

# STATE GUIDE

## SOUTH CAROLINA

by NANCY HENDRICKSON

**IF SOUTH CAROLINA** genealogists had an official dance, it would be the Charleston. Not simply because its quick-stepping choreography originated in the Palmetto State's oldest city. When you have 500 years' worth of family tree records to explore, who wouldn't want to kick up their heels?

Whether your clan arrived during the days of Colonial settlement or that Roaring '20s dance craze, you'll have a swingin' time tracing your own South Carolina ancestry. Just follow our lead, and you'll find your family right on cue.

### STATE HISTORY

Spanish explorers first established a foothold in Carolina in 1514; soon after, France and England began eyeing the territory with envy. What did those expanding European powers covet? Carolina's four unique geographic areas: the Coastal Plains, a flat area near Charleston; Sand Hills, a spot just west of the Coastal Plains; Piedmont, the hilly region close to Columbia; and Upcountry, an escarpment of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

In 1587, Spanish forces withdrew from the area, and by 1670 the English had founded a colony at Albemarle Point—dubbed Charles Town in honor of King Charles II. England attracted immigrants to its new province by renting land for a half-penny per acre.

The province split into North and South Carolina in 1712. To entice new settlers, the English gave monetary incentives to importers of healthy British servants between ages 12 and 30. Other

early settlers included Germans, Scottish religious dissenters, descendants of French Huguenots and a few Dutch from New York. South Carolina also attracted people from another British colony—Barbados. Their influence gave rise to an early South Carolina economy that resembled the plantation system of the West Indies: Rice and indigo crops, cultivated by slave labor, dominated the economy initially; later on, cotton, tobacco and soybeans became important crops.

After South Carolina became an official royal colony in 1729, the English again encouraged settlement, this time offering free rent to families who planted 50 acres of land. During the Revolutionary War, farmers from Scotland, Germany and Wales poured into the Piedmont and

Upcountry regions and started small farms. In 1804, a general invitation went out to immigrant merchants to come to Charleston.

South Carolina's population numbered nearly 250,000 in the 1790 federal census—almost half were slaves. In fact, during the height of the slave trade, about 40 percent of Africans forcibly shipped to North America arrived in South Carolina. By the 1820s, slaves made up a majority of the state's population. To trace them, check the South Carolina Department of Archives and History (see Toolkit) for wills and estate papers and inventories, many of which identify slaves by name or description (search a database of wills at <archivesindex.sc.gov>). See also slave-passenger manifests of ships arriving in South Carolina, indexed on subscription site Ancestry <ancestry.com>.

### FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1788
- ★ **First federal census:** 1790
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1915
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** 1950
- ★ **State-land state**
- ★ **Counties:** 46
- ★ **Contact for vital records:** Division of Vital Records  
South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control,  
2600 Bull St., Columbia, SC 29201,  
(803) 898-3432,  
<scdhec.gov/vital-records>

# SOUTH CAROLINA

NORTH CAROLINA

NORTH CAROLINA

GEORGIA

ATLANTIC OCEAN



## timeline

**1566**

The Spanish build Fort San Felipe on Parris Island

**1778**

South Carolina is the first state to ratify the Articles of Confederation

**1780**

British troops capture Charleston

**1786**

State capital moves from Charleston to Columbia

**1860**

South Carolina is the first state to secede from the Union; it rejoins in 1868

**1886**

An earthquake devastates Charleston

## South Carolina played a pivotal role in the Revolutionary War. British loyalists and American patriots waged more than 200 skirmishes in the state.

### GENEALOGICAL RECORDS

Now that you understand South Carolina's history, it's time to track down your ancestors in Palmetto State records.

★ **IMMIGRATION:** Most South Carolina immigrants entered through Charleston. You can find transcriptions of a few Colonial passenger lists online at <[sciway3.net/proctor/SC\\_ships.html](http://sciway3.net/proctor/SC_ships.html)>. Fragments of Charleston's customs lists from 1820 (when the federal government began recording immigrants) to 1829 have survived, as have early lists for Georgetown and Beaufort. These lists are kept at the state archives; microfilmed copies are at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) <[archives.gov](http://archives.gov)> and the Family History Library (FHL) <[familysearch.org](http://familysearch.org)>. Scattered arrivals to Charleston and Port Royal are indexed on Ancestry.

★ **MILITARY:** South Carolina played a pivotal role in the Revolutionary War. British loyalists and American patriots waged more than 200 skirmishes in the state, including two battles that served as turning points in the war: Kings Mountain and Cowpens.

In the decades that followed, South Carolinians' belief in states' rights became a point of contention with other states—and in 1860, the Palmetto State was the first to secede from the Union. The first shots of the Civil War were fired in Charleston Harbor on April 12, 1861, forcing Union soldiers to surrender Fort Sumter. In 1865, Gen. William Sherman led his march to the sea, burning most of South Carolina's capital city, Columbia, and ruining the state's economy along the way.

Search the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System <[nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm](http://nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm)> to see if your ancestor served. Search for records at NARA and through indexes at Ancestry. An index to Confederate service records is

at the free FamilySearch.org; search results link to digitized records on subscription site Fold3.com <[fold3.com](http://fold3.com)>. Pension records are at the state archives.

★ **VITAL:** Despite the state's deep roots, South Carolina didn't require statewide birth and death registration until 1915. Statewide marriage records start in 1950 and divorces in 1962 (divorce was illegal until 1949). Birth and

### STATE HISTORY HIGHLIGHT

- ★ Eliza Lucas Pinckney, then 20 years old, introduced indigo to South Carolina in 1742, and it became the colony's second-most valuable export (after rice).
- ★ Many considered indigo dye a symbol of wealth and notoriety. Several members of European royalty used the material to dye their clothes.
- ★ Benjamin Franklin carried 35 barrels of indigo with him to France in 1776, where he planned on selling the dye to raise money for the war effort.
- ★ South Carolina's indigo industry collapsed after the Revolutionary War, as England pivoted to India for dye.



**1917**

John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie is born in Cheraw

**1934**

Composer George Gershwin arrives in Charleston to research and write *Porgy and Bess*, America's first opera

**1954**

Strom Thurmond is the first US senator elected by write-in vote

**1982**

North Myrtle Beach native Vanna White debuts on "Wheel of Fortune"

**1995**

Divers discover the wreck of Confederate submarine *H. L. Hunley* in the waters off Sullivan's Island

## TOOLKIT

## Websites

**Cyndi's List: South Carolina** <cyndislist.com/us/sc>

**South Carolina Cemeteries** <daddezio.com/cemetery/junction/CJ-SC-NDX.html>

**South Carolina Digital Library** <scmemory.org>

**South Carolina Genealogy and Family History** <sciway.net/hist/genealogy>

**South Carolina GenWeb Project** <sciway3.net/scgenweb>

## Publications

**Carolina Scots** edited by Douglas F. Kelly (1739 Publishers)

**Colonial South Carolina: A History** by Robert M. Weir (University of South Carolina Press)

**A Guide to South Carolina Genealogical Research** by Brent H. Holcomb (self-published)

**Original Index Book Showing the Revolutionary Claims Filed in South Carolina** by Janie Revill (Genealogical Publishing Co.)

**Roster of South Carolina Patriots in the American Revolution** by Bobby Gilmer Moss (Genealogical Publishing Co.)

**South Carolina and the American Revolution: A Battlefield History** by John W. Gordon (University of South Carolina Press)

**South Carolina: A History** by Walter B. Edgar (University of South Carolina Press)

**South Carolina's Civil War: A Narrative History** by W. Scott Poole (Mercer University Press)

## Archives &amp; Organizations

**The National Archives at Atlanta** 5780 Jonesboro Road, Morrow, GA 30260, (770) 968-2100, <archives.gov/atlanta>

**Piedmont Historical Society** P.O. Box 127, Campobello, SC 29322, <piedmont-historical-society.org>

**South Carolina Department of Archives and History** 8301 Parklane Road, Columbia, SC 29223, (803) 896-6196, <scdah.sc.gov>

**South Carolina Genealogical Society** P.O. Box 24526, Columbia, SC 29224, <scgen.org>

**South Carolina Historical Society** 100 Meeting St., Charleston, SC 29401, (843) 723-3225, <schistory.org>

**South Carolina State Library** 1500 Senate St., Columbia, SC 29211, (803) 734-8666, <www.statelibrary.sc.gov>

**University of South Carolina, Thomas Cooper Library** 1322 Greene St., Columbia, SC 29208, (803) 777-4866, <library.sc.edu>

death certificates are issued through the Division of Vital Records (see the Fast Facts box), but only to immediate relatives. However, death records for 1915 to 1961 are accessible to the public at the state archives (these are indexed at <scdhec.gov/vital-records/death-indexes-genealogy/vital-records-death-indexes-1915-1967>). Request marriage records since 1950 through the state vital records office; earlier ones may be in county probate courts and the state archives. Search other statewide vital record datasets at Ancestry and FamilySearch.org (the latter now also has browsable probate records).

Large cities kept some earlier vital records. For example, you can find Charleston birth records from 1877 to 1901 on FamilySearch.org. Death records from 1821 to 1886 can be obtained from the South Carolina Department of Archives and History (see Toolkit). Contact county or city health departments for additional records.

Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterians were South Carolina's predominant 19th-century religious groups; the state was also home to Huguenots, Quakers and Anglicans (Episcopalians). To locate church records, first try the FHL (which has many on microfilm) and the South Carolina Historical Society (see the Toolkit). If you strike out with those sources, you'll need to contact the denomination's regional repository or the local church.

★ **CENSUS:** Federal census records of the Palmetto State begin with the country's first head count, 1790. Although most of the 1890 US census was ruined in a fire, South Carolina's supplemental schedules enumerating Civil War Union veterans and widows survived (some enumerators noted Confederate veterans, too). You'll find these federal census records on Ancestry and FamilySearch.org.

No Colonial censuses have survived, but South Carolina took several state censuses. The state archives has data for a few districts for 1829 and 1839, plus 1868 agricultural returns, 1869 population returns and both types for 1875. An 1848 Charleston city census is on microfilm at the FHL.

★ **LAND:** Between 1670 and 1719, the lords proprietors (sent by the King of England) issued and recorded land grants. After 1719, each province's secretary recorded land grants and a public register kept track of deeds. Counties recorded deeds after 1785. Original state land grants from 1784 to 1882 and land plats from 1731 to 1861 are on microfilm at the FHL and the state archives. Remember that the boundary with North Carolina wasn't always clearly defined, so either state might hold records of those near the border.

Now that you're in step with South Carolina records, you'll soon be dancing up and down the aisles of Palmetto State repositories, on your way to discovering your kin. ●