

RESEARCH GUIDE

SOUTH DAKOTA

by VIRGINIA HANSON



IT'S HARD TO ARGUE ABOUT SOUTH DAKOTA'S beauty, with its the pastoral prairies (childhood home of Laura Ingalls Wilder of *Little House on the Prairie* fame) and monumental mountains (both Mount Rushmore and the in-progress Crazy Horse Memorial). Discover your ancestor's story there with the following tips and resources for researching your family in the Mount Rushmore State.

MOUNTAINS (AND PRAIRIES) OF HISTORY

Prior to European or American settlement, Native groups (notably the Arikara, Mandan and Hidatsa) had lived in the area for centuries. The state's namesake, the Dakota/Lakota/Nakota Sioux, originated in neighboring Minnesota, but moved westward into the modern Dakotas by the mid-18th century.

After Frenchman René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur da La Salle's expedition to the Great Lakes in 1682, France claimed the whole of "Upper Louisiana," including modern South Dakota. Throughout the 18th century and up to 1803, South Dakota was part of this Louisiana Territory, which changed hands from France to Spain in the 1760s, then back again to France in 1801. The United States purchased the lands from France for pennies per acre in 1803, including nearly all of modern South Dakota. (The very northeastern-most portion of the state was ceded by Britain in a separate treaty in 1818.)

Remote from other settlements in the region, South Dakota was sparsely populated by white settlers (except for fur traders) until the mid-1800s. The US government initially administered the whole South Dakota region as part of various territories: Louisiana, then Missouri, then "unorganized" or "Indian Territory."

But the two halves of the modern state, divided at the Missouri River, were administered differently beginning in the late 1830s. The western portion remained part of "unorganized" territory before becoming part of Nebraska Territory, while the eastern half was part of Iowa Territory, then Minnesota Territory, then unorganized territory.

As American settlement grew in the region, so too did conflict between settlers and Native tribes. In an attempt to keep the peace, a treaty in 1851 reserved large swaths of land in South Dakota and other Plains territories for Native settlement.

But interest in the area (including its organization into Dakota Territory in 1861 as well as the Homestead Act of 1862) continued to rise, and many American settlers failed to respect the treaty's provisions. The government and Sioux struck a new deal in 1868, and the resulting Great Sioux Reservation set aside land for that nation that included all of modern South Dakota west of the Missouri River, plus some land in North Dakota and a county in Nebraska.

Prospectors discovered gold in the Black Hills (part of the Great Sioux Reservation). A gold rush that followed caused the population of Dakota Territory to quadruple in less than 10 years, with immigrants flocking to the area.

Tensions boiled over in the Great Sioux War, beginning in 1876. Notable events include the Sioux victory at the Battle of Little Bighorn ("Custer's Last Stand") in nearby Montana, though the US government ultimately won the war. The Sioux were forced to give up the Black Hills region, then the Great Sioux Reservation was disbanded.

In its place were a handful of smaller

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:
1889

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1860 (as territory); 1900 (as state)

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1905 (state); counties may be earlier

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
from settlement (county); 1905 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:
S.D. Dept. of Health
<doh.sd.gov/records>



Badlands National Park

reservations, many of them noncontiguous and operating into the present. The Wounded Knee Massacre on Pine Ridge Reservation in 1890 largely ended armed conflict. But legal battles over ownership of the Black Hills continue to the present, with a 1980 Supreme Court ruling that Sioux Nation was entitled to financial compensation for the land.

South Dakota was admitted as a state in 1889, at the same time as the separate North Dakota. Since then, the state has developed robust agricultural and industrial economies, despite setbacks like the Dust Bowl of the

1930s. Tourism is another of South Dakota's industries—Mount Rushmore, completed in the Black Hills in 1941, attracts more than 2 million visitors each year.

CHECKING VITALS

The state began keeping birth, death and marriage records in July 1905, but various vital records (especially of marriages) may be available earlier in many counties, starting about 1880. Order vital records for your family through any county or state register of deeds office. Informational

SOLENTFEISSA/UNSPUSH

TIMELINE

1682

Frenchman René-Robert de La Salle claims "Louisiana Territory," including the Great Plains, for France

1803

The Lewis & Clark Expedition climbs Spirit Mound near modern Vermillion, S.D.

1817

Fort Pierre is established, the foundation for continuous American settlement in the area

1851

The Treaty of Fort Laramie sets aside large swaths of land in western South Dakota (and other territory) for Native peoples

1861

South Dakota is part of the newly created Dakota Territory, with Yankton as capital

Discover your ancestor's story with the following tips and resources for researching your family in the Mount Rushmore State.

copies are available to request for genealogical use; certified copies are restricted to direct family members or legal agents of the person named in the record.

The Department of Health has an index to births over 100 years old <apps.sd.gov/PH14Over100BirthRec/index.aspx>, where you can search by the child's name or the parent's information. Delayed births over 100 years are also recorded on this site.

Marriage record images up to 1955 are available on Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8561> (free to subscribing libraries). That collection has an index for subsequent marriages up through 2017, as of writing.

Death records are not available online, but Ancestry.com has an index to deaths up to 1955 <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8659>.

Note: Any register of deeds can access post-1905 vital records from anywhere in the state; you don't need to order from the specific county where the event took place. If the county does not have access to the original photostatic copy, then the record will be mailed to the applicant the next day.

COUNTING SOUTH DAKOTANS

As the history section indicated, South Dakota was part of the United States for more than 80 years before becoming a state. As a result, its residents appeared variously in US federal censuses until that point. Though not incorporated until 1861, Dakota Territory appears as a browse option in online collections of the 1860 census. (South Dakota was technically part of Nebraska Territory or considered "unorganized" at the time.) By contrast, the 1870 census covered Dakota Territory in its own right, but included only the most populated areas (mostly along the Missouri River and in the southeast corner of the state).

The 1880 census covered much of eastern South Dakota, again as part of Dakota Territory. But some northern counties were omitted, as was most of western South Dakota (still unconsidered Indian Territory). The exceptions were some counties in the Black Hills area, or river counties that housed civilians or military employees.

Because most of the 1890 federal census was destroyed, the 1900 enumeration is the first surviving decennial census to cover the whole state.

South Dakota took its own censuses beginning in 1885, in which only the most populated areas are recorded. That enumeration also included a record of Civil War veterans. Subsequent state-specific censuses were taken every 10 years from 1895 through 1945, making them nice complements to the federal census. You can find South Dakota state and territorial censuses at FamilySearch and paid sites Ancestry.com, Findmypast <www.findmypast.com> and MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com>; the state archives have original records.

Reservations and other land held by Native peoples were not included on federal censuses until 1940 (save for a separate Indian population schedule in 1900 and 1910), and only sporadically in state censuses. But if you have Native ancestry in the state, a separate enumeration—annuity rolls—will be useful for you. These were taken every year from 1885 through 1935 by various federal Indian agencies across South Dakota. The state archives has copies of the available agency census and guides to agency records <history.sd.gov/archives/Data/Archives/project.aspx>.

OTHER RECORDS

You'll note that much of the state lacks census records from before about 1900. To compensate, look for tax

1868

A revised Fort Laramie treaty re-asserts western South Dakota as Native land, the "Great Sioux Reservation"

1874

Gold is discovered in the Black Hills, leading to a gold rush, a population boom, and a reduction of Native reservations

1889

South Dakota is separated from North Dakota and admitted as the 40th state

1890

Hundreds of Lakota are killed by the US army in the Wounded Knee Massacre

1916

Jones County is created, the latest of South Dakota's 66 counties to be incorporated

TOOLKIT

Websites

Cyndi's List: South Dakota <www.cyndislist.com/us/sd>

FamilySearch Research Wiki: South Dakota

<www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/South_Dakota,_United_States_Genealogy>

Linkpendium: South Dakota <www.linkpendium.com/sd-genealogy>

SDGenWeb <www.sdgenweb.com>

Publications

History of South Dakota, 4th edition by Herbert S. Schell and John E. Miller (South Dakota State Historical Society Press)

A New South Dakota History edited by Harry F. Thompson (Center for Western Studies)

Roadside History of South Dakota by Linda Hasselstrom (Mountain Press Publishing Company)

South Dakota Geographic Names by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve (Brevet Press)

South Dakota Post Offices by Alan H. Patera and John S. Gallagher (The Depot)

They Captured the Moment: Dakota Photographers, 1853–1920 by Robert Kolbe and Brian Bade (Pine Hill Press)

With A Shirt Tail Full of Type: The Story of Newspapering in South Dakota by Robert F. Karolevitz (South Dakota Press Association)

Archives & Organizations

National Archives at Kansas City <www.archives.gov/kansas-city>

South Dakota Genealogical Society <www.sdgensociety.org>

South Dakota State Historical Society Archives <history.sd.gov/archives/collectionindexes.aspx>

South Dakota State Library <library.sd.gov/LIB/ERD/complete.aspx>

records, school censuses and classification records, or voting records like poll records and county registrations.

In addition to the aforementioned, look for these documents that could name your South Dakota kin.

- **Newspapers:** The South Dakota State Archives collections include most newspapers ever printed in the state, from 1858 <history.sd.gov/archives/newspaperarchive.aspx>. Entries include publications in several different languages, and dozens of South Dakota titles have been added to the free Chronicling America site <chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>.

- **Military Records:** The South Dakota State Archives has a guide to military records from various conflicts or assignment posts at <history.sd.gov/archives/military.aspx>. Servicemen were active in the area as early as the 1830s, and volunteers from Dakota Territory formed volunteer regiments for the Union during the Civil War. Records of both militia/National Guard troops and armed forces regulars are under county jurisdiction or with federal military records, with copies on sites like Ancestry.com or Fold3 <www.fold3.com>.

- **Homestead and Land Records:** Federal land—including some in South Dakota—opened to eligible applicants in 1862. But settlers might have received homesteads earlier than that via other means, including cash exemptions, military patents, mineral or livestock claims, desert land claims or Indian allotments. The South Dakota Land Patent Register, also known as the South Dakota Tract Books, shows the first date that the homesteader filed for a piece of land, the land's value, as well as the type of homestead and the date of final entry file. You can search an index of land patents at the Bureau of Land Management's General Land Office website <gloreCORDS.blm.gov>. Note that subsequent land exchanges were handled at the county level.

- **Naturalization Records:** The state archives have naturalizations up to 1987 <history.sd.gov/archives/naturalization.aspx>. The indexes there (one each for first and second papers) have enough detail to confirm if the applicant is your ancestor, order original records, or continue your research into other resources, such as ships' passenger lists. Request post-1906 applications at the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website <www.uscis.gov/records/genealogy>.

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