

## RESEARCH GUIDE

# MISSISSIPPI

by KIM RICHARDSON



GET READY TO DISCOVER YOUR MISSISSIPPI forebearers as you explore genealogical and historical treasures of the Magnolia State! Mississippi embraces a captivating past of native peoples, Africans, and immigrants who have transformed the state into a unique fusion of cultures. Enduring French, British and Spanish rule, removal of Native Americans, slavery, the devastation of the Civil War and the chaos of the Civil Rights Era, Mississippians have remained resilient.

This guide will help you find your ancestor's story within Mississippi's collective heritage, which is preserved in the following easily accessible sources.

### MISSISSIPPIAN HISTORY

The place we now know as Mississippi was historically inhabited by several Native American tribes including the Natchez, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Biloxi, Pascagoula, Tunica and Yazoo. French missionaries were the first Europeans to colonize the area along the Gulf Coast in 1699, and the French establishment Fort Rosalie (now Natchez) along the Mississippi River, founded in 1716, spurred conflict with neighboring Native Americans.

France lost the Seven Years' War to its rival, England, in 1763, ceding all its lands east of the Mississippi river. The southern half of the modern state of Mississippi became part of British West Florida.

Spain allied with France against Great Britain during the Revolutionary War. So after the English were defeated, West Florida was relinquished to Spain. The United States and Spain disagreed on the location of their shared border (with Spanish claims extending well into modern Mississippi), but Spain surrendered its disputed land in 1798.

As the Revolutionary War ended, those seeking land and trade entered the region. Georgia originally claimed the American Southeast from its borders to the Mississippi River, though the state ultimately gave up the land to the federal government. The Mississippi Territory was finally demarcated in 1798, and included both modern Mississippi and Alabama.

Mississippi achieved statehood in 1817, just as concerted efforts to relocate Native American inhabitants were gathering steam. The last Native American lands (notably, those of the Chickasaw and Choctaw) were ceded in the 1830s. Nearly all tribal members were removed to Oklahoma as part of the Trail of Tears.

Slavery was legal in the new state, and Mississippi led the nation in cotton production largely because of its reliance on the institution. On the eve of the Civil War, the majority of Mississippi's population was enslaved. Large plantations relied on slavery, though many smaller farmers did not have the funds to do so.

Mississippi seceded from the Union with the other slave states in 1861, and Mississippian Jefferson Davis governed the Confederacy. Major battles that took place in Mississippi include the Battles of Corinth (1862) and the Siege of Vicksburg (1863). Some populations—famously in the “Free State of Jones” in Jones County—resisted the war and actively rebelled against the Confederacy.

Reconstruction lasted for 12 years after the end of the war. In 1870, Mississippi returned to the Union. The new state government was initially made up of both white and Black legislators, and Hiram R. Revels (a senator from Mississippi) was the first African American elected to either house of Congress.

### FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:  
1817

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:  
1820

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:  
1912 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:  
varies by county; 1926 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:  
MS Dept. of Health,  
Vital Records Office

## Find your ancestor's story within Mississippi's collective heritage, which is preserved in easily accessible sources.

But in the decades that followed, subsequent governments enacted Jim Crow laws that institutionalized racial segregation and barred African Americans from various aspects of public life. This discrimination, as well as stalled economic prospects, led to the “Great Migration” of African Americans to areas north and west (especially cities) beginning in the 1910s. And Mississippi, along with Alabama, became the center of national attention in the 1950s and 1960s during the civil rights movement.

Mississippi's multicultural history is documented in Delta State University's collection of oral histories, which document African American, Chinese, Italian and Jewish communities in the state <[www.deltastate.edu/library/departments/archives-museum/guides-to-the-collection](http://www.deltastate.edu/library/departments/archives-museum/guides-to-the-collection)>. And Mississippi State University is partnering with other institutions on the Lantern Project, which seeks to digitize records of enslaved people.

### DELTA VITALS

The state government began compiling birth and death records in 1912. Certificates for births that occurred more than 100 years ago and deaths that occurred more than 50 years ago are available to anyone. But access to more recent certificates requires a qualified relationship to the person of record, and can be ordered from the vital records office <[msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/\\_static/31,0,109.html](http://msdh.ms.gov/msdhsite/_static/31,0,109.html)>.

The Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) holds copies of death certificates from



1912 to 1943, which can be ordered through the department's website <[www.mdah.ms.gov/research](http://www.mdah.ms.gov/research)>. Reclaim the Records <[www.reclaimtherecords.org](http://www.reclaimtherecords.org)> secured the index to these records, which it's made available for free at the Internet Archive and at FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3583821](http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3583821)>.

Marriage records were first kept by the state in 1926. Most counties kept records earlier, but many were destroyed over the years or in courthouse fires. MDAH has a pre-1926 statewide index to county circuit court records, plus copies of local marriage books. Some marriage records are available on FamilySearch; use the location search to find specific counties. You can also search

## TIMELINE

**1699**

The French Fort Maurepas (“Old Biloxi”) is founded

**1763**

France cedes its land east of the Mississippi River to Britain

**1783**

The United States takes control of Britain's land east of the Mississippi; southern Mississippi stays part of West Florida, now owned by Spain

**1798**

The Mississippi Territory is incorporated, including both modern Mississippi and Alabama

**1817**

Mississippi becomes the 20th state to join the Union



Cypress Swamp along the Natchez Trace Parkway

can conduct a five-year search to determine the specific location from 1926 forward; records themselves are kept at the chancery court.

### COUNTING MAGNOLIAS

Mississippi first appeared in the federal census as a territory in the 1800 and 1810 enumerations, but its entries in both have been lost. Look for Mississippians beginning in the 1820 census, the first after statehood. These records are mostly complete (except for the destroyed 1890 census), though a few counties are missing from the 1830 and 1860 counts. You can find federal censuses widely on websites like FamilySearch, Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com>, MyHeritage <www.myheritage.com> and Findmypast <www.findmypast.com>.

Supplementary schedules to the federal census can also be helpful. Ancestry.com has mortality schedules for the state (1850–1880), and slave schedules (1850, 1860) are available at Ancestry.com and FamilySearch. In addition, the 1890 Union veterans schedule survives for Mississippi (though, of course, most Mississippians who served did so for the Confederacy).

Mississippi took its own censuses in various years, too, both as a territory and as a state. FamilySearch includes them in its collection of state archive records <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1919687>, and MDAH has browsable images of state censuses from 1818 to 1880 <da.mdah.ms.gov/series/sos/100>. Ancestry.com has all surviving state and territorial censuses (including a Spanish 1792 census of the Natchez area) in a single collection <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1125>.

You can overcome gaps between censuses using substitutes like the “Enumeration of Educable Children, 1850–1957” <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1856425>, county voter rolls <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/3308840>, and tax rolls (part of the state archives collection <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1919687>).

### GREAT RIVER, GREAT RECORDS

Here are how to find some other kinds of records from Mississippi:

records of marriages between the recently emancipated that were facilitated by the Freedmen’s Bureau at <opac2.mdah.state.ms.us/freemar.php>.

The vital records office has marriage information from 1926 forward (with the exception of mid-1938 to 1941, when recordkeeping duty temporarily returned to the circuit courts). You can order records from the vital records office, or from the county circuit court clerk’s office directly.

Divorce cases were decided by the state legislature prior to 1859, and are listed in the *Index of Mississippi Session Acts, 1817–1865* available online at HaithiTrust <www.hathitrust.org>. Later divorces are held in the county chancery clerk office where the divorce occurred. The vital records office

#### 1830

The Indian Removal Act authorizes the forced migration of native tribes from the Southeast to Kansas and Oklahoma

#### 1861

Mississippi secedes from the Union; it’s readmitted in 1870

#### 1910

The first Great Migration begins as thousands of African Americans leave the South for northern and western states

#### 1918

Humphreys County is created in the last major change to Mississippi’s county boundaries

#### 1962

James Meredith becomes the first Black student to enroll at the University of Mississippi (“Ole Miss”)

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

## TOOLKIT

### Websites

**Cyndi's List: Mississippi** <[www.cyndislist.com/us/ms](http://www.cyndislist.com/us/ms)>

**FamilySearch Research Wiki: Mississippi** <[www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Mississippi,\\_United\\_States\\_Genealogy](http://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Mississippi,_United_States_Genealogy)>

**Mississippi Digital Library** <[www.msdiglib.org](http://www.msdiglib.org)>

**Mississippi GenWeb** <[www.msgw.org/index2.html](http://www.msgw.org/index2.html)>

**Mississippi History Now** <[mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov](http://mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov)>

**Mississippi Libraries Directory** <[mlc.lib.ms.us/mississippi-libraries-directory](http://mlc.lib.ms.us/mississippi-libraries-directory)>

### Publications

**Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi** by the Goodspeed Brothers (Goodspeed Publishing Company) <[www.archive.org/details/biographicalhist11good](http://www.archive.org/details/biographicalhist11good)>

**Ethnic Heritage in Mississippi** edited by Barbara Carpenter (University Press of Mississippi) and **Ethnic Heritage in Mississippi: The Twentieth Century** edited by Shana Walton and Barbara Carpenter (University Press of Mississippi)

**History of Mississippi: The Heart of the South**, 4 vols. by Dunbar Rowland (The S. J. Clarke Publishing Company)

**Tracing Your Mississippi Ancestors** by Anne S. Lipscomb and Kathleen S. Hutchison (University Press of Mississippi)

### Archives & Organizations

**Dancing Rabbit Genealogical and Historical Society** <[www.drghs.org](http://www.drghs.org)>

**Historic Natchez Foundation** <[www.natchez.org](http://www.natchez.org)>

**Mississippi Civil Rights Museum** <[www.mcrm.mdah.ms.gov](http://www.mcrm.mdah.ms.gov)>

**Mississippi Department of Archives and History** <[www.mdah.ms.gov/genealogy](http://www.mdah.ms.gov/genealogy)>

**Mississippi Genealogical Society** <[msgensociety.org](http://msgensociety.org)>

**Mississippi Historical Society** <[mississippihistory.org](http://mississippihistory.org)>

**Museum of Mississippi History** <[www.mmh.mdah.ms.gov](http://www.mmh.mdah.ms.gov)>

**National Archives at Atlanta** <[www.archives.gov/atlanta](http://www.archives.gov/atlanta)>

- **Land records:** Request land entry case files from the National Archives <[www.archives.gov/research/land/land-records](http://www.archives.gov/research/land/land-records)>, and find free digitized images of land patents at the Bureau of Land Management <[www.glorerecords.blm.gov](http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov)>. The First Landowners Project is a subscription-based, interactive patent map showing original landowners overlaid on a modern map and links to patent images at HistoryGeo.com <[www.historygeo.com](http://www.historygeo.com)>. Subsequent deeds and land transactions occurring after the initial patent are held by the county's chancery court.

- **Naturalization records:** Mississippi's immigrants were naturalized through local courts until 1906, when the federal government centralized the naturalization process. Most counties filed these earlier naturalization records within their general court records. The *Index to the Naturalization Records of Mississippi Courts, 1798–1906*, by the Works Progress Administration is browsable on FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/650056](http://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/650056)>. FamilySearch also offers three sets of browsable images: one for Biloxi (1906–1945), one for Jackson (1911–1958), and one for the whole state (1936–1941). Ancestry.com hosts the collection “Mississippi, U.S., Naturalization Records, 1907–2008,” which has indexed images and an excellent explanation of naturalization records <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2502](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2502)>.

- **Newspapers:** MDAH holds various Mississippi newspapers among its collection. Chronicling America offers free access to Mississippi newspapers as early as 1820 <[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov)>, while subscription sites Newspapers.com <[www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com)> and GenealogyBank <[www.genealogybank.com](http://www.genealogybank.com)> also have Mississippi listings.

- **Directories:** You can find collections of city directories at Ancestry.com, City Directories of the United States <[www.uscitydirectories.com/ms.htm](http://www.uscitydirectories.com/ms.htm)>, and MyHeritage. MDAH and local and university libraries may also hold directories.

- **Civil War pension records:** Mississippi's Confederate pension applications (1900–1974) contain valuable genealogical information and are available on FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1936413](http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1936413)>. Mississippi was the first Southern state to extend pension benefits to African Americans; find a searchable index of Black veterans' applications on the MDAH's website <[opac2.mdah.state.ms.us/queries/blackconfed.php](http://opac2.mdah.state.ms.us/queries/blackconfed.php)>.

MDAH surveyed every county's collection of pre-1920 records and created an inventory index <[opac2.mdah.state.ms.us/queries/coinventory.php](http://opac2.mdah.state.ms.us/queries/coinventory.php)>.

---

**Kim Richardson**, founder of Southern Heritage Genealogy <[www.southernheritagegenealogy.com](http://www.southernheritagegenealogy.com)>, enjoys serving others in their quests to find Mississippi ancestors.