

RESEARCH GUIDE

PENNSYLVANIA

by JAMES M. BEIDLER



PENNSYLVANIA WAS THE MOST RELIGIOUSLY AND ethnically diverse of the original Thirteen Colonies. Philadelphia, its largest city, was the top port of arrival during the 1700s and remained an important entry point well into the 20th century.

The commonwealth grew enormously in the 19th century, and while its early role as the nation's breadbasket was eclipsed by the Midwest, Pennsylvania's wealth of coal and timber made it a magnet for immigrants of many ethnicities—and a center of industry. The 20th century was less kind to Pennsylvania demographically as its population stagnated, but its storied place in American history has resulted in many records becoming more accessible online.

A COMMONWEALTH OF HISTORY

Native American nations known as the Leni Lenape and Susquehannocks inhabited Pennsylvania for centuries, with some Shawnee bands settling in the region. The Delaware River Valley was a battleground between European nations seeking to expand beginning in the 1630s, first ruled by Sweden (1638–1655), then the Netherlands (1655–1664, 1673) and finally the English (permanently in 1674).

English King Charles II saw an opportunity in 1681 to solve two issues at once. By bestowing a charter for “Pennsylvania” (Latin for “Penn’s woods”) on the son of Admiral William Penn, he could return a debt to Penn—and deal with dissent from the Religious Society of Friends, of which the younger Penn was a member.

But even once under the English, border conflicts dogged Pennsylvania. The Province included modern Delaware, but

three other colonies (Virginia, Connecticut and Maryland) all claimed land near their respective regions. The colony's southern border with Maryland had to be established by the Mason-Dixon line in the 1760s.

Penn the Younger founded a colony based on religious toleration—one of the few American colonies not to have an established church. The opportunity for land (and, secondarily, religious tolerance) led many German-speaking people to Pennsylvania, in addition to Scots-Irish and other British Isle denizens.

Dominance by the pacifist Quakers began to recede during the French and Indian War (1754–1763), when a militia was first organized. French claims in western Pennsylvania (notably Fort Duquesne near modern Pittsburgh) sparked tension with Colonial militia, and George Washington, then a lieutenant colonel, led Virginia militia in the first battle of the war, in modern Fayette County.

The colony was a hotbed for independence and served as the meeting point for the Continental Congress, including when the Colonies signed the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia. After the Revolutionary War, the city played host again in 1787 when the new US

Constitution was debated; Pennsylvania was the second state to ratify the union. After the Revolution, Pennsylvanians went westward into Ohio, the Midwest and eventually across the continent.

Enslavement was legal in Pennsylvania in Colonial times, but the Gradual Abolition Act passed in 1780 led to emancipation for newly born children of enslaved people. No enslaved persons are seen in the state's records after 1847.

Coal mining and steelmaking in Pennsylvania attracted many immigrants in the

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:
1787

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1790

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1852, 1893 (county); 1906 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
1855 (county); never statewide

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

19th century from southern and eastern Europe. Beginning in the early 20th century, many African Americans came to Pennsylvania's urban centers as part of the Great Migration.

VITAL INTERESTS

Pennsylvania has a wide-ranging genealogical infrastructure. Participants include some statewide organizations—many of whom have been helped with digitization by major genealogy players such as FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org> and Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com>—as well as a network of county and local organizations and repositories.

Though a 1682 law required vital-recordkeeping, only a few early marriage licenses were actually kept and are extant. The first concerted effort at vital records was in 1852, when counties began keeping registers of births, marriages and deaths. Compliance was low and the law was repealed in 1855; those that have survived are on Ancestry.com. Counties again kept registers of births and deaths from 1893 to 1905.

State certificates for births and deaths begin in 1906, and records become public after blackout periods (105 years for births and 50 years for deaths); most public records are on Ancestry.com, and you can view a free index at the state archives <www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/Vital-Statistics.aspx>. Those in the blackout periods can be ordered from the Department of Health by family members or legal representatives.

Counties have kept marriage licenses continuously since 1885. You can find many of them up to 1950 on FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1589502> and Ancestry.com.

In addition to civil records, Pennsylvania's history of religious diversity means a lot of records from churches and their pastors—fortunate, given the state's spotty 19th-century vital records. The amount of genealogical data and public accessibility of these records varies from denomination to denomination, and even from one congregation to another.

Many church records are in the large online collection “Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Church and Town Records, 1708–1985” (available on both Ancestry.com and Find-

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mypast <www.findmypast.com>). Many registers or their transcriptions are available from denominational archives or county historical societies, and Findmypast has orchestrated putting many Roman Catholic registers online.

KEY(STONE) RECORDS

Other prominent record groups include:

- **Censuses and Substitutes:** Pennsylvania has appeared in every US census, with no major record losses (except for the general loss of the 1890 census). Pennsylvania took no official state censuses, but did take a “Septennial Census” every seven years from 1779 to 1863. However, only about 11% of the returns survive (available on Ancestry.com), and their contents more closely resemble a tax list.

- **Tax Lists:** Find county tax lists on FamilySearch, plus a collection on Ancestry.com of statewide tax lists. The detailed 1798 U.S. Direct Tax (nicknamed the “Window Tax”) survives for Pennsylvania; search it on Ancestry.com.

- **Land Records:** Pennsylvania is a “state land” entity, with a complex (but rich) patchwork of distribution methods and documentation. The Pennsylvania State Archives has digitized many of its holdings of original land transactions, including surveys and what it called “warrantee township maps” (which show original land purchases and purchasers). Many of the county recorders of deeds have digitized their holdings; they range from free access to “pay per view” sites. Note that land records for areas of the state claimed by other state governments may be in the respective state's archive.

TIMELINE

1638

Settlers found New Sweden in the Delaware River Valley

1655

The Dutch capture New Sweden, incorporating it into New Netherland

1664

The Dutch cede New Netherland to the English

1674

The English retake control of New Netherland after a brief conflict with the Dutch

1681

King Charles II grants the Province of Pennsylvania to William Penn



Independence Hall in Philadelphia



1701

The “Lower Counties” (Delaware) gain a legislature independent from Pennsylvania; the two share a governor until 1776

1776

The Second Continental Congress signs the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia

1787

Pennsylvania is the second state to ratify the Constitution

1800

The US capital moves from Philadelphia to the newly built Washington, DC

1878

Lackawanna County is created from Luzerne County, the last major change to Pennsylvania county borders

TOOLKIT

Websites

Archives Records Information Access System (ARIAS)

<www.digitalarchives.state.pa.us>

Cyndi's List: Pennsylvania <www.cyndislist.com/us/pa>

FamilySearch Research Wiki: Pennsylvania

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

Linkpendium: Pennsylvania <www.linkpendium.com/pa-genealogy>

Pennsylvania GenWeb <www.pagenweb.org>

Publications

Guide to African American Resources at the Pennsylvania State Archives by Ruth E. Hodge (Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission)

Guide to Genealogical Sources at the Pennsylvania State Archives by Robert M. Dructor (Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission)

Pennsylvania Land Records: A History and Guide for Research by Donna Bingham Munger (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers)

Research in Pennsylvania by Kay Haviland Freilich (National Genealogical Society)

Archives & Organizations

Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Department <www.carnegielibrary.org/research-overview/genealogy>

Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania

<www.genpa.org>

Historical Society of Pennsylvania <www.hsp.org>

Mennonite Heritage Center <www.mhep.org>

Moravian Archives <www.moravianchurcharchives.org>

National Archives at Philadelphia <www.archives.gov/philadelphia>

Pennsylvania State Archives <www.phmc.pa.gov/archives/pages/default.aspx>

Pennsylvania State Library <www.statelibrary.pa.gov/pages/default.aspx>

● **Estate Files:** Originally kept by the county registers of wills, many of these records are now found in FamilySearch's "Pennsylvania Probate Records, 1683–1994" (index on Ancestry.com). The coverage varies from county to county, not just in the dates but also what types of documents are included.

● **Immigration and Naturalization Records:** Philadelphia passenger arrival lists from 1800 are held by the National Archives and available at FamilySearch, Ancestry.com and Findmypast. Pennsylvania has oaths of allegiance of men 16 and older from the Colonial era, which were published as *Pennsylvania German Pioneers*. (Ancestry.com has a searchable version online.) Likewise, with a large population of non-British residents who needed to become subjects, Pennsylvania has naturalizations from Colonial times; see M.S. Giuseppi's *Naturalizations of Foreign Protestants*. For the 19th century (before the naturalization process became more federalized), many local and county Pennsylvania courts created these citizenship documents—and a fair number have given them special priority in digitizing.

● **Newspapers:** The press of Pennsylvania—particularly of English- and German-language publications but also other ethnic tongues—is well-represented on free site Chronicling America <chroniclingamerica.loc.gov> as well as subscription sites such as Newspapers.com <www.newspapers.com> and GenealogyBank <www.genealogybank.com>. The State Library of Pennsylvania's website hosts the "Pennsylvania Digitized Newspaper Directory" and other research aids.

● **Military Records:** The Pennsylvania State Archives has a separate website called Archives Records Information Access System (ARIAS) <www.digitalarchives.state.pa.us>, hosting military records from the state including digitized card files with references to Revolutionary and Civil War soldiers. In addition, Fold3 has digitized the multivolume *Pennsylvania Archives* publication, which has many early militia records (in addition to tax records, naturalizations, and records of correspondence) for free <www.fold3.com/title/450/pennsylvania-archives>.

● **Fraktur:** In addition to having many extant church and pastoral registers, the Pennsylvania Germans also began a folk art tradition that has left many decorative baptismal (as well as some marriage) certificates of ancestors in archives and private collections. Many Fraktur books have been published in the last two decades, and the genealogical information they contain can help fill in gaps in church registers.

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