

STATE GUIDE

TENNESSEE

by LAUREN GAMBER

ON OCTOBER 7, 1763, King George III of England issued a proclamation forbidding colonists from settling beyond the crest of the Appalachian Mountains and encroaching on Indian territory. But that didn't stop early Virginians, Pennsylvanians and North Carolinians lured by rumors of Tennessee's lush farmland and the prospects of independence and economic stability. By spring of 1772, they'd established settlements along East Tennessee's Watauga River, and created America's first independent government, the Watauga Association.

Tennesseans have always embodied a pioneering spirit. After achieving statehood in 1796, many went on to explore lands farther west, including Missouri, Arkansas, Texas and Oklahoma. Those who stayed helped grow the state's economy and its largest cities—Memphis, Nashville, Knoxville and Chattanooga. Three US presidents have come out of Tennessee: Andrew Jackson, James K. Polk and Andrew Johnson. So have dozens of country crooners and blues musicians. Are you ready to discover the pioneers in your family? Let us lead the way.

THE WILD FRONTIER

Tennessee has three regions: East Tennessee, characterized by mountainous terrain; Middle Tennessee, known for fertile farmland; and West Tennessee—the state's final frontier—which developed close ties to the Deep South and an economy based on cotton and the Mississippi River.

When the first white settlers arrived in upper East Tennessee, the Cherokee Indians had driven most other tribes out of the region. The Cherokee taught the pioneers—primarily Scots-Irish and some Germans, English, French Huguenots, Swiss, Welsh, and African slaves—to hunt, build log cabins and utilize various plants. But as the settlers appeared more land-hungry, the Cherokee saw them as a threat. So began a long period of conflict lasting until the late 1830s. It ended with the forced removal of the remaining Cherokee along the Trail of Tears.

FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1796
- ★ **First federal census:** 1830
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1914
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** 1915
- ★ **State-land state**
- ★ **Counties:** 14 in 1796; 95 today
- ★ **Contact for vital records:** Tennessee Office of Vital Records, Andrew Johnson Tower, First Floor, 710 James Robertson Parkway, Nashville, TN 37243, (615) 741-1763, <www.tn.gov/health/health-program-areas/vital-records.html>

BORDER SHIFTS

In 1776, North Carolina annexed the Watauga Association, later renamed the Washington District. It transferred the land to two existing counties, finally dubbing it the independent Washington County. Seeking self-government, the Wataugans appealed to Congress for independence, but were denied. In 1789, North Carolina ceded Washington County to the US government, and the area became the Territory of the United States South of the River Ohio (or simply the Southwest Territory).

By 1795, the territory had enough residents to achieve statehood. Tennessee's population continued to rise and county borders to shift. When residents felt they lived too far from the county seat to conduct legal business, they petitioned for the creation

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of a new county. For boundary change details, see Tennessee County Formation Maps <ngenweb.org/maps/county-ani/tn-maps/tn-cf.html>.

Early Tennesseans left county records including petitions, deeds, wills and licenses, but finding them can be a challenge. Residents may have lived in multiple counties and have records scattered among county courthouses.

STARTING PLACES

You'll need to identify your ancestors' county (or counties) because most genealogical records are based there. Ask relatives and check these places for information:

★ **CENSUSES:** Tennessee didn't take state or territorial censuses. The US government first counted Tennessee in 1810, but only the Rutherford County census survived. Likewise, most 1820 records of East Tennessee no longer exist.

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★ **TAX LISTS:** If your ancestors lived in Tennessee prior to 1830, look to tax records as alternatives to the census. Some lists provide just the names of taxpayers, but others include the amounts of property, their value and locations.

Both the Tennessee State Library and Archives (TSLA) <sos.tn.gov/products/tsla/early-tennessee-tax-lists-tennessee-state-library-and-archives> and the Family History Library (FHL) <www.familysearch.org> have microfilmed tax lists.

timeline

1772

Early settlers form an independent government called the Watauga Association

1791

The *Knoxville Gazette* is founded as Tennessee's first newspaper

1803

The Louisiana Purchase increases migration to and settlement in Tennessee

1828

Tennessean Andrew Jackson is elected US president

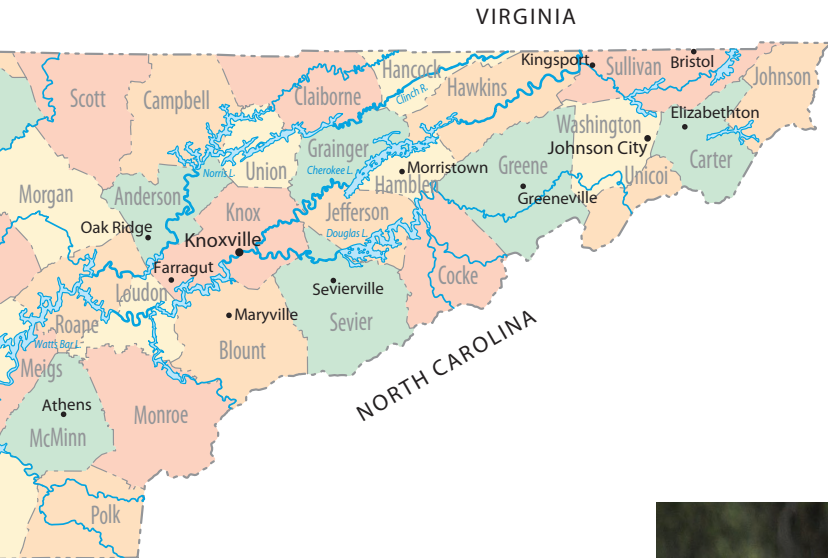
1838–1839

Cherokee Indians are driven out of Tennessee along the Trail of Tears

1861

Tennessee secedes from the Union

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joined the Confederacy in 1861, many East Tennesseans left home to fight for the Union.

TSLA has numerous military records and indexes. See <sos.tn.gov/products/tsla/ordering-military-records> for details. The FHL has a broad selection of microfilmed military records and indexes, and you can visit FamilySearch.org for Tennessee Civil War indexes covering both sides, as well as pension records.

VITAL TIPS

Statewide registration of births and deaths began in 1908, but not until 1914 did death

TSLA will make copies of lists that have been published in book form for \$5 per surname. Also consult the *Index to Early Tennessee Tax Lists* by Byron and Barbara Sistler, which contains entries representing 1787 to 1827, and *Early East Tennessee Taxpayers* by Pollyanna Creekmore, covering 1778 to 1832. Both are available at the FHL, TSLA, other libraries and for purchase on Amazon.

★ **MILITARY RECORDS:** Shortly after gaining statehood, Tennessee sent soldiers to the War of 1812 (which earned it the Volunteer State nickname), the Seminole Wars, the Cherokee Removal and the Mexican-American War (1846–1848). In addition, Tennesseans fought on both sides of the Civil War. When the state



1878

Yellow fever epidemic strikes

1900

Legendary railroad engineer and Tennessee native Casey Jones dies in a train crash

1925

Nashville's "Grand Ole Opry" radio program debuts

1933

The New Deal spawns the Tennessee Valley Authority

1948

Elvis Aaron Presley moves to Memphis with his parents

1968

Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis

TOOLKIT

Websites

Abstracts from Tennessee Newspapers

<sites.rootsweb.com/~tnnews>

Cyndi's List: Tennessee <cyndislist.com/us/tn>**FamilySearch Wiki: Tennessee** <familysearch.org/wiki/en/Tennessee>**Tennessee GenWeb Project** <www.tngenweb.org>

Publications

First Families of Tennessee: A Register of Early Settlers and Their Present-Day Descendants by the East Tennessee Historical Society (University of Tennessee)

Research in Tennessee by Gale Williams Bamman (National Genealogical Society)

The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture edited by Carroll Van West (Tennessee Historical Society)

Tennessee Genealogical Research by George K. Schweitzer (Genealogical Sources Unlimited)

Tennessee Place Names by Larry L. Miller (Indiana University Press)

Archives & Organizations

East Tennessee Historical Society, 601 S. Gay St., Box 1629, Knoxville, TN 37901, (865) 215-8824, <easttnhistory.org>

Memphis Public Library 3030 Poplar Ave., Memphis, TN, 38111, (901) 415-2742, <www.memphislibrary.org>

Middle Tennessee Genealogical Society Box 59085, Nashville, TN 37205, <www.mtgs.org>

Nashville Public Library 615 Church St., Nashville, TN 37219, (615) 862-5800, <library.nashville.org>

Tennessee Genealogical Society Box 381284, Germantown, TN 38183, (901) 754-4300, <www.tngs.org>

Tennessee Historical Commission 2941 Lebanon Road, Nashville, TN 37214, <www.tn.gov/environment/about-tdec/tennessee-historical-commission.html>

Tennessee State Library and Archives 403 Seventh Ave. N., Nashville, TN 37243, (615) 741-2764, <www.tennessee.gov/tsla>

records contain parents' names and other genealogically useful details. TSLA holds these early records, and you can search death indexes (1908–1912 and 1914–1933) on its website <tslaindexes.tn.gov>. (The state's vital records law expired in 1913, so no events were recorded.) Also check vital records indexes at FamilySearch.org and Ancestry.com.

Tennessee birth records are closed for 100 years, and death records for 50. To get birth records from less than 100 years ago (as of writing, 1919), write the Office of Vital Records (see the Fast Facts box). TSLA has death records from 1914 to 1968; request a lookup by mail. Death records less than 50 years old are at the Office of Vital Records.

You'll find indexes to Nashville births from 1881 to 1913 and Davidson County births from 1908 to 1912 at <freepages.family.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nashvillearchives/births81.html>. Among other databases, the Shelby County Register of Deeds website <register.shelby.tn.us> has indexes to Memphis deaths from 1848 to 1967 and births from 1874 to 1917. Memphis public library indexes <www.memphislibrary.org> include one to Yellow Fever deaths, covering the 10,000 Memphians who died during an 1878 epidemic.

Since 1945, the Office of Vital Records has recorded statewide marriages. Contact that office for records from the past 50 years; TSLA has a statewide index covering 1945 to 1968. Earlier marriage records are in county courthouses. The FHL has microfilmed indexes of pre-1861 marriages; some are online at FamilySearch.org.

SUPER SOURCES

Tennessee researchers have plenty of resources at their fingertips. Here are a few more to check out:

★ The Draper Manuscript Collection, nearly 500 volumes of manuscripts about the trans-Allegheny West, covers Tennessee. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin holds the original documents, but you can view the collection on microfilm at FamilySearch.org or the FHL (and other libraries).

★ Were your ancestors some of the first white settlers in Tennessee? Consult *First Families of Tennessee: A Register of Early Settlers and Their Present-Day Descendants* (see the Toolkit).

★ If your forebears were among Tennessee's native sons and daughters, see the October/November 2016 issue of *Family Tree Magazine* for a guide to researching American Indian ancestors. If you have Cherokee forebears, see the First People of Tennessee and the American Southwest portion of Tennessee GenWeb <www.tngenweb.org/tnfirst>. ●