

RESEARCH GUIDE

OREGON

by JANICE HANDSAKER



OREGON TERRITORY WAS CALLED “PIONEER’S Paradise” because of its rich and fertile farm land. But Oregon Trail pioneers also found high desert, valleys, mountain ranges, rivers and the Pacific Ocean, each offering their own abundance of opportunities.

Read on for more on your Oregonian ancestors—both those who came via the famous Oregon Trail, and those who arrived via other means.

TRAILBLAZING HISTORY

Dozens of different Native American tribes lived in what is now Oregon at the time of contact with Europeans. Notable groups included the Chinookan, Kalapuya, Tillamook, Nez Percé, Bannock, Cayuse and Umatilla.

Spanish explorers made the first European sightings of Oregon as early as the mid-1500s, seeking the fabled “Northwest Passage” shipping route that would more easily connect Asia and Europe. But more-regular exploration didn’t take place until the likes of Spaniard Juan Pérez in 1774 and British explorer James Cook in 1778.

In 1804, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark led their Corps of Discovery expedition from Missouri west towards what is now Oregon. Their goal, too, was to find the most “direct and practical” route to the Pacific Ocean for the purposes of commerce, as well as report on the flora and fauna they found in the newly purchased Louisiana Territory.

Beginning in 1818, Great Britain and the United States shared joint sovereignty over the Oregon Country. But to better stake its claim, the US government sought to flood the area with American settlers. Tensions between the two countries flared, but were resolved peacefully a few years later

with the Oregon Treaty that set the boundary at the 49th parallel.

Missionaries were among the first people of European descent to permanently settle in Oregon. Methodist Jason Lee and the Presbyterian Whitman and Spalding families each led parties that founded settlements there in the 1830s.

In 1843, the newly formed Oregon Provisional Government began offering 320 acres of land to any white settler over the age of 18 (and 640 acres to a married couple). The U.S. Congress followed with the Oregon Donation Land Act of 1850, resulting in nearly 7,500 claims.

This spurred “Oregon fever,” and one of the largest mass migrations in US history. Over the next 20 years, between 300,000 and 400,000 settlers heeded the call “Go west, young man,” braving the 2,000-mile Oregon Trail to Willamette Valley. The vast majority traveled to Oregon overland by wagon, but some arrived by ship via Panama and San Francisco or Astoria (in Oregon Country). Later migrants—such as those coming from the transcontinental railroad, completed in 1869—came by rail.

To help manage the population boom, Congress created Oregon Territory in 1848. At the time, it included modern Washington, Idaho and parts of Montana and Wyoming (all of which split off as Washington Territory in 1853). Oregon entered the Union as the 33rd state on 14 February 1859.

Oregon was one of the last states admitted to the Union before the outbreak of the Civil War, and some 2,000 Oregonians served in the conflict. Though the state was far from the main theater of war, Oregon was the site of clashes between Union forces and various bands of indigenous tribes.

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:
1859

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1850

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1903 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
1906 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:
OR Health Authority,
Center for Health Statistics

Between 300,000 and 400,000 settlers heeded the call “Go west, young man,” braving the 2,000-mile Oregon Trail to Willamette Valley.

Indeed, US forces and settlers fought several armed conflicts against indigenous groups before, during and after the Civil War. And, in general, Native populations were greatly diminished by white settlement. Much of the land given to white settlers had been purchased or otherwise acquired from indigenous peoples via treaties. And some historians estimate that up to 80% of the Native American population in the Pacific Northwest died from diseases brought by settlers.

Beginning in the 1850s, the US government forcibly moved most of Oregon’s surviving tribes onto regional reservations. Today, there are seven such reservations in Oregon, and nine federally recognized tribes in the state.

The completion of the transcontinental railroad lessened migrants’ reliance on the Oregon Trail. But gold mining, fishing and railroad construction attracted new residents, as did abundant agriculture and timber industries. Notable immigration groups included Scandinavians (particularly Swedes and Finns), Germans and the Chinese.

LIVING IN THE BEAVER STATE

Oregon began recording births and deaths statewide in 1903, marriages in 1906, and divorces in 1925. Individual locales kept records earlier (such as Portland, from 1862). Those state records are held by the state vital record office <www.oregon.gov/oha/ph/birthdeathcertificates/pages/index.aspx>. Privacy laws restrict access to birth records less than 100 years old, and to death, marriage and divorce records less than 50 years old.

Records outside those privacy restrictions are held by the Oregon State Archives, which allow for record requests

<sos.oregon.gov/archives/Pages/records/aids-vitalrecords.aspx>. You can also order records from the local county vital records office (for birth and death) or county clerk’s office (for marriage and divorce).

FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org> and subscription sites Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com>, Findmypast <www.findmypast.com> and MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com> each hold various vital indexes, as well as some record images.

Note that some Oregonians hopped across the Columbia River to neighboring Washington to avoid Oregon marriage restrictions. Such marriages would be documented by the Washington State Archives <www.digitalarchives.wa.gov>. Both Oregon and Washington are included in the Western States Marriage index <abish.byui.edu/special-collections/westernstates/search.cfm>, which references roughly 28,000 marriages in the two states.

COUNTING OREGONIANS

Oregon first appeared in the federal census as Oregon Territory in 1850, and also took its own censuses at various times in the territorial period from 1842 to 1859. Some of the latter cover only certain counties. Some territorial census indexes are available through Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3569>, and federal censuses (every 10 years from 1790 to 1950; most of 1890 has been lost) are widely available on sites like Ancestry.com, FamilySearch, Findmypast and MyHeritage.

Oregon didn’t take its own censuses after statehood, but some individual counties did. (Some surviving enumerations are in the state archives’ Historical Records Index

TIMELINE

1778

British explorer James Cook travels the Oregon coast

1805

Lewis and Clark’s expedition reaches modern Oregon

1818

A treaty establishes joint US-UK sovereignty of Oregon Country

1843

Hundreds of migrants travel along the Oregon Trail via wagon; more than 300,000 make the trip through the 1860s

1846

Great Britain formally cedes Oregon Country south of the 49th parallel



Mount Hood

1848

Oregon Territory is established

1853

Washington Territory splits off from Oregon

1859

Oregon becomes the 33rd state

1869

The transcontinental railroad is completed, making travel to the West cheaper and faster and reducing reliance on the Oregon Trail

1917

Deschutes County is created in the last major change to Oregon's county boundaries

TOOLKIT

Websites

Columbia River Basin Ethnic History Archives <content.libraries.wsu.edu/digital/collection/cchm/custom/crbasin>

Cyndi's List: Oregon <www.cyndislist.com/us/or>

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

Historic Oregon Newspapers <oregonnews.uoregon.edu>

Linkpendium: Oregon <www.linkpendium.com/or-genealogy>

Oregon American History and Genealogy Project <www.oregongenealogy.com/ahgp>

Oregon Digital <www.oregondigital.org>

ORGenWeb Project <orgenweb.atwebpages.com>

Southern Oregon Digital Archives <soda.sou.edu>

Publications

Oregon Guide to Genealogical Sources by Connie Lenzen (Genealogical Forum of Oregon)

Archives & Organizations

Archives West <archiveswest.orbiscascade.org>

Bend Genealogical Society and Library <www.bendgenealogy.org>

Genealogical Forum of Oregon <www.gfo.org>

The National Archives at Seattle <www.archives.gov/seattle>

Oregon Genealogical Society <www.oregongs.org>

Oregon Historical Society <www.ohs.org>

Oregon State Archives <sos.oregon.gov/archives>

Oregon State University Valley Library <library.oregonstate.edu>

Sons and Daughters of Oregon Pioneers <www.oregon-sdop.org>

Southern Oregon Historical Society <www.sohs.org>

State Library of Oregon <www.oregon.gov/library/Pages/default.aspx>

<genealogy.state.or.us>.) You can also find special enumerations like the veterans' schedule of 1890 and Indian population schedules of 1900 and 1910.

OTHER RECORDS

Look for your Oregon ancestors in these other documents.

- **Land Records:** A public-land state, Oregon is composed mostly of land that the US government distributed directly to individuals, first through the Donation Land Claims Act (early 1850s), then through the Homestead Act (1862). The Bureau of Land Management's General Land Office Records website <glorerecords.blm.gov/default.aspx> has searchable land patents. Early, provisional land records (1845 to 1849) are held by the state archives. Subsequent transactions were documented in deeds at county offices.

- **Military Records:** The state's first militia was organized in the 1840s to defend settlements and missions during wars with indigenous groups. Though never formally inducted into the U.S. Army, these servicemen were eventually awarded veterans benefits. You can find pension record indexes at the Genealogical Forum of Oregon <www.gfo.org/resources/indexes/military/indian-war-pensions.html>. The Oregon State Archives has a guide to the military records in its care <sos.oregon.gov/archives/records/agency/Pages/military.aspx>, and you can research the roughly 2,000 Civil War servicemen from Oregon in the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System <www.nps.gov/civil-war/search-soldiers.htm>.

- **Newspapers:** The University of Oregon Libraries hosts Historic Oregon Newspapers <oregonnews.uoregon.edu>, a fully searchable database of more than 2 million newspaper pages dating back to 1846. (You can also search by title or browse by location.) Find additional publications at the Library of Congress' free Chronicling America <chroniclingamerica.loc.gov> or subscription sites like Newspapers.com <www.newspapers.com> and GenealogyBank <www.genealogybank.com>. The Genealogical Forum of Oregon has a database of obituary indexes from the 20th century <www.gfo.org/resources/indexes/vital-records/oregon-obituaries.html>.

- **Local Records:** The Oregon State Archives has a comprehensive inventory of county-level records from around the state: maps, county and office histories, images and more <sos.oregon.gov/archives/records/county/Pages/default.aspx>.

A lifelong Oregonian, **Janice Handsaker** has been doing genealogy for 25 years. She has done extensive research in the Pacific Northwest, across the United States, and in Sweden, England and Germany. In addition to general family history, her research has also focused on Oregon Trail pioneers and Native Americans.