

5 Steps to Find Your Ancestor's Deed

1 KNOW WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR.

You'll need to know your ancestor's name, about when the purchase occurred, and the county the property was in at the time. It may help to know the subdivision name and the property's lot number; look on a plat map or the county recorder's website. Finding the lot number may require you to trace changes in street names and house numbers. City directories, old maps and local history guides can help.

2 FIND THE RIGHT REPOSITORY.

County or town courts recorded property transfers in deed books as they happened, noting the date, location, boundaries, terms of sale, and names of grantor(s) and grantee(s). Books may overlap in coverage years and areas. Courthouses may have microfilmed books, and copies could be available through the Family History Library, FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org> or the state archives. Check the local court website and use local guides to learn where microfilm is.

3 START WITH AN INDEX.

Deeds may be fully or partially indexed, or unindexed. If available, indexes can shorten your search by providing the deed book volume and page number with your ancestor's deed. At FamilySearch, run a place search of the online catalog with the name of the county and look for a Land and Property heading. Click it and look for deed books and indexes covering the years your ancestor purchased land. Deed indexes might be alphabetical by surname or first name, or may be chronological or by neighborhood.

If you don't find separate index volumes, deed books may have indexes in the front or back. You also can check genealogical societies and local libraries for published deed indexes.

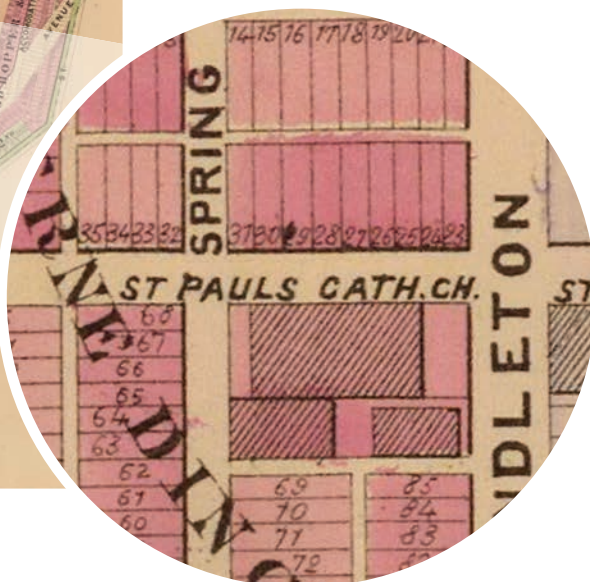
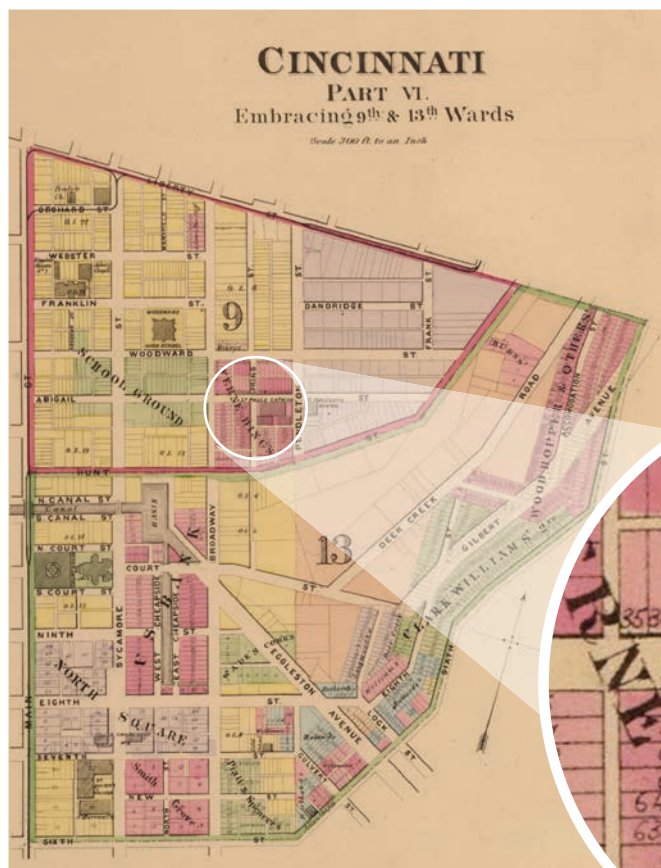
4 CHECK ONLINE.

Few old deed books are posted online, but if you're lucky, the catalog will link to digitized records on the FamilySearch website. If not, try your county clerk's website and the county USGenWeb project page <www.usgenweb.org>. You might find an index to the county's deeds, if nothing else.

5 GET THE DEED.

Record the volume and page number in the index for the deeds you want. You can mail a request to the court clerk or other office holding the original deeds.

A map with subdivision names, ward numbers and lot numbers, such as this 1869 map from Titus' *Atlas of Hamilton Co., Ohio*, can be helpful in finding and identifying your ancestor's property deed.



DECIPHERING AN OLD DEED

Most deeds, like this 1658 one from Essex, Mass., are fairly formulaic. Learning their anatomy, a few legal terms and some old writing quirks will help you decipher them.

1 Most deeds start with introductory language such as “Know all men by these presents ...”

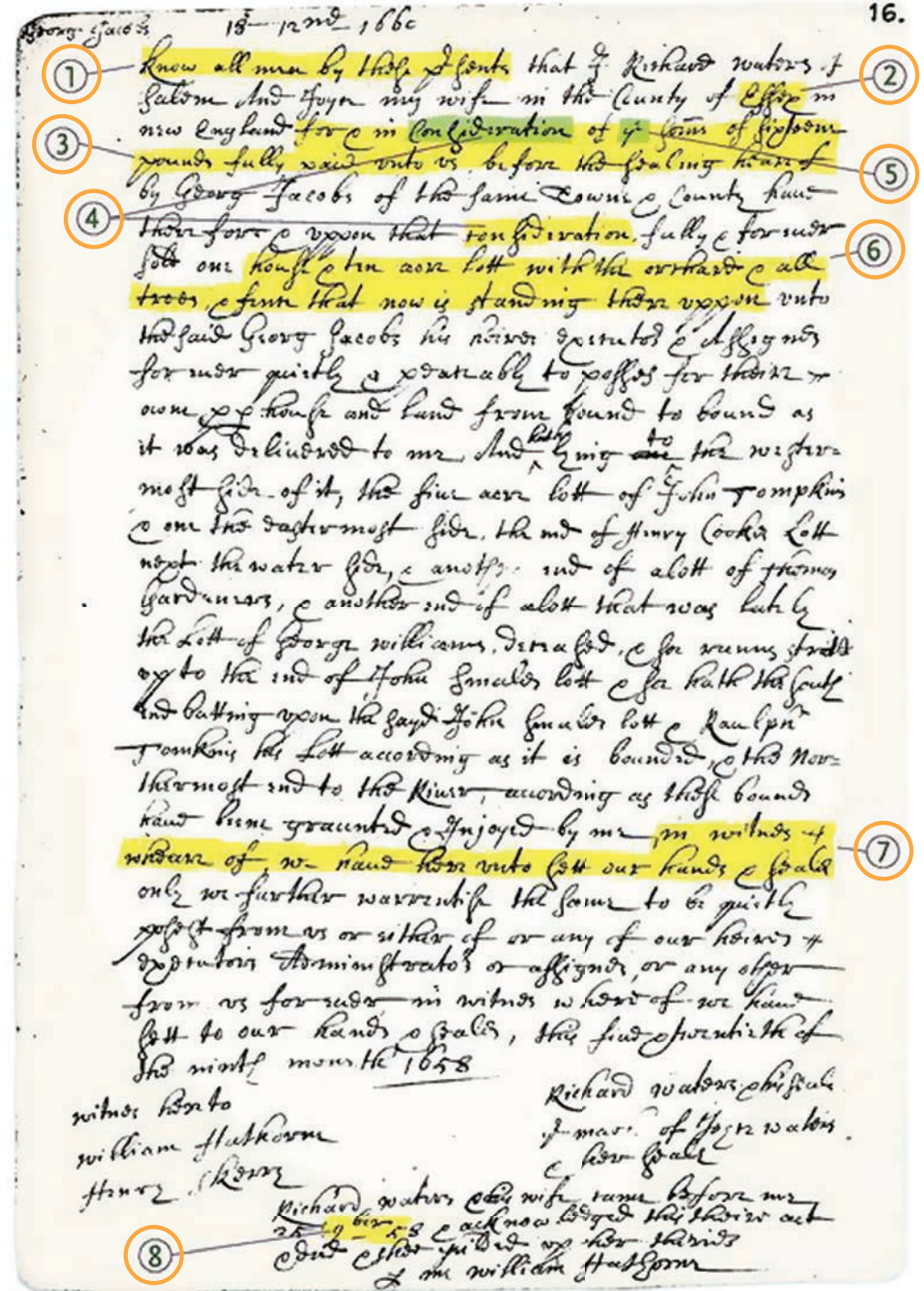
2 Compare hard-to-read words to those you’ve already deciphered. An *s* might look like an *f*; here, Essex could be mistaken for Effoy. Capital letters may look similar: *I* and *J*, *L* and *S*, *L* and *T*, *M* and *N*, *T* and *F*, *U* and *V*.

3 Payment details are usually after the parties’ names. This deed’s phrasing, “for and in consideration of the sum of 16 pounds fully paid unto us, before the sealing hereof,” is common.

4 Read published deed transcriptions from the same time period to get a feel for the jargon, such as *consideration* to mean “payment.”

5 Thorns are superscript letters used in early documents to abbreviate words that begin with a “th” sound; for example, *y^t* for that or *y^e* for the.

6 This transaction involves a “house and ten acre lott with the orchard and all the trees, and farm that is now standing thereupon,” and describes the boundaries.



Deed from Essex, Mass.

7 Deeds close with typical language, such as “in witness whereof we have hereunto sett our hands and sealed,” along with signatures of the parties and witnesses. The date may be at the end or the beginning.

8 Common abbreviations in deeds and other court records include *sd* for said, *dec'd* for deceased, *Junr* for junior, *Jas* for James, & *c* for and etcetera, and *gber* for September.

A deed showing a property transfer for no cost or for a nominal sum, such as \$1, may represent a gift or inheritance.

LAND RECORDS GLOSSARY

- **aliquot parts:** In the Public Land or Rectangular Survey System, a description for an exact subdivision of a section of land using directions and fractions, for example, “W ½ SE ¼” represents the west half of the southeast quarter of a section.
- **bounty land:** Land granted by a government as a reward for military service.
- **Bureau of Land Management General Land Office (GLO):** The US government office historically in charge of disposing of public land, with branch offices in each state.
- **cadastral map:** A plat map showing the boundaries and owners of land, generally used for tax purposes.
- **consideration:** Money or other property used to purchase land.
- **convey:** To transfer property to another, especially by a deed.
- **deed:** A document transferring ownership and title of property from one entity to another.
- **deed of trust:** A temporary transfer of a property’s title to a third party as collateral for debt (often to purchase the property); used in some places instead of a mortgage.
- **dower:** A wife’s right to a share in her husband’s property; he couldn’t sell or mortgage it without her consent.
- **fee simple:** Ownership of land that is unconditional, and has no restrictions on how property may be sold or bequeathed.
- **fee tail:** Ownership of land that is restricted to inheritance via a certain heir or type of heir, such as direct descendants.
- **gazetteer:** A geographical dictionary giving names and descriptions of places, usually in alphabetical order.
- **grantee:** A person receiving land.
- **grantor:** A person transferring land to another.
- **headright:** A system, used in several American colonies, in which land was granted to those who paid passage of immigrants, or (generally) land acquired in such a fashion.
- **homestead:** Land obtained from the US government under homestead laws, or (generally) a home built on such land.
- **Homestead Act of 1862:** A law allowing people to settle up to 160 acres of public land if they lived on it for five years and made improvements (e.g., built a house or grew crops). The land itself didn’t cost anything, but settlers paid a filing fee.
- **land claim:** In record-keeping, an application to receive public land, which became part of the applicant’s land-entry case file.
- **land grant:** Public land given to an individual by the government, usually as a reward for military service.
- **land patent:** A document transferring land ownership from the government to another entity.
- **legal land description:** An exact identification of the land being transferred using survey terms.
- **lien:** A claim placed on property by a person who is owed money.
- **lot:** A plot of land assigned for sale or another use, usually identified by number on a plat map.
- **meridian:** An imaginary north-south line; a principal meridian is the starting point for a rectangular land survey.
- **metes and bounds:** A land-survey method employing compass directions, natural landmarks and distances between points.
- **moiety:** A share of a property, usually one-half.
- **mortgage:** A temporary transfer of a property’s title as collateral for debt (often to purchase the property).
- **plat:** A drawing that shows the boundaries and features of properties.
- **public land:** Land owned by the federal government and sold to individuals. Can also refer to the land itself.
- **Public Land or Rectangular Survey System:** The land-survey method the General Land Office used most often, employing a grid of east-west and north-south lines that cross at a known geographic position. Townships, each generally 36 square miles, are described in relation to an established meridian and baseline, and subdivided into sections.
- **quitclaim deed:** A common type of deed in which the seller relinquishes claim to a property with no guarantee that the property is free of claims by others (liens).
- **range:** In a government survey, the east-west position of a township in a survey grid, numbered in relation to the principal meridian.
- **real property:** Land and anything attached to it, such as buildings, timber and crops.
- **section:** A division of land within a township that measures one square mile (640 acres)—about 1/36 of a township. Sections were further subdivided into half-sections, quarter-sections, etc.
- **state land:** Land owned by a state or another entity, rather than by the federal government.
- **township:** In a government survey, a square piece of land six miles on each side. Can also refer to the north-south position of a township in a survey grid, numbered in relation to the base line.
- **tract:** A specified parcel of land.
- **warranty deed:** A real estate document in which the seller asserts that the title is valid and not subject to any outstanding liens.

State Land or Public Land?

Before *state-land states* became US territories, entities such as colonial governments surveyed and distributed their land. These states used the metes-and-bounds survey system, which described property boundaries using compass directions, distances, and landmarks such as rivers and rocks. Early property records in state-land states are usually in those states' archives.

In *public-land states*, the US government is considered the original landowner. Parcels of property in these areas were divided according to the Public Land (or Rectangular) Survey System.

State-Land States

- Connecticut
- Delaware
- Georgia
- Hawaii
- Kentucky
- Maine
- Maryland
- Massachusetts
- New Hampshire
- New Jersey
- New York
- North Carolina
- Pennsylvania
- Rhode Island
- South Carolina
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Vermont
- Virginia
- West Virginia

Public-Land States

- Alabama
- Alaska
- Arizona
- Arkansas
- California
- Colorado
- Florida
- Idaho
- Illinois
- Indiana
- Iowa
- Kansas
- Louisiana
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- Mississippi
- Missouri
- Montana
- Nebraska
- Nevada
- New Mexico
- North Dakota
- Ohio (parts were surveyed under earlier systems)
- Oklahoma
- Oregon
- South Dakota
- Utah
- Washington
- Wisconsin
- Wyoming

THE PUBLIC LAND SURVEY SYSTEM: EXPLAINED

In the Public (or Rectangular) Survey System, land is carefully measured, then visualized on a grid and divided into standard units.

First, the government establishes a **principal meridian** (a north-south line) and a **base line** (an east-west line) for the state, and these serve as the "axes" of the survey's grid. Then, imaginary parallel lines (survey lines) are drawn six miles apart from those axes.

Each 36-square-mile piece of land at an intersection of survey lines is called a **township**. Townships are assigned coordinates in relation to the principal meridian and the base line.

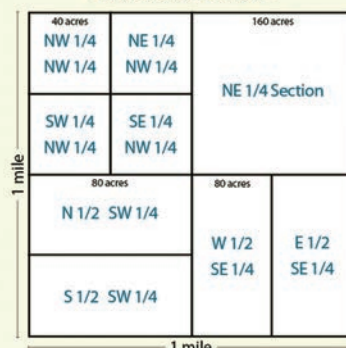
The north-south position is labeled *T* for **township**, and the east-west position is labeled *R* for **range**. So a piece of land that's two townships south of the base line and three west of the principal meridian would be designated "Township 2 South, Range 3 West" or *T2S, R3W*.

Each township is then divided into 36 numbered **sections** (1 square mile each). Sections were generally subdivided further, often into exact fractions; see the image at right for some examples. Subsections were described in relation to the whole. (For example: "the north half of the southwest quarter" or "N 1/2, SW 1/4.") These descriptions are called **aliquot parts**.

Sections in a Township

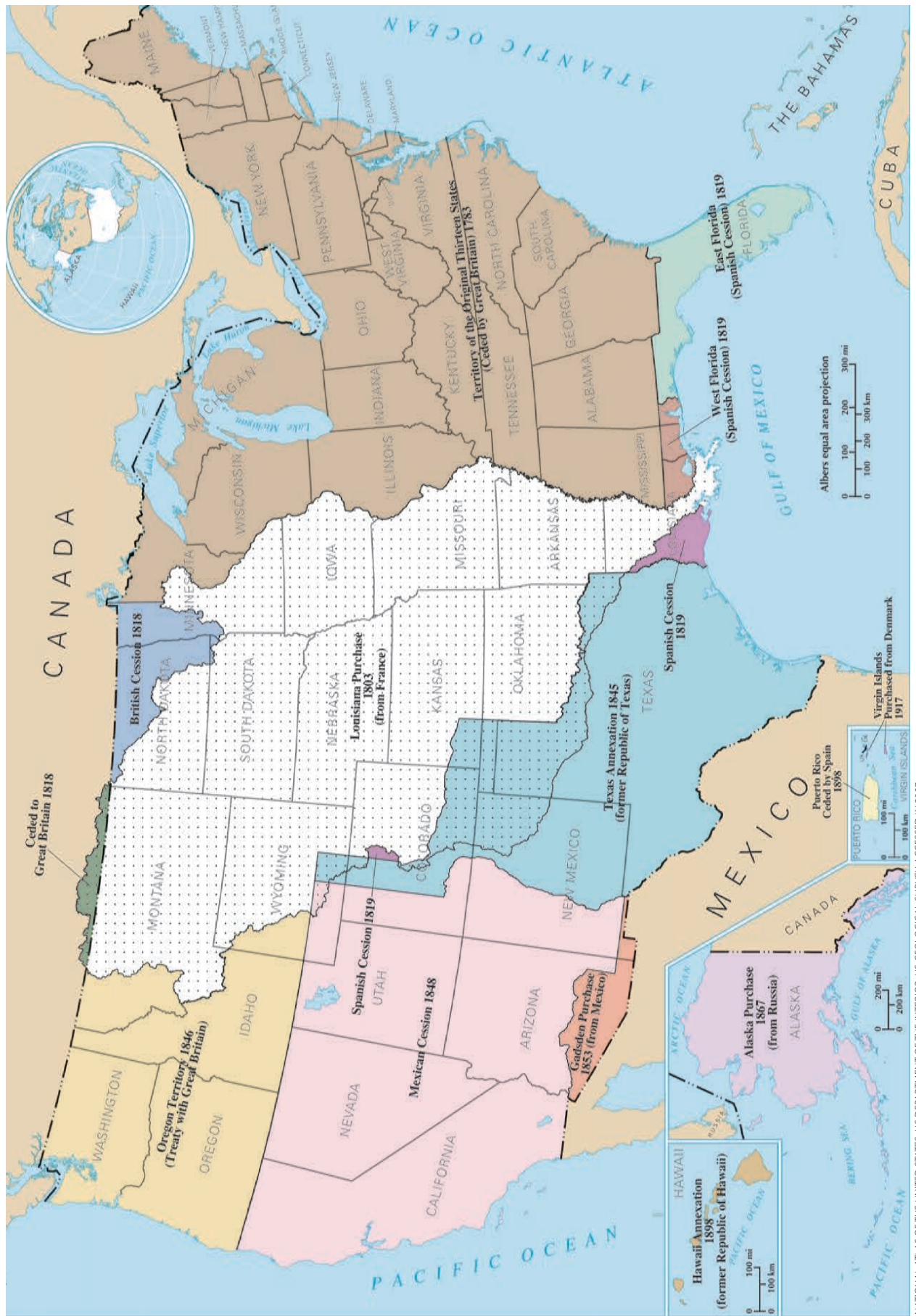
6 miles	6	5	4	3	2	640 acres
	7	8	9	10	11	12
	18	17	16	15	14	13
	19	20	21	22	23	24
	30	29	28	27	26	25
	32	33	34	35	36	
	6 miles					

Divisions of a Section



In the rectangular survey system, townships are plots of land six miles long and six miles wide. They're divided into one-square-mile portions called sections, which are numbered in sequential order as above. Sections are subdivided into smaller (more affordable) units.

US TERRITORIAL ACQUISITIONS



TIMELINE OF US EXPANSION AND SETTLEMENT

- 1618** The headright system, in which land is granted to those who sponsor immigrants' passage, is established in Jamestown.
- 1763** A British royal proclamation establishes the British Indian Reserve, limiting the settlement of Europeans to Crown-claimed lands east of the Appalachian Mountains.
- 1783** The Treaty of Paris ends the American Revolution and establishes the northeast border with Canada at the 45th parallel.
- 1785** The Land Ordinance of 1785 implements a standardized system of federal land surveys that eases boundary conflicts.
- 1787** The Northwest Ordinance establishes the Northwest Territory in the Great Lakes region and mandates the creation of new states from the area.
- 1788** Seven Ranges in eastern Ohio is the first tract surveyed with the Public Land Survey System.
- 1792** Connecticut sets aside "firelands" in its Western Reserve (now Ohio) for residents of towns burned during the American Revolution.
- 1803** The United States acquires 828,000 square miles from France in the Louisiana Purchase.
- 1818** A treaty establishes the 49th parallel as the border between the United States and British Canada west of the Great Lakes; the two countries exchange some land on either side of the line.
- 1820** Congress requires full payment for public domain land at time of purchase, ending the issuance of credit patents.
- 1820** As part of the Missouri Compromise, the District of Maine gains its independence from Massachusetts and becomes a state.
- 1836** The bloodless Toledo War ends as Michigan agrees to give up claims to the Toledo Strip (which becomes part of Ohio) in exchange for statehood and the Upper Peninsula.
- 1836** The first migrant wagon train is organized in Independence, Mo., and heads West along the Oregon Trail.
- 1839** Mississippi is the first state to allow (married) women to own property.
- 1845** The United States annexes Texas.
- 1846** The Oregon Treaty formalizes the 49th parallel as the border between the United States and British Canada in the Oregon Country, settling a long-standing dispute.
- 1848** The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo with Mexico adds land from what's now Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming to the United States.
- 1850** The Donation Land Claim Act grants free land to new and recent arrivals in Oregon Territory.
- 1854** The Kansas-Nebraska Act forms Kansas and Nebraska territories from unclaimed land.
- 1862** The Homestead Act opens millions of acres of public land to settlers, including women and immigrants who'd applied for citizenship, in exchange for making improvements.
- 1867** The United States acquires Alaska from Russia.
- 1869** The ceremonial last spike is driven into the Transcontinental Railroad at Promontory Summit, Utah.
- 1876** Following the example of the independent city of Baltimore, citizens of St. Louis city vote to separate themselves from the surrounding St. Louis County.
- 1889** The first Oklahoma land rush opens settlement in the "Unassigned Lands" previously part of Indian Territory, and gives rise to the "Sooner" nickname.
- 1898** A treaty ends the Spanish-American War and transfers ownership of Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines to the United States.
- 1905** Congress rebuffs Indian Territory residents' efforts to be admitted as the State of Sequoyah; the area is admitted to the Union as part of eastern Oklahoma in 1907.
- 1910** The Great Migration of rural African Americans to northern cities begins.
- 1949** Congress passes the Housing Act of 1949 in response to a post-WWII housing shortage.
- 1956** President Eisenhower signs the Federal Highway Act, authorizing the construction of 41,000 miles of interstate highways.
- 1959** Hawaii is admitted as the 50th US state.

KEY TYPES OF LAND RECORDS				
Record type	Available for	Description	Where to find	Tips
Property deed	individuals who purchased or received land from private entities	a document recording the transfer of land between private entities, describing the property and the terms of transfer	Check county courthouses with jurisdiction over the property. FamilySearch has microfilmed deeds and/or county court records for many areas. Also check county court websites.	Deed books may be unindexed or only partially indexed. Check for separate index books or indexes in the fronts of volumes. Also look for published indexes from local genealogical societies.
Plat map	property that has been subdivided for sale	a map, also called a plan or cadastral map, that's drawn to scale and shows land divisions, and sometimes landowners' names	Check map collections in libraries and online, as well as in county and city offices. You can search for federal land survey plats on the Bureau of Land Management's General Land Office website <glorerecords.blm.gov/search>.	A plat map shows the exact location of your ancestor's property. In deed searches, use plat maps to find the subdivision and lot number.
Sanborn fire insurance map	many towns and cities in the late 1800s and early 1900s	fire insurance maps that detail buildings with their purposes and construction materials	Sanborn maps for many areas are digitized through local, state and university libraries; search online for the town or city name and <i>Sanborn maps</i> . The Library of Congress has a sizeable collection <www.loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps>.	Maps were published periodically. Street and building updates may be cut and pasted on.
Property tax records	property owners who paid taxes	registers recording place of residence, name of property owners and amount of taxes paid	To find records in the FamilySearch online catalog <www.familysearch.org/catalog/search>, run a place search and look for a Taxation heading. Surviving original tax records are usually at local and state archives.	Look for published tax record indexes created by local genealogical societies.
Land patent	individuals who received land from the government	records the transfer of land from the federal government to an individual	Search and download digitized patents on the General Land Office website.	Use the Related Documents tab to see patents for nearby land, which may have been claimed by your ancestor's relatives.
Land entry case file	individuals who applied for federal land under an act of Congress	a file with a person's application for federal land and sometimes documents such as affidavits of occupation, immigration, and marriage	Order from NARA for \$50 at <eservices.archives.gov/orderonline>, following the instructions in Reference Information Paper (RIP) 114 <www.archives.gov/files/publications/ref-info-papers/rip114.pdf>.	Use details from your ancestor's land patent to order the case file. RIP 114 also has resources for case files when the land wasn't patented.
Bounty-land warrant	veterans who received land from a state or federal government in exchange for military service in the American Revolution, War of 1812, Mexican War or Indian wars	warrant certificate describing military service and land location a file containing supporting documentation for a bounty-land claim, including military records and affidavits	Use NARA's eServices link to order records before 1856. Some are on Ancestry.com and Fold3. FamilySearch has an index to Revolutionary War warrants. See <www.archives.gov/files/research/military/bounty-land-1775-1855.pdf> for more information. Check state archives for warrants issued by state governments.	Many soldiers gave or sold their bounty land to their heirs or others, called assignees.
Tract book	individuals who applied for federal land beginning in 1820	ledgers recording federal land entries (including for land applicants who didn't receive a patent), leases, withdrawals and other actions	Eastern state (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Ohio, and Wisconsin) tract books are located at the Bureau of Land Management Eastern States office in Washington DC. Western state tract books are at the National Archives.	Tract books can help you locate land entry case files for cancelled (unpatented) claims. Tract books are arranged by legal land description (township, range, section, etc.).

Citing Land Records

TYPE OF RECORD	SAMPLE SOURCE CITATION
Deed from a courthouse	Deed of Sale from James Otten and wife to Thomas Otten, 10 March 1869 (filed 18 June 1869), Campbell County, Kentucky, Deed Book 45, page 240. County courthouse, Independence, Kentucky.
Deed found on FamilySearch website	Deed of sale from Elizabeth Buscher et. al. to Henry Arnold Seeger, "Ohio, Hamilton County Records, 1791–1994," 6 February 1884 (filed 8 February 1884), digital images, FamilySearch (https://familysearch.org : accessed 23 April 2015), Land and property records, Deeds, vol 560, p. 508, 1883-1884 (images 184–187 of 317); Hamilton County Recorder's Office, Cincinnati.
Land patent found at General Land Office website	Zerhusen, Henry (Ford, Kansas), homestead patent no. 78, issued 23 September 1879, Larned land office; "Land Patent Search," digital images, General Land Office Records (http://glorerecords.blm.gov/PatentSearch : accessed 9 May 2014).
Map found in a printed atlas	Cincinnati 6, wards 9, 13 [map]. Scale 1:3,600. In: Titus, C.O. <i>Titus' atlas of Hamilton Co., Ohio from actual surveys</i> by R.H. Harrison, C.E. . . . Philadelphia: C. O. Titus, 1869, page 95.
Map found on Library of Congress website	Emerson, William D. Map of Hamilton County, Ohio [cadastral map]. 1847. Scale 1 inch: 1 mile. Digital image, Library of Congress (http://www.loc.gov/resource/g4083h.la000632 : accessed 10 July 2016).

RESOURCES

Websites

Atlas of Historical County Boundaries

<digital.newberry.org/ahcb>

Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States

<dsl.richmond.edu/historicalatlas>

Bureau of Land Management General Land Office Records

<glorerecords.blm.gov/default.aspx>

Cyndi's List: Land Records, Deeds, Homesteads, Etc.

<www.cyndislist.com/land>

David Rumsey Map Collection

<www.davidrumsey.com>

Early American Roads and Trails

<freepages.rootsweb.com/~gentutor/genealogy/trails.html>

FamilySearch: Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps

<www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Sanborn_Insurance_Maps>

Google Earth

<earth.google.com/web> and

Google Maps

<www.google.com/maps>

Historic US County Boundary Maps

<www.randymajors.com/p/maps.html>

History Geo

<www.historygeo.com>

Homestead Act

<www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs>

Library of Congress Maps Collection

<www.loc.gov/maps>

National Archives: Land Records

<www.archives.gov/research/land>

Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection

<www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/map_sites/hist_sites.html>

Research in Land Entry Files <www.archives.gov/publications/general-info-leaflets/67-land-entry-files.html>

Territorial Evolution of the United States <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Territorial_evolution_of_the_United_States>

ThoughtCo: "Digging for Deeds" <www.thoughtco.com/digging-for-deeds-1420630>

US Geological Survey topographic maps viewer <ngmdb.usgs.gov/topoview>

Books, Videos and More

The Family Tree Historical Maps Book (Family Tree Books)

The Family Tree Historical Atlas of American Cities (Family Tree Books)

Google Earth for Genealogy Video Training

by Lisa Louise Cooke <www.lisalouisecooke.com/free-google-earth-for-genealogy-video-class-by-lisa-louise-cooke>

Land and Property Research in the United States by E. Wade Hone (Ancestry)

Locating Your Roots: Discover Your Ancestors Using Land Records by Patricia Law Hatcher (Betterway)

Map Guide to American Migration Routes, 1735–1815 by William Dollarhide (Heritage Quest)

Military Bounty Land, 1776–1855 by Christine Rose (CR Publications)

Walking With Your Ancestors: A Genealogist's Guide to Maps and Geography by Melinda Kashuba (Family Tree Books)

Western Expansion: A History of the American Frontier by Ray Allen Billington (University of New Mexico Press)