

# STATE GUIDE

## WISCONSIN

by RICK CRUME

**WHERE CAN YOU** get great cheese and beer, be a subject of a progressive state government and seriously up your chances of meeting a German-American?

Wisconsin, of course. The area's first Europeans actually were French fur traders who trapped in the Green Bay area in the 1700s. Lead miners from the South came in the 1820s, followed by settlers from northeastern states in the 1830s. It wasn't until the 1840s and 1850s that hundreds of thousands of immigrants poured in from Europe, mainly Germany. Catholics from southern Germany dominated until 1847, when eastern German Protestants surpassed them. Before World War I, Rhinelanders made up most of the state's population, though others hailed from the British Isles, Norway and Eastern Europe. In the 2000 US census, 43 percent of Wisconsin's residents reported German ancestry; only the Dakotas had a higher concentration.

Wherever your Wisconsin ancestors started out, a plethora of resources will help you find them. And despite the melting-pot nature of the state's residents, its distinctly Teutonic attention to orderliness makes tracing your ancestors in this state a relatively simple pursuit.

### CENSUS SENSE

Federal censuses, taken every 10 years, reveal places of residence, occupations, years and places of birth, and family relationships. They list only heads of household up through 1840, but everyone beginning in 1850. Residents of what's now Wisconsin were first counted in the 1820 Michigan Territory census; in 1830, they're also grouped with Michigan Territory.

Wisconsin took territorial and state censuses every two years from 1836 to

1842, in 1846, in 1847, and every 10 years from 1855 to 1905. Except for the 1905 count, all list only heads of household. Pre-1865 records are missing for many counties. State census records from 1855 to 1905 are searchable at the free FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)>.

### LANDED GENTRY

Land records can help you track a person's movements and identify past residences. These documents often provide occupations, relatives' names and other clues.

Did your ancestors file land claims with the US government? The Bureau of Land Management's General Land Office Records site <[www.gloreCORDS.blm.gov](http://www.gloreCORDS.blm.gov)> has a searchable index and digital images of federal land patents. Use the information on your ancestor's patent to order his land entry case file from the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) <[archives.gov](http://archives.gov)>.

Once a private citizen acquired land, subsequent sales of the property would be recorded at the local county courthouse. FamilySearch has deed indexes and some land records for many counties. Run a place search on the FamilySearch Catalog for your Wisconsin county, then look for the subject heading Land and Property.

### ON THE MARCH

During the Civil War, Wisconsin aided the Northern cause with more than 91,000 soldiers. To see if your ancestor was among them, search the WHS' statewide roster linked from <[www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS15252](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS15252)>, along with 1885, 1895, and 1905 veterans' lists.

Subscription site Ancestry.com

### FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1848
- ★ **First federal census:** 1820
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1907
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** 1907
- ★ **Public-land state**
- ★ **Counties:** 72
- ★ **Contact for vital records:** Department of Health, Wisconsin Office of Vital Records, PO Box 309, Madison, WI 53701, (608) 266-1373, <[www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/vitalrecords](http://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/vitalrecords)>

# WISCONSIN

LAKE SUPERIOR



ILLINOIS

## timeline

**1787**

Modern Wisconsin is part of the Northwest Territory

**1835**

John Phillips opens the first brewery in Wisconsin, in Mineral Point

**1836**

Black Hawk War ends in a massacre of the Sac tribe at the Bad Axe River

**1846**

The State Historical Society of Wisconsin is founded

**1856**

German-speaking children attend the nation's first kindergarten at Watertown

**1861**

Gov. Alexander Randall calls for Civil War volunteers; more than 90,000 answer during the war



## Wherever your Wisconsin ancestors started out, a plethora of resources will help you find them.

<ancestry.com> has indexes to Civil War Union service and pension records; the subscription collection at Fold3.com includes images of Wisconsin General Index cards to Union service records. The free Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System <www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm> has a searchable database of Union and Confederate soldier names. See <archives.gov/research/order> for instructions on getting Union service and pension records from NARA.

Search the “Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers, War of the Rebellion, 1861–1865” <www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS4267>. With that information, you can order a copy of a soldier’s Regimental Muster and Descriptive Rolls from the Wisconsin Historical Society.

You can search a roster of soldiers from the Badger State who died in World War I through the free Access Genealogy <www.accessgenealogy.com/wisconsin/wisconsin-gold-star-list.htm>. The Milwaukee Public Library website has WWI Military Portraits <content.mpl.org/digital/

collection/WWI>, a collection of more than 32,000 photographs, typewritten volumes and service records of military personnel from Milwaukee County. Also consult a list of WWI casualties in John Goadby Gregory’s *Wisconsin’s Gold Star List* (State Historical Society of Wisconsin), digitized at <www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/search.asp?id=1058>.

### VITAL ADVICE

Vital records—government records of births, marriages, divorces and deaths—are some of the most important documents for genealogical research. Some Wisconsin counties started keeping marriage records in the 1820s and birth and death records in the 1850s, but most started later.

Fortunately, you can check statewide indexes even for early years. The Wisconsin Historical Society’s index to over three million family history records <www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS15307> includes birth, marriage and death records. Both FamilySearch and

### 1884

The town of Baraboo hosts the Ringling Brothers’ first circus

### 1932

Wisconsin is the first US state to enact an unemployment compensation law

### 1934

Sons of Wisconsin politician Robert LaFollette form the influential Wisconsin Progressive Party

### 1980

Eric Heiden of Madison wins five Olympic gold medals for speedskating

### 2011

Wisconsin lawmakers make national news when they flee their state to protest anti-union legislation

## TOOLKIT

## Websites

**Central Wisconsin Digitization Project Online Collections** <content.wisconsinhistory.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/cwdp>

**County Maps, Wisconsin Department of Transportation** <wisconsin.gov/Pages/travel/road/hwy-maps/county-maps>

**Milwaukee Public Library (MPL) Digital Library** <www.mpl.org/special\_collections/images>

**Recollection Wisconsin** <www.recollectionwisconsin.org>

**University of Wisconsin Digital Collections** <uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections>

**Wisconsin GenWeb Project** <www.wigenweb.org>

**Wisconsin Historical Society Collections** <www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS15310>

**Wisconsin Land Patents** <www.wigenweb.org/blm-toc.html>

## Publications

**The Atlas of Ethnic Diversity in Wisconsin** by Kazimierz Zaniewski and Carol Rosen (University of Wisconsin Press)

**Germans in Wisconsin** by Richard H. Zeitlin (Wisconsin Historical Society Press)

**Heritage Books Archives: Wisconsin Volume 1** (Heritage Books)

**Wisconsin's German Element: J.H.A. Lacher's Introductory History** edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann (Clearfield Co.)

## Archives &amp; Organizations

**Milwaukee Public Library** 814 W. Wisconsin Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53233, (414) 286-3000, <www.mpl.org>

**University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Library Archives** P.O. Box 604, Milwaukee, WI 53201, (414) 229-5402, <uwm.edu/libraries/archives>

**Norwegian American Genealogical Center & Naeseth Library** 415 W. Main St., Madison, WI 53703, (608) 255-2224, <www.nagcni.org>

**Wisconsin Historical Society** 816 State St., Madison, WI, 53706, (608) 264-6460, <www.wisconsinhistory.org>

Ancestry.com have a variety of statewide indexes to Wisconsin births, marriages and deaths between 1820 and 1997. The Wisconsin GenWeb Project <www.wigenweb.org> hosts or links to various vital records indexes, such as those covering Sheboygan County from 1841 to 1912 <freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~sheboygan/11.htm> and Richland County deaths through 1998 <rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wirichla/deadintr.htm>.

Once you find a name in an index, you can order uncertified copies of records since 1907 from the Wisconsin Office of Vital Records (see the Fast Facts box). You can order copies of pre-1907 vital records from the Wisconsin Historical Society <www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS4018>.

Browse county-level webpages at Wisconsin GenWeb for local resources, such as Milwaukee County census indexes. FamilySearch has posted a lot of county-level data, such as probates, naturalization records, obituaries and vital records.

## RECORDS ROUNDUP

County and local history books often profile residents, particularly early settlers. Search for a word anywhere in the Wisconsin Historical Society's local and county histories from all of the state's 72 counties <www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS1594>.

Dig deeper with a place search of the FHL catalog for a county name and *Wisconsin*, and look under the topics History and History—Indexes. You also can search Wisconsin county and local histories through HeritageQuest Online's Family & Local Histories collection. *Heritage Books Archives: Wisconsin Volume 1* (Heritage Books) includes five books covering Milwaukee County burials, abstracts from the *Wauwatosa News* (1899 to 1904), and histories of Wisconsin Territory and Milwaukee.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee library website lists its genealogy resources and request forms for church, cemetery, naturalization and property records at <uwm.edu/libraries/archives/genealogy>. Look for contact information for local historical societies at <www.wisconsinhistory.org/localhistory-directory>.

All these research resources may keep you at your computer for hours at a time, whetting your genealogical appetite and your actual appetite. Whether or not you are researching German ancestry, you may want to take a cue from the locals and grab yourself some cheese and beer. ●