

RESEARCH GUIDE

ALABAMA

by SUSAN MARTIN



WELCOME TO “SWEET HOME ALABAMA,” where southern hospitality and beautiful landscapes abound, from the Appalachian Mountains foothills to the sugar-white beaches of the southern Gulf shores. Alabama’s beauty complements the uniqueness of her people, culture and history.

Use this guide to dive deep into the pivotal moments that forever redefined the state. What Alabama has to offer might surprise you.

ROLL TIDES OF HISTORY

By the time the Spanish explored Mobile Bay in 1519, the primary indigenous groups in Alabama were the Chickasaw, the Cherokee, the Creek (Muskogee) and the Choctaw. Spaniard Hernando De Soto’s expedition for gold a few decades later led him and his men through the area, drawing them into conflict with the Choctaw and Creek.

European settlement remained sparse until 1702, when the French arrived at the Gulf Coast and founded the city of Mobile. France governed what is now Alabama (plus much of the “Old Southwest”) until 1763, when it surrendered its territories east of the Mississippi River to Great Britain. It was during this era, in 1719, that Port Dauphin in Mobile Bay received the first ship of enslaved Africans in the area.

To avoid the Revolutionary War, many British sympathizers settled in the Alabama area. They were followed by cotton planters from Georgia, Virginia and the Carolinas. Britain lost the Revolution in 1783 and ceded the Mobile area to Spain, with the remainder of present-day Alabama becoming part of Georgia.

A longstanding dispute over territorial boundaries between the United States and

Spain led to Pinckney’s Treaty (1795), in which the Spanish formally ceded much of central Alabama and Mississippi. From that, the United States formed Mississippi Territory (then including Alabama) in 1798.

Extreme southern Alabama remained in Spanish hands. Tensions flared again during the War of 1812, when US forces led by General Andrew Jackson drove the Spanish from Mobile. The United States then annexed West Florida in 1813.

General Jackson also defeated the Creek at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in 1814. Over the next 20 years, the Creek and other indigenous tribes were forced from their lands through cessions and marches (such as the Trail of Tears). This opened the area for white settlement.

Early in the 1800s, emigrants from the Carolinas and Virginia came to the central and western parts of Alabama (especially along the Tombigbee and Black Warrior Rivers), and the Scots-Irish from Tennessee settled the Tennessee Valley district in northern Alabama. Many brought enslaved people with them.

The influx of settlers led to the formation of Alabama Territory in 1817, then statehood in 1819. St. Stephens was the temporary seat of government, followed by Huntsville, Cahaba and Tuscaloosa. The present capital, Montgomery, became so in 1846.

Before the Civil War, Alabama tried to industrialize its economy. Still, most investments remained in cotton and enslaved people, who comprised roughly 50% of the population by 1860. The Alabama Department of Archives and History <digital.archives.alabama.gov> has digital collections related to the enslaved and emancipated, including 1867 and 1875 voter registration records.

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:
1819

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1830

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1881 (county); 1908 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
varies (county); 1936 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:
AL Public Health,
Center for Health Statistics

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Alabama seceded from the Union in 1861 and joined the Confederacy. Notable clashes in the state include the Battles of Mobile Bay and Fort Blakeley, both near Mobile. Alabama was readmitted in 1868.

Alabama's economy recovered slowly from the devastation of the Civil War. Sharecropping emerged, and with it came an even greater dependence on cotton crops. From 1880 to 1900, the state's natural resources gave it an advantage over neighboring states in attracting investment and industry.

The "Great Migration" of African Americans from the South to cities in the north and west occurred from 1910 to 1970. Through it, African Americans fled racial violence and the oppression of Jim Crow laws in favor of economic and educational opportunities in other parts of the country.

Indeed, Alabama became the center of national attention during the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Many of the movement's seminal moments—the Montgomery bus boycotts, the march from Selma to Montgomery, and battles over the end of racial segregation in schools—took place in the state. The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections <www.lib.ua.edu/libraries/hole> holds items relevant to African American research, including a digital collection with photographs.

LIVING IN THE YELLOWHAMMER STATE

In 1881, Alabama first began requiring counties to keep birth records. Not all counties complied, and others kept inconsistent records. County probate offices hold any surviving registers.

Statewide birth and death registration began in 1908, with general compliance by the 1920s. Records are available from the Alabama Department of Public Health's website <www.alabamapublichealth.gov/vitalrecords> or in-person at county health departments. Restrictions

apply for 125 years from the date of birth and 25 years from the date of death. FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org> holds death records and indexes covering 1908 to 1974 and birth records and indexes covering 1881 to 1930.

Statewide registration of marriage certificates did not begin until 1936, but records were kept at the county level as early as 1799. For pre-1936 marriages, check the county probate office where the marriage license was issued. FamilySearch provides indexes to select Alabama county marriage records from 1809 to 1950 <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1743384>, and Ancestry.com has typed transcripts of 1814–1935 marriage record indexes created by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60922>. Alabama has no restrictions on access to marriage records.

The Alabama Center for Health Statistics began filing divorce certificates in 1950. Pre-1950 divorces must be obtained from the circuit court in the county where the divorce was granted.

COUNTING ALABAMIANS

Federal population schedules are available for Alabama beginning in 1830 and continue through 1950. (What is now Alabama was enumerated in 1810 and 1820, but records have been lost.) Schedules for the 1890 census were almost entirely destroyed, though fragments survive for two Alabama townships, Perryville and Severe in Perry County.

Alabama took its own censuses in 1820, 1850, 1855 and 1866, though only the 1866 census has surviving records for every county that existed at the time. The Alabama Department of Archives and History holds the schedules, which have been digitized at FamilySearch and Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1576>.

The Alabama Department of Archives and History, FamilySearch and Ancestry.com also have other useful

TIMELINE

1519

Spanish explorers reach the Mobile Bay area

1702

The French found Mobile, the first permanent European settlement in Alabama

1763

England acquires France's land east of the Mississippi River

1783

The new United States controls territory east of the Mississippi River; Spain disputes these claims

1795

Spain cedes central Alabama and Mississippi to the United States in Pinckney's Treaty; the area becomes Mississippi Territory



1813

US forces defeat the Spanish at Mobile, taking control of the whole modern state

1817

Alabama Territory is established

1819

Alabama becomes the 22nd state

1861

During the Civil War, Alabama secedes from the Union

1903

Houston County is established in the last major change to Alabama's county boundaries

TOOLKIT

Websites

Alabama History at Home <alabamahistoryhome.org>

AlabamaMosaic <www.alabamamosaic.org>

ALGenWeb <www.algenweb.org>

Cyndi's List: Alabama <www.cyndislist.com/us/al>

Encyclopedia of Alabama <encyclopediaofalabama.org>

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

Linkpendium: Alabama <www.linkpendium.com/al-genealogy>

Publications

History of Alabama and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi: From the Earliest Period, 2 volumes by Albert James Pickett (Walker and James) <www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2614901>

Researching African American Genealogy in Alabama by Frazine Taylor (NewSouth)

Rivers of History: Life on the Coosa, Tallapoosa, Cahaba, and Alabama by Harvey H. Jackson III (University of Alabama Press)

Tracing Ancestors Among the Five Civilized Tribes by Rachel Mills Lennon (Genealogical Publishing Co.)

Tracing Your Alabama Past by Robert Scott Davis (University Press of Mississippi)

Archives & Organizations

Alabama Department of Archives and History <archives.alabama.gov>

Alabama Genealogical Society <www.algensoc.org>

Alabama Historical Association <alabamahistory.net>

Birmingham Public Library <www.bplonline.org/resources/genealogy>

The National Archives at Atlanta <archives.gov/atlanta>

Samford University Library Special Collections <library.samford.edu/special>

University of Alabama Library Special Collections <lib.ua.edu/libraries/hoole>

enumerations for Alabamians: slaves schedules (1850, 1860); agricultural, manufacturing and mortality schedules (1850, 1860, 1870, 1880); and special censuses for “defective, dependent, and delinquent” classes (1880).

Note that Native Americans living under tribal authority on reservations were excluded from the federal census until 1900. A Creek census in 1833 (also known as the Parsons and Abbott Roll) <www.accessgenealogy.com/native/parsons-abbott-roll.htm> is the most comprehensive pre-removal document, containing the names of heads of household. The National Archives <www.archives.gov> holds several relevant documents created by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, including the “Dawes Rolls” (which listed members of the “Five Civilized Tribes” living in Oklahoma between 1898 and 1914).

OTHER RECORDS

Trace your Alabama ancestors in these other kinds of documents.

- **Land Records:** Alabama is a public-land state, meaning the federal government held title to all ungranted land and conveyed the land (e.g., sold or given as a bounty or homestead) to individuals, or recognized colonial-era land claims. The Bureau of Land Management’s General Land Office <gloreCORDS.blm.gov> holds information about land sales from statehood. Subsequent land sales were recorded in county deed books. FamilySearch and Ancestry.com have land patents and plats, respectively, and the “First Landowners Project” at subscription site HistoryGeo.com <www.historygeo.com/v3/search> offers a surname search for all 67 counties in Alabama.

- **Court Records:** Under the territorial system, justices of the peace handled criminal cases and small-dollar civil disputes. After statehood, county courts had concurrent jurisdiction with the circuit courts in actions involving debt, trespass, assault, and battery. Surviving records are held at the county courthouses, though many courthouses have fallen victim to fires and other natural disasters over the years. (The ADAH’s website has a map indicating courthouses destroyed by fire <archives.alabama.gov/research/images/courthouse_fires.jpg>.)

- **Probate Records:** The “orphans court” of each county carried out probate functions before the formation of separate probate courts in 1850. These appointed guardians, granted letters of administration and probated wills, in addition to managing estates. Like court records, probate records are held at the county level, with collections on FamilySearch and Ancestry.com.

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