

## RESEARCH GUIDE

# MISSOURI

by LADONNA GARNER



**MANY LINEAGES TIE BACK TO MISSOURI.** Countless travelers, drawn by prospects out west or the vast tracks of land in the Midwest, navigated through the state or became permanent settlers. Many left behind a trail of documents that give clues about their lives.

But to understand the state's genealogy records, we must first learn about the state's history, evolution and even boundaries. Read on for a guide to researching your ancestors in the "Show Me" State.

### MISSOURI'S BEGINNINGS

Missouri's rich history was shaped by several competing countries. France, Spain, and the United States each aspired to gain Missouri's land for profit.

Missouri is named for the Missouria tribe, one of the numerous indigenous societies that lived in the region before European occupation. Notably, the pre-Columbian city of Cahokia lay directly across the Mississippi from modern St. Louis, and was a center of trade.

As indigenous societies continued to be pressed westward or ravaged by disease, Missouri's landscape swiftly became home to white settlers. French-Canadian Louis Jolliet and Jesuit missionary Jacques Marquette were the first Europeans documented in the area, navigating the upper Mississippi River Valley in 1673.

Drawn by fur-trading prospects, René-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle claimed the whole Louisiana Territory for France a few years later in 1682. This encouraged settlements along the Mississippi River bank, including Ste. Genevieve (c. 1735) and St. Louis (1764). Additional settlements expanded along the Missouri River and its tributaries.

In addition to inviting white migrants, these French industries also introduced Blacks of African descent into the territory as enslaved labor during the early 18th century. Blacks became the primary workforce in the region's growing industries, notably mining and agriculture.

In 1762, Spain gained control of the Louisiana territory after the French and Indian War (Seven Year's War), then secretly returned the region to France in 1800. In 1803, the United States nearly doubled its territory in the Louisiana Purchase, which included modern Missouri.

With its navigable waterways and connections to other parts of the country, Missouri was a launchpad for many passages and nicknamed the "Gateway to the West." Lewis and Clark embarked on their historic expedition from St. Louis in 1803, and the famous California, Oregon and Santa Fe Trails each began in Independence, Mo. The US government formed the Territory of Missouri in 1812, including in it a large swath of the Louisiana Purchase.

Missouri was at the crossroads of not just east and west, but also North and South and was admitted to the Union as a slave state as part of the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The deal, struck to settle divisions in Congress over the expansion of slavery into new territories, also admitted the (free)

state of Maine and established the 36°30' parallel as the southernmost point of Louisiana Territory that would permit slavery—with the exception of Missouri. Missouri was also key in the pivotal *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision in 1857, as Dred Scott filed for his freedom in a St. Louis court.

During the Civil War, Missouri (though a slave state) remained in the Union. Sentiments were divided as Missourians served on both sides of the conflict, and many battles took place within the state.

### FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:  
1821

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:  
1830

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:  
1910

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:  
from establishment (county); 1881 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:  
Mo. Bureau of  
Vital Records

After the war, the state supported an influx of migrants, including (but not limited to) those from Germany, Ireland and Italy, and the formerly enslaved from the South. Missouri's numerous record repositories today reflect the diverse ethnic and cultural influences that have shaped the state's history.

### VITAL RECORDS

Missouri didn't enact statewide registration of births and deaths until 1910. An earlier attempt at standard registration in 1883 failed after just 10 years due to limited compliance, and the Missouri State Archives have an index of these early records <[s1.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/birthdeath/#searchdb](http://s1.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/birthdeath/#searchdb)>. A guide is also available at <[www.sos.mo.gov/CMSImages/Archives/resources/pre\\_1910\\_births\\_deaths.pdf](http://www.sos.mo.gov/CMSImages/Archives/resources/pre_1910_births_deaths.pdf)>, charting surviving record availability by county and time period.

Post-1910 birth records are under privacy restrictions and are only available to authorized family members or representatives upon request through the Bureau of Vital Records. The same is true for post-1910 death records less than 50 years old, but they're transferred to the Missouri State Archives after that window of time. See a digital collection of them at <[s1.sos.mo.gov/records/Archives/ArchivesMvc/DeathCertificates#searchDB](http://s1.sos.mo.gov/records/Archives/ArchivesMvc/DeathCertificates#searchDB)>.

Missouri began requiring marriage licenses in 1881 at the county level, and did not require them at the state level until 1948. Some counties may have earlier records, though, from the county's foundation. Contact the recorder of deeds office in the county the event took place for marriage records, and request divorce records from the circuit clerk office where the action was filed.

### COUNTING MISSOURIANS

Individuals residing in the Upper Mississippi Valley were counted in a variety of censuses, reflecting the broader history of the region: territorial, state, and federal.

The first known census was of Ste. Genevieve in 1752, followed by various Spanish enumerations between 1770 and 1797. France again enumerated the territory when it regained control in 1800 and 1803.

As a US territory, Missouri was enumerated every two

years from 1814 to 1820, but of these only 1818 Ste. Genevieve records survive. Upon statehood, Missouri conducted several state censuses including every four years from 1840 through 1876.

The land in what is now Missouri appeared in both the 1810 and 1820 federal censuses, but records have not survived. As a result, Missouri's earliest surviving federal census is 1830, the first in which it was recorded as a state.

The Missouri State Archives have a searchable database of some surviving nonfederal census entries at <[s1.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/census/Default.aspx](http://s1.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/census/Default.aspx)>. You can find federal censuses variously at Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)>, FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)>, MyHeritage <[www.myheritage.com](http://www.myheritage.com)> and more.

### LANDS OF OPPORTUNITY

After admittance into the United States, the population of Missouri (a public-land state) rapidly expanded. Land officers sold available land to eager settlers, while other officials worked to verify French and Spanish land-grant claims that pre-dated the Louisiana Purchase.

The state's land records vary in purpose and format, including but not limited to land patents, tract books, and warranty deeds. Navigating land transactions requires an understanding of when the land was purchased and who sold it.

The Missouri State Archives offer a searchable database of land record transcriptions covering transactions from 1777 to 1969 at <[s1.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/land](http://s1.sos.mo.gov/records/archives/archivesdb/land)>. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) <[gloreCORDS.blm.gov](http://gloreCORDS.blm.gov)> offers a searchable index to patent records for land-owners who purchased from the US government.

Private land transactions were recorded at the recorder of deeds office in the county of interest and may not be available online. FamilySearch has browse-only collections for many counties, searchable by a grantor-to-grantee index. The Missouri State Archives maintain an inventory of county court records at <[www.sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/county/croll](http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/county/croll)>, which can serve as a finding aid.

For help in finding county-level records, study how county boundaries shifted over time, and the "parent" counties of newly formed jurisdictions. For example, St. Louis City separated from St. Louis County in 1876,

## TIMELINE

**1682**

René-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle claims Louisiana for France

**1735**

The French settle Ste. Genevieve on the west banks of the Mississippi River

**1762**

Spain gains control of Louisiana; they return it to France in 1800

**1803**

The United States purchases the Louisiana Territory from France

**1812**

The Territory of Missouri is established, containing much of the land from the Louisiana Purchase



**The St. Louis Arch and  
the Mississippi River**



**1821**

As part of the Missouri Compromise, Missouri becomes the 24th state

**1836**

Missouri annexes its modern northwest corner as a result of the Platte Purchase, acquired from various tribes

**1849**

The California Gold Rush sparks mass westward migration, notably through Independence, St. Joseph, St. Louis and Kansas City

**1876**

The city of St. Louis separates from St. Louis County, the last major change to Missouri's county boundaries

**1965**

The Gateway Arch is completed in St. Louis

## TOOLKIT

### Websites

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

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

**"Indigenous Tribes of Missouri: Missouri's Native Peoples"** <[libguides.jeffco.edu/missouritribes](http://libguides.jeffco.edu/missouritribes)>

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

**Missouri Digital Heritage** <[www.sos.mo.gov/mdh](http://www.sos.mo.gov/mdh)>

**Missouri Digital Newspaper Project** <[www.shsmo.org/collections/newspapers/mdnp](http://www.shsmo.org/collections/newspapers/mdnp)>

**MoGenWeb** <[www.mogenweb.org](http://www.mogenweb.org)>

### Publications

**"Immigrant Experience Research Guide,"** The State Historical Society of Missouri <[www.shsmo.org/research/guides/immigrant](http://www.shsmo.org/research/guides/immigrant)>

**Missouri's Black Heritage, revised edition** by Lorenzo J. Greene, Gary R. Kremer, and Antonio F. Holland (University of Missouri Press)

**Missouri: The Heart of the Nation, 4th edition** by William E. Parrish, Lawrence O. Christensen, and Brad D. Lookingbill (Wiley-Blackwell)

**The Tribes of Missouri Part 1: When the Osage & Missouriia Reigned** by Ron Soodalter (Missouri Life Magazine) <[missourilife.com/the-tribes-of-missouri-part-1-when-the-osage-missouria-reigned](http://missourilife.com/the-tribes-of-missouri-part-1-when-the-osage-missouria-reigned)>

### Archives & Organizations

**Midwest Genealogy Center** <[www.mymcpl.org/genealogy](http://www.mymcpl.org/genealogy)>

**Missouri Historical Society** <[www.mohistory.org/society](http://www.mohistory.org/society)>

**Missouri State Archives** <[www.sos.mo.gov/archives](http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives)>

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

**Ozarks Genealogical Society** <[ozarksgs.org](http://ozarksgs.org)>

**The State Historical Society of Missouri** <[www.shsmo.org](http://www.shsmo.org)>

**St. Louis County Library, History & Genealogy** <[www.slcl.org/genealogy](http://www.slcl.org/genealogy)>

creating complexities for researchers. Many of the records were retained within the parent county's repositories.

### SHOW ME MORE RECORDS

Missourians were also documented in other kinds of records that are frequently overlooked by researchers. Here are some documents to consider:

- **Citizenship Records:** Naturalization papers required foreign-born Missourians to file two sets of paperwork. Before 1906, they could file at any municipal, county, state or federal court, so examine courts nearest an ancestor's current and former residence(s). (After 1906, when the process was federalized, records were kept only in the local federal court.) Ancestry.com offers an index of naturalizations in the Western District (including Missouri <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2494](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2494)>, and the National Archives has an index of St. Louis naturalizations <[www.archives.gov/kansas-city/finding-aids/naturalization-st-louis.html](http://www.archives.gov/kansas-city/finding-aids/naturalization-st-louis.html)>).

- **Military Records:** Missourians served their country in various skirmishes and wars. The Missouri State Archives holds numerous military documents from the War of 1812, Civil War (both Union and Confederate) and other conflicts, including service cards, muster rolls, and payrolls <[www.sos.mo.gov/archives/pubs/archweb/military](http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/pubs/archweb/military)>. A searchable Soldiers Records database at <[s1.sos.mo.gov/Records/Archives/ArchivesDb/soldiers](http://s1.sos.mo.gov/Records/Archives/ArchivesDb/soldiers)> contains transcripts and images of original service cards.

- **Maps:** Historical maps that recorded the developing territory of Missouri are quite useful in navigating ancestral locations. The Library of Congress' Map Collection <[www.loc.gov/maps](http://www.loc.gov/maps)> offers a plethora of maps. Sanborn fire insurance maps, street-level views of neighborhoods, are also available through the Library of Congress and the University of Missouri <[library.missouri.edu/specialcollections/collections/show/43](http://library.missouri.edu/specialcollections/collections/show/43)>. Learn about changing county boundaries with <[www.mapofus.org/\\_iframe/mo-maps.htm](http://www.mapofus.org/_iframe/mo-maps.htm)> or the Atlas of Historical County Boundaries <[digital.newberry.org/ahcb/pages/Missouri.html](http://digital.newberry.org/ahcb/pages/Missouri.html)>.

- **Newspapers:** The first newspaper published in Missouri was the *Missouri Gazette* in 1808. Today, surviving historical newspapers are housed at The State Historical Society of Missouri's Columbia Research Center (SHSMO) <[www.shsmo.org/collections/newspapers](http://www.shsmo.org/collections/newspapers)>, complete with an index. Online access is available through the Missouri Digital Newspaper Project <[www.shsmo.org/collections/newspapers/mdnp](http://www.shsmo.org/collections/newspapers/mdnp)> or (for some titles) the Library of Congress' Chronicling America site <[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov)>.

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