved hard to come by, as Spanish authorities often failed to record deeds. US land patents are held at the National Archives, with copies of notes and original ledgers at the Arkansas State Archives <digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/state-land-records>. Look for patents, plat maps, field notes and more at the Bureau of Land Management’s General Land Office <glorerecords.blm.gov>.

- **Newspapers:** The Arkansas State Archives preserve, mainly on microfilm, the largest collection of papers published in the territory and state <digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/newspapers>. Newspapers date from 1819 to the present, covering births, deaths, public events, accidents and more. Projects with Newspapers.com <www.newspapers.com> and the Library of Congress’ Chronicling America <chroniclingamerica.loc.gov> are working to make papers available digitally.

- **Religious Records:** Prominent religious groups in Arkansas include Baptists, Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians and Lutherans. The Arkansas State Archives hold some church records; find a guide at <digitalheritage.arkansas.gov/resource-guides/11>.

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