

# STATE GUIDE

## NEBRASKA

by DANA MCCULLOUGH

**NEBRASKA HAS PRODUCED** more than its well-known crops of corn, soybeans and wheat, and a historically top-ranked football team—the University of Nebraska Cornhuskers. It's also produced stars such as entertainer Fred Astaire, actors Marlon Brando and Henry Fonda, writer Willa Cather and former US president Gerald Ford.

But long before those stars were born, historical headliners blazoned their way through the area—including Étienne Veniard de Bourgmont, the first recorded European in Nebraska; Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, explorers of the Louisiana Purchase; and Robert Stuart, an Oregon Trail pioneer. Embrace those trailblazers' legacy by using this guide to plot your own Nebraska family's past.

### SEEDS OF SETTLEMENT

From 1830 to 1854, the government designated Nebraska as Indian Territory. After a failed 1844 attempt at “normal” territoryhood, the area remained Indian Territory until the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act created Nebraska Territory. The act opened land to settlement and moved the Omaha to a reservation in northeastern Nebraska.

The state's reputation as a vast wasteland (the misnomered “Great American Desert”) stifled settlement until the end of the Civil War, when the Union Pacific Railroad reached the territory and Americans migrated west to claim new land under the Homestead Act of 1862. Until that time, most people who came to Nebraska were migrants and fur traders passing through along

the California, Oregon and Mormon trails. Settlers came mostly from Illinois, Iowa, Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, New York and Pennsylvania, as well as Germany, Scandinavian countries, the British Isles and Bohemia.

The rivers—particularly the Missouri and Platte—played a key role in the Cornhusker State's settlement. In fact, *Nebraska* derives from an Indian word meaning “flat water.” Even today, the state's population centers around areas near the two rivers.

### CENSUS STALKING

Unlike its population, the state's genealogical records are far from centralized. Although History Nebraska (formerly the Nebraska State Historical Society)

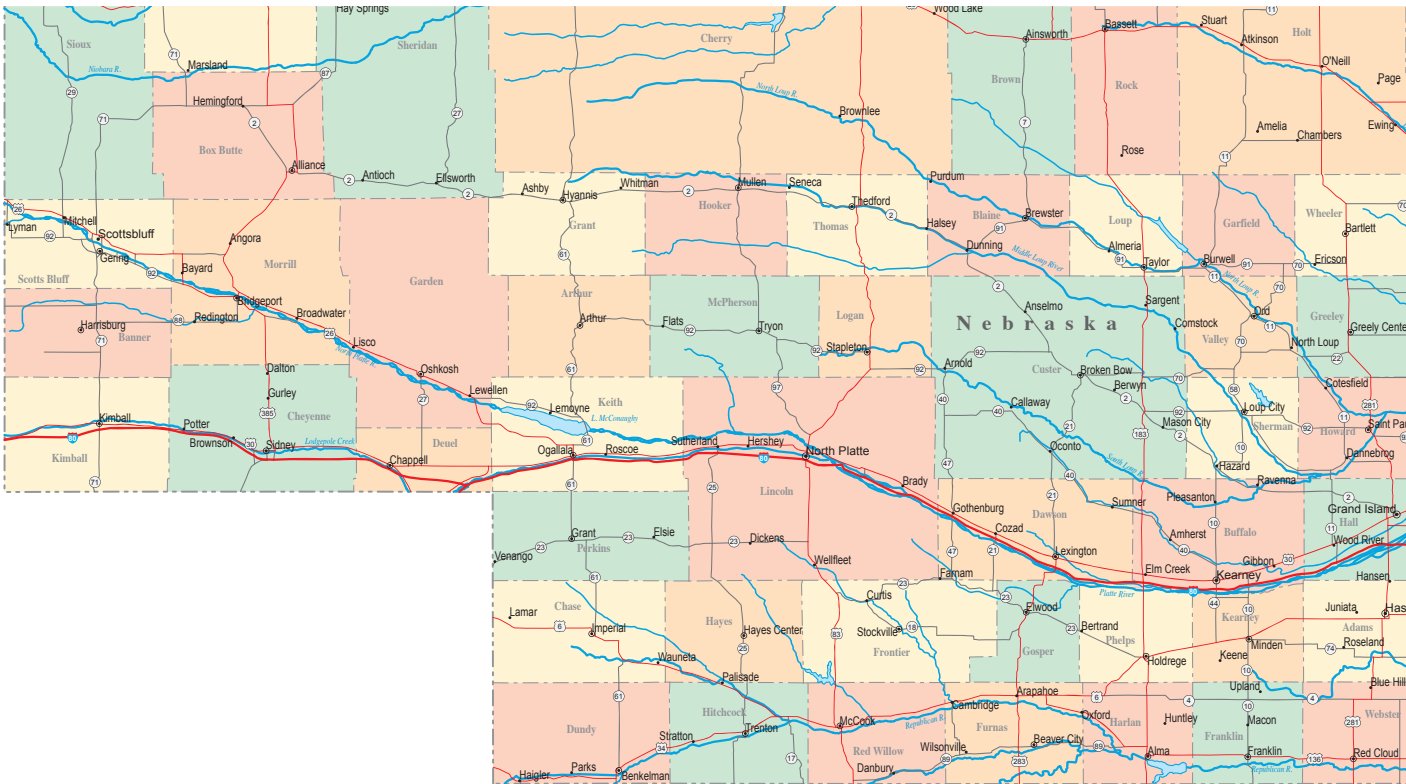
<[history.nebraska.gov](http://history.nebraska.gov)> (the state's official archives) holds many records, quite a few family history records exist at the county level, rather than the state level. So as you begin your ancestor search, it'll be important to learn which county your ancestors resided in.

Start with US census records. Federal enumerations of Nebraskans started in 1860, and are available every 10 years after that (except for the destroyed 1890 count). The government also took a special census of Nebraska in 1885, searchable online at the free FamilySearch/The Family History Library (FHL) <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)> and subscription-site Ancestry.com <[ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com)>. It's also on microfilm at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) <[archives.gov](http://archives.gov)> and History Nebraska.

### FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1867
- ★ **First federal census:** 1854 (as Nebraska Territory)
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1904
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** 1909
- ★ **Public-land state**
- ★ **Counties:** 93
- ★ **Contact for vital records:** Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Vital Records, Box 95065, Lincoln, NE 68509, (402) 471-2871, <[dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/vital-records.aspx](mailto:dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/vital-records.aspx)>

# NEBRASKA



Several territorial, state and county enumerations were taken between the 1854 and 1917. Find information about them at [www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Nebraska\\_Census](http://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Nebraska_Census), or consult county records resources and the state historical society for holdings. Ancestry.com has searchable state censuses from 1860 to 1885. Transcriptions of territorial censuses are at [www.usgennet.org/usa/ne/topic/resources/OLLibrary/Journals/NMGR/censindx.html](http://www.usgennet.org/usa/ne/topic/resources/OLLibrary/Journals/NMGR/censindx.html).

## VITAL RECORDS TO REAP

The Cornhusker State started recording birth and death data in 1904, and marriages and divorces in 1909. You can order available records from the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services [www.dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/vital-records.aspx](http://www.dhhs.ne.gov/Pages/vital-records.aspx). Only immediate family can access records for individuals born or married in the past 50 years.

Few counties and cities kept birth and death records before 1904, and except for the *Omaha Birth Registry, 1869–1907*, History Nebraska has no copies of statewide or county birth and death records. Marriage records are a different story. Counties recorded marriages from the time they formed. History Nebraska has some microfilmed county records. Search indexes to marriages at FamilySearch.org (1855–1995) or an index with images at Ancestry.com (1855–1908).

If you strike out in early state and local vital records, seek vital statistics in church records. Some—showing membership, baptisms, marriages and confirmations—are in History Nebraska’s manuscript division. They’re rarely indexed, and if the historical society doesn’t have the records, you’ll want to check with the church archives directly.

## timeline

**1763**

Spain gains the trans-Mississippi region, including Nebraska

**1800**

France acquires the Nebraska region from Spain

**1803**

The Louisiana Purchase puts Nebraska in the United States

**1823**

Bellevue is Nebraska’s first permanent settlement

**1854**

The Kansas-Nebraska Act creates Nebraska Territory

**1862**

Daniel Freeman files first land patent under the Homestead Act in Brownville, Neb.

# NEBRASKA

Whether your Nebraska ancestors were stars or common folk, you'll reap rewards from the Cornhusker State's vast crop of genealogical resources.



For example, you can start your search for Roman Catholic ancestors, who arrived as early as 1838, by contacting one of the state's three dioceses: Omaha <[www.archomaha.org](http://www.archomaha.org)>, Lincoln <[www.lincolndiocese.org](http://www.lincolndiocese.org)> or Grand Island <[www.gidiocese.org](http://www.gidiocese.org)>. Episcopalians were in Omaha in 1856; visit <[www.episcopal-ne.org](http://www.episcopal-ne.org)> for contacts. Many Nebraska Germans and Scandinavians practiced the Lutheran faith, and you can start your search for them at <[www.elca.org](http://www.elca.org)> or <[www.ndlcms.org](http://www.ndlcms.org)>. See finding aids for church records at <[history.nebraska.gov/collections/church-records](http://history.nebraska.gov/collections/church-records)>.

Newspapers also are a good source for vital data. History Nebraska has microfilmed newspapers back to the mid-1800s. Go to Nebraska Newspapers <[ne newspapers.unl.edu](http://ne newspapers.unl.edu)> for help locating newspapers and to search some digitized issues.

**1869**

The Union Pacific Railroad begins in Omaha and neighboring Council Bluffs, Iowa

**1874**

A grasshopper plague threatens Nebraska crops

**1904**

The Kinkaid Act opens the last rangeland in northwestern Nebraska to settlement

**1948**

Omaha's Offutt Air Force Base becomes headquarters of Strategic Command

**1974**

Nebraska native Gerald Ford becomes President

## TOOLKIT

## Websites

**Cyndi's List: Nebraska** <[cyndislist.com/us/ne](http://cyndislist.com/us/ne)>

**History Nebraska Research Guides** <[history.nebraska.gov/collections/research-guides](http://history.nebraska.gov/collections/research-guides)>

**History Nebraska Research Resources and Databases** <[history.nebraska.gov/collections/research-resources-databases](http://history.nebraska.gov/collections/research-resources-databases)>

**History of the State of Nebraska** <[www.kancoll.org/books/andreas\\_ne/hon\\_tabl.html](http://www.kancoll.org/books/andreas_ne/hon_tabl.html)>

**Nebraska Genealogy** <[nebraskagenealogy.com](http://nebraskagenealogy.com)>

**Nebraska GenWeb Project** <[rootsweb.ancestry.com/~negenweb](http://rootsweb.ancestry.com/~negenweb)>

**Nebraska Naturalization Records, 1855–1989** <[www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3241361](http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3241361)>

## Publications

**History of Nebraska** by Ronald C. Naugle, John J. Manning, and James C. Olson (University of Nebraska Press)

**Nebraska: An Illustrated History** by Frederick C. Luebke (Bison Books)

**Nebraska History**, quarterly magazine by History Nebraska <[history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine](http://history.nebraska.gov/publications/nebraska-history-magazine)>

**Nebraska Place Names** by Lilian L. Fitzpatrick (University of Nebraska Press)

## Archives &amp; Organizations

**Greater Omaha Genealogical Society** Box 4011, Omaha, NE 68104, <[gogsmembers.wordpress.com](http://gogsmembers.wordpress.com)>

**National Archives at Kansas City** 400 W. Pershing Road, Kansas City, MO 64108, (816) 268-8000, <[archives.gov/kansas-city](http://archives.gov/kansas-city)>

**Nebraska State Genealogical Society** Box 5608, Lincoln, NE 68505, <[www.nsgs.org](http://www.nsgs.org)>

**History Nebraska** 1500 R St., Lincoln, NE 68508, (402) 471-3270 <[history.nebraska.gov](http://history.nebraska.gov)>

**Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs** State Capitol, Sixth Floor East, Box 94981, Lincoln, NE 68509, (402) 471-3475, <[indianaffairs.state.ne.us](http://indianaffairs.state.ne.us)>

## A-MAIZE-ING ACREAGE

With the importance of agriculture and homesteading in Nebraska's past, land records will be key to your family tree search. Records from the land offices and microfilm copies of all the tract books are at History Nebraska. The Bureau of Land Management's Wyoming office <[www.blm.gov/wyoming](http://www.blm.gov/wyoming)> holds the originals; supply the exact land description in your research request. Search Nebraska land patents free online at <[www.glorecords.blm.gov](http://www.glorecords.blm.gov)>; land entry case files are at NARA.

Counties keep other land transfers, such as deeds. History Nebraska and FHL have some deeds on microfilm. History Nebraska also has some county plat books and atlases, which may show land ownership; borrow these through interlibrary loan.

Railroad companies bought and sold a lot of land in Nebraska. Unfortunately, a fire destroyed most records of transactions kept by the Union Pacific Railroad, but those by the Burlington Railroad are on microfilm at History Nebraska. FamilySearch has searchable Broken Bow Homestead Records (1890–1908) at <[www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1840496](http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1840496)>.

## FIELDS OF BATTLE

Nebraskans participated in various conflicts—providing enlisted and volunteer soldiers for the Civil War (Union), Spanish-American War, and World War I, among others.

History Nebraska is your first stop for military records. Don't miss the collection of Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) records, which include many Union Civil War veterans and provide membership information, military unit, death date, burial place, and birthplace and date. Search these burial records from 1861 to 1948 on FamilySearch. The society also has Spanish-American War (1898) service cards listing the soldier's name, birthplace, age/birth date, residence, dates of service, and assigned unit.

You can surf the Internet for military records, too. Ancestry.com offers several searchable databases for Nebraska soldiers, including Nebraska volunteers, 1861 to 1869; Nebraska Resident Military Roster on June 1, 1891; and Nebraska Pawnee scouts, 1861 to 1869. The free Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System <[www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm](http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm)> provides searchable online data on millions of soldiers on both sides of the war. An 1893 Nebraska state census of Civil War Veterans is indexed at <[www.usgennet.org/usa/ne/county/holt/1893](http://www.usgennet.org/usa/ne/county/holt/1893)>.

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