

## RESEARCH GUIDE

# NORTH CAROLINA



by CONSTANCE HENLEY KNOX

GENEALOGISTS WILL HAVE THE MOST SUCCESS researching their family history in North Carolina when they understand the general history, geographic regions and migration routes in the state. This, together with an understanding of the major record groups, will help family historians create a logical research strategy that will ultimately piece together a well-researched family tree.

North Carolina is primarily broken up into three geographic regions: the Coastal Plain (eastern), the Piedmont (central) and the Mountain region (western). Understanding this can help researchers comprehend migration patterns and the communities who settled there. The Coastal Plain provided transportation along the coast and inland up the many navigable rivers as well as land trade routes. And the Piedmont begins at the fall line (the western edge of the Coastal Plains, where the rivers are no longer navigable) and continues to the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains to the west.

### CAROLINA IN MY MIND

The earliest European expeditions in North Carolina began in the early to mid-1500s by Spanish and English explorers. The English's earliest known settlement—Roanoke Island—was along the coast, though it did not survive. Founded by Sir Walter Raleigh in the 1580s, Roanoke is commonly referred to as the “Lost Colony” due to the mysterious disappearance of its residents while its governor was away to England.

In 1663, King Charles II granted a royal charter to the “Province of Carolina” (named for his father, Charles I), which then included both North and South as well as parts of modern-day Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. He selected eight “Lords

Proprietor” to govern, though harsh conditions and conflicts with various groups (such as Native Americans and pirates) stalled their progress. But one notable settlement was Bath in Beaufort County, an important port city founded in 1705.

Settlement also spiked in the southeast portion of the area. Early settlers came up the Cape Fear River, founding settlements like Brunswick Town (1726) and the port of Wilmington (1739). Though dangerous to navigate, the Cape Fear River was the only deep-water river in the area, allowing for larger sailing vessels and the relatively safe transportation of goods.

In 1729, the Crown purchased seven of the eight Proprietors' parcels of land, and created the royal colony of North Carolina (separate from South Carolina since 1719). The eighth Lord Proprietor who refused to sell his share (John Carteret, or the “Lord of Granville”) retained his portion—a 60-mile strip extending south from Virginia's border—as the Granville District, an important settlement for understanding and researching North Carolina land grants.

Land opportunities in the north had become scarce by 1735. The establishment of a land grant system in North Carolina triggered a surge of migration into the colony. Migrants came from abroad; down from Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania along the Great Wagon Road; and up from South Carolina along various trade routes.

After the Revolutionary War ended in 1781, North Carolina became the 12th state to ratify the Constitution in 1789.

As in other parts of the American South, slavery was a major part of North Carolina's economy. Despite initial reluctance to secede, the state joined the Confederacy in 1861 and provided the most men—and highest number of casualties—of any Confederate state.

### FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:  
1789

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:  
1790

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:  
1913

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:  
1868 (counties); 1962 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:  
N.C. Dept. of Health  
and Human Services

## TAR HEEL COMMUNITIES

Early European settlers established communities in groups, notably the English, Welsh, Scots-Irish, Scottish Highlanders, and German Protestants (including Moravians). Quakers and Moravians also migrated to the region in the mid-1700s. You can learn more about these and other groups at <[www.ncpedia.org](http://www.ncpedia.org)>, which is an online encyclopedia managed by the North Carolina Government & Heritage Library and the state library.

In addition, by 1860, North Carolina was inhabited by 330,000 enslaved persons and 30,000 free persons of color, representing one-third of the state's entire population. You can find hundreds of records for African American ancestors in North Carolina on FamilySearch by searching the catalog <[www.familysearch.org/search/catalog](http://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog)> with the keywords *African Americans in North Carolina*. Other resources include records from the Freedmen's Bureau and the Southern Claims Commission, which were both established during the Reconstruction era.

Additionally, FamilySearch has the 1850 and 1860 US slave schedules, with enslaved people listed by the name of their enslavers. Formerly enslaved people had their own last names by the 1870 US census, but may have continued to work the plantations of their former enslavers. Knowing this may help you identify unnamed people in earlier census schedules.

North Carolina has also been home to dozens of Native American communities, including the Cherokee, Lumbee, Catawba, Tuscarora and Chowanoke. The Cherokee have the most records available, with reservation rolls (1848–1970) on Ancestry.com and the Dawes Rolls (1898–1914) and other records at the National Archives <[www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/dawes/tutorial/intro.html](http://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/dawes/tutorial/intro.html)>. You can view a map of historical Native American territory at <[www.native-land.ca](http://www.native-land.ca)>.

## VITAL INTERESTS

It was not until 1913 that the state mandated birth and death records—and even then, it took a few years for some counties to comply. The North Carolina Department of Archives and History has created a vital

record index (1800–2000) for existing documents, searchable on FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2848682](http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2848682)>. Order originals from either the North Carolina health department <[vitalrecords.nc.gov](http://vitalrecords.nc.gov)> or the registrar of deeds office in the county the event took place in <[www.statewidetitle.com/register.asp](http://www.statewidetitle.com/register.asp)>.

You may find birth records (or substitutes) for some locations before the adoption of civil records. Some cities or counties kept their own, earlier birth records, and the government also issued delayed birth certificates for eligible residents beginning in 1935 (some of which date to the 1870s). The county registrar of deeds has any such records for its county, and FamilySearch has microfilm copies of some areas.

In addition, “bastardy bonds” (common in the 1800s) may provide genealogical information for children born out of wedlock. You can find an extract of roughly 22,000 records in *North Carolina Bastardy Bonds* by Betty and Edwin Camin (self-published), viewable at North Carolina Digital Collections <[digital.ncdcr.gov](http://digital.ncdcr.gov)>.

Marriage records, however, were generally created earlier than those of birth and death, and may be found in the form of banns, bonds, registries, licenses or certificates. Marriage records may have been produced by the church or the county, typically in the place where the bride lived. Some church marriage records date to the mid-1700s, though not all have survived.

Banns and bonds were most common prior to 1851, and they assured that there was no legal impediment to the marriage. An 1851 law required marriage licenses to be returned to the county clerk, proving the marriage had been performed. Thus, you will often find a marriage license with the “return” section on the bottom of the same page.

Marriage records were first required by state law in 1868. You can find original records at the registrar of deeds, and FamilySearch and Ancestry.com each have collections of county marriages.

Formerly enslaved African Americans may have applied for a cohabitation license in 1866 to prove their marriage. FamilySearch has some cohabitation records for North

## TIMELINE

### 1520s

The Spanish and French explore the Carolinian coast; the Spanish attempt to settle along the Cape Fear River

### 1585

The English first attempt to colonize Roanoke Island; a second attempt two years later is dubbed “The Lost Colony” when its residents go missing

### 1629

Charles I gives land south of Virginia to Sir Robert Heath, naming the region “Carolina” for himself

### 1663

Charles II grants a charter for the “Province of Carolina” to eight Lords Proprietor

### 1729

North Carolina is made a royal colony



Cape Lookout  
Lighthouse in the  
Outer Banks

Carolina. For information by county, see <[www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/North\\_Carolina\\_Cohabitation\\_Records](http://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/North_Carolina_Cohabitation_Records)>.

North Carolina Digital Collections also has collections of family Bible records, which can serve as vital-record substitutes.

### LAND IN “THE OLD NORTH STATE”

While North Carolina currently has 100 counties, this was not always the case. Genealogists should pay close attention to original county borders as well as those that have been abolished entirely. MapofUS.org has an interactive map of North Carolina showing county borders as they changed <[www.mapofus.org/northcarolina](http://www.mapofus.org/northcarolina)>. NC Ancestry also has a complete list of all counties, including those abolished <[www.ncancestry.com/2018/08/17/all-north-carolina-counties](http://www.ncancestry.com/2018/08/17/all-north-carolina-counties)>, and you’ll find an online gazetteer of the state at <[www.ncpedia.org/exploring-north-carolina-geography](http://www.ncpedia.org/exploring-north-carolina-geography)>.

Early inhabitants may have been given land grants, issued to settlers in Colonial times by the eight Lords

Proprietor or (after 1729) purchased from the Crown itself. The “Granville District” in the state’s north, mentioned earlier, was made up the land granted to a Lord Proprietor who refused to sell back to the Crown. (The land continued to be administered by his heirs until 1777.)

Alternatively, North Carolina’s “headrights” system (1663–1744) gave settlers a certain number of acres for each person they took with them to the area, usually 50 acres per head. An applicant could claim himself, as well as a spouse, children, other family members, and even the enslaved. The system encouraged settlement and resulted in households with hundreds of acres.

Key resources on Colonial land records include the book *North Carolina Headrights: A List of Names, 1663–1744* by Caroline B. Whitley (North Carolina Office of Archives and History) and “North Carolina, U.S., Land Grant Files, 1693–1960” at Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60621](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60621)>. Find digital images of land grants online at <[www.nclandgrants.com/home.htm](http://www.nclandgrants.com/home.htm)>.

### 1789

North Carolina becomes the 12th US state; it cedes its western territories (modern Tennessee) to the federal government

### 1838

A few hundred Cherokee in N.C. refuse to be relocated as part of the “Trail of Tears”; their descendants continue to live in the state today

### 1861

North Carolina secedes from the Union; it’s readmitted in 1868

### 1903

Orville and Wilbur Wright pilot the first powered heavier-than-air aircraft near Kitty Hawk

### 1911

Avery and Hoke Counties are created, the last major changes to North Carolina county borders

## TOOLKIT

### Websites

**Cyndi's List: North Carolina** <[www.cyndislist.com/us/nc](http://www.cyndislist.com/us/nc)>

**Digital NC** <[www.digitalnc.org](http://www.digitalnc.org)>

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

**Linkpendium: North Carolina** <[www.linkpendium.com/nc-genealogy](http://www.linkpendium.com/nc-genealogy)>

**NC Ancestry** <[www.ncancestry.com](http://www.ncancestry.com)>

**NC Live Local History & Historical Maps** <[www.nclive.org/sem/local-history-historical-maps](http://www.nclive.org/sem/local-history-historical-maps)>

**NCGenWeb Project** <[www.ncgenweb.us](http://www.ncgenweb.us)>

**NCpedia** <[www.ncpedia.org](http://www.ncpedia.org)>

**North Carolina Digital Collections** <[digital.ncdcr.gov](http://digital.ncdcr.gov)>

### Publications

**NGS Research in the States Series: North Carolina** by Jeffrey L. Haines, 2nd edition <[www.ngsgenealogy.org/ris/north-carolina](http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/ris/north-carolina)>

**North Carolina Headrights: A List of Names, 1663–1744** by Caroline B. Whitley (North Carolina Office of Archives and History)

### Archives & Organizations

**East Carolina Genealogy Collection** <[libguides.ecu.edu/ncgenealogy](http://libguides.ecu.edu/ncgenealogy)>

**Local History Room, New Hanover County Library**  
<[libguides.nhcgov.com/local](http://libguides.nhcgov.com/local)>

**National Archives at Atlanta** <[www.archives.gov/atlanta](http://www.archives.gov/atlanta)>

**North Carolina Genealogical Society**  
<[www.ncgenealogy.org](http://www.ncgenealogy.org)>

**North Carolina Museum of History** <[www.ncmuseumofhistory.org](http://www.ncmuseumofhistory.org)>

**North Carolina State Archives** <[archives.ncdcr.gov/researchers/collections](http://archives.ncdcr.gov/researchers/collections)>

**North Carolina State Library** <[statelibrary.ncdcr.gov/ghl/resources/online](http://statelibrary.ncdcr.gov/ghl/resources/online)>

During the American Revolution, the nascent state of North Carolina began selling vacant or previously British land to citizens. Subsequent land sales between private individuals would have been recorded in deeds, which you can find at the county level. Many counties have made these free and searchable online, and FamilySearch has various land records.

### PIEDMONT PARTICULARS

Some other key records for your Tar Heel ancestors include:

- **Wills and Estate Records:** These are some of the most valuable records for genealogists. Original wills from 1760 are with the county clerk offices, while the North Carolina State Archives in Raleigh <[archives.ncdcr.gov](http://archives.ncdcr.gov)> hold estate and probate records. The North Carolina Digital Collections have Colonial wills <[digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/custom/secretary-of-state-wills](http://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/custom/secretary-of-state-wills)>, and FamilySearch and Ancestry.com both have digitized estates and probate records. (You can view all the archives' online records at <[archives.ncdcr.gov/doc](http://archives.ncdcr.gov/doc)>.)

- **Censuses:** North Carolina has appeared in every decennial federal census, though some counties are missing in earlier censuses. The state took its own census in the mid-1780s, and you can access that enumeration at the state archives or Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3005](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3005)>.

- **Newspapers:** You can find free publications through Digital NC <[www.digitalnc.org/collections/newspapers](http://www.digitalnc.org/collections/newspapers)>, the North Carolina State Library <[statelibrary.ncdcr.gov/ghl/resources/online](http://statelibrary.ncdcr.gov/ghl/resources/online)>, and Chronicling America <[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov)>. Societies and local governments may have also kept their own collections of publications.

- **Tax Records:** These come in two types (property taxes and poll taxes) and were kept at the county level. Property taxes generally began after the Revolutionary War in 1777. Records are in the state archives' custody, and microfilm is available for some later years.

Poll tax laws varied over time, but were primarily levied on males 16 (or, later, 21) years or older. (There was also an upper age limit that varied by era.) Tax records from the Colonial and Revolutionary era (1600s–1775), which show the adult males, female head of households, and those enslaved, are available online at <[digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/custom/tax-lists](http://digital.ncdcr.gov/digital/custom/tax-lists)>.

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