

# STATE GUIDE

## DELAWARE

BY ALLISON DOLAN

**🐉 IF DELAWARE HAD** a cartoon alter ego, it would be Speedy Gonzales. This miniature state—larger only than Rhode Island—has made its mark on American history by leaving bigger *banditos* in its dust.

For starters, Delaware raced past the 12 other colonies to ratify the Constitution, resulting in its status as the first US state. More firsts followed, including the first automated flour-milling system, the first regularly scheduled steam railroad and the first divided highway (the DuPont Highway, widened in 1933).

Delaware also has zoomed ahead of other states in recent years in digitizing its genealogical records. The Delaware Public Archives (DPA) <[archives.delaware.gov](http://archives.delaware.gov)> (click on Digital Archives) boasts indexes and record images that will speed your research.

Want to follow in your First State ancestors' footsteps? Here's how to get your research off to a running start.

### Early history

Dutch colonists staked out Delaware's first European settlement in 1631, at modern-day Lewes. Their outpost didn't last long, though: The next year, the entire group of 32 perished in a scuffle with the local Lenape Indians (also called the Delaware).

The settlers' Swedish counterparts fared better. In 1638, Swedes established Fort Christina (now Wilmington) and dubbed their colony New Sweden. But the Dutch hadn't yet given up on Delaware. Settlers from New Netherland (what's now New York) challenged the

Swedes, capturing Fort Christina in 1655. Then the Dutch found themselves fending off England—which overtook Delaware for good in 1674.

Eight years later, the Duke of York transferred Delaware to William Penn, who also was the proprietor of the new Quaker colony next door. Though it got its own assembly in 1704, for nine decades Delaware remained under Pennsylvania's jurisdiction as the three "Lower Counties" (with Maryland claiming southern and western Delaware from 1684 to 1736). The Assembly of the Lower Counties of Pennsylvania declared Delaware's independence in 1776, then pledged its allegiance to the United States.

### FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1787
- ★ **First mostly extant federal census:** 1800
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 161 to 1863; resumed in 1881
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** 1847
- ★ **State-land state**
- ★ **Original counties:** Deale, New Castle, St. Jones
- ★ **Contact for vital records:** Office of Vital Statistics, Jesse S. Cooper Building, Federal and Water streets, Dover, DE 19901, (302) 744-4549, <[dhss.delaware.gov/dph/ss/vitalstats.html](http://dhss.delaware.gov/dph/ss/vitalstats.html)>

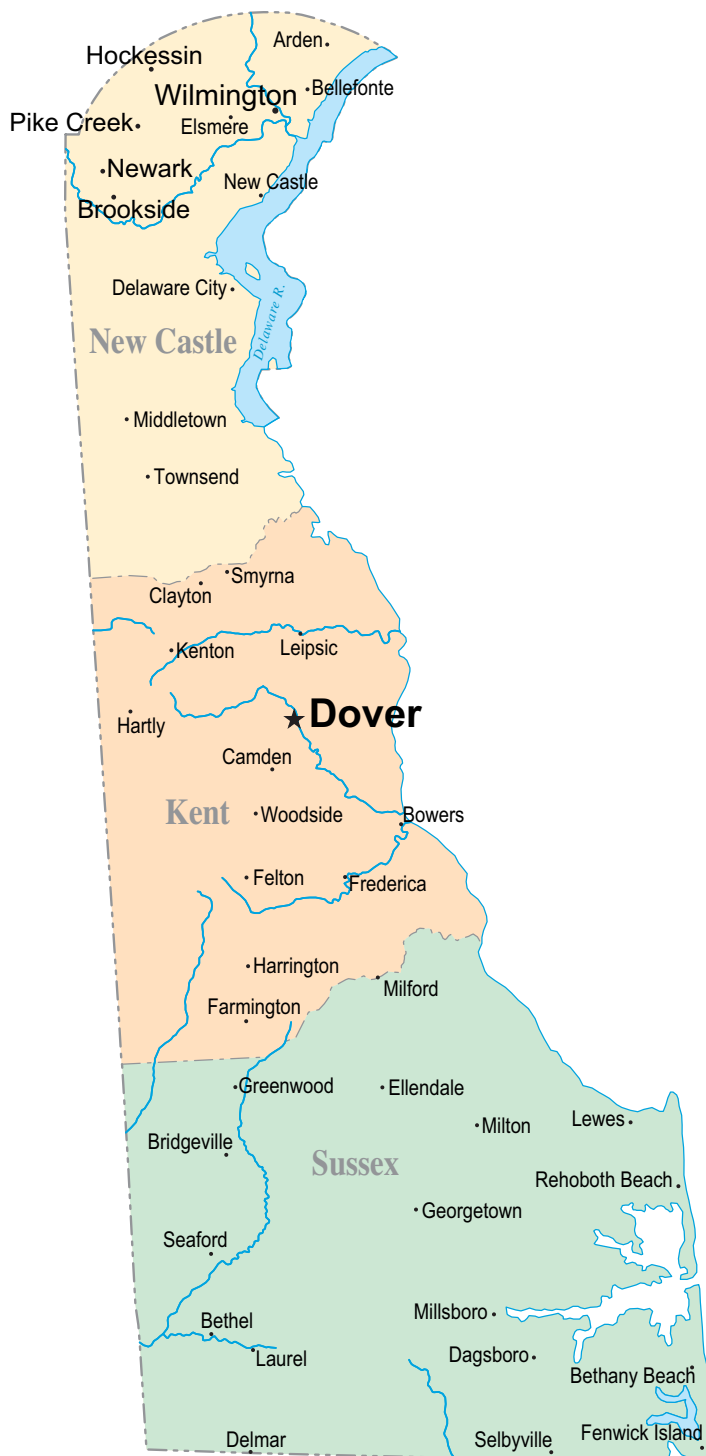
### Land records

Early land grants in what's now Delaware were made in New York from 1664 until 1682, then Pennsylvania until 1776. The Delaware State Archives has microfilm of the Pennsylvania grants.

Today, Delaware has three counties: New Castle, created in 1673, is the only original county. Kent County, established in 1682, began as the Horrekill District (1664 to 1680), followed by a two-year stint as St. Jones County. Sussex County was also formed in 1682, from Durham County, Md., and Deale County, Del. County courts house deeds recording land transactions between private parties, and there's an unindexed collection of Delaware county land records on subscription site Ancestry.com <[ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com)>

Many Delaware locales adopted new monikers over the years. For a list of

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**TIP:** The Society of Friends, or Quakers, was one of Delaware's biggest religious denominations. Two resources you'll want to consult are Ancestry.com's collection Quaker Meeting Records, 1681-1935 and the 1921 book *Delaware Quaker Records: Early Members of Wilmington Meeting* by Herbert Standing, digitized free at Internet Archive <[archive.org](http://archive.org)>. Find records of nearly 100 churches of several denominations transcribed on microfilm at the Delaware Public Archives.

## timeline

**1610**

Samuel Argall names Cape De La Warr (now Henlopen) after Virginia's first colonial governor

**1632**

American Indians wipe out the Dutch settlement Zwaanendael (Swan Valley)

**1638**

Swedes establish Fort Christina and build America's first log cabins

**1655**

Delaware is part of Dutch New Amsterdam

**1664**

England seizes Delaware; Duke of York becomes the proprietary authority

**1682**

Pennsylvania annexes Delaware

place-name changes, go to <[newrivernotes.com/de/deplace.htm](http://newrivernotes.com/de/deplace.htm)>. Name changes also appear in the Delaware Genealogical Society's *Delaware Genealogical Research Guide* (see the Toolkit for publication details).

If you don't live in Delaware, you'll need a crash course in "hundreds." This Colonial tax-districting system is now unique to Delaware. Roughly equivalent to a township, a hundred likely represented an area occupied by 100 families, although some sources say it referred to 100 people or 100 soldiers. Delaware's 33 present-day hundreds haven't changed borders since 1897, and many bear the same names as cities. The Delaware Geological Survey has posted historical maps of hundreds at <[dgs.udel.edu/delaware-1868-hundreds-maps](http://dgs.udel.edu/delaware-1868-hundreds-maps)>. Scanned from the 1869 *Pomeroy and Beers Atlas*, they show property ownership, churches and businesses. Tax assessment records are arranged by hundreds at the DPA. They're available on microfilm and in published indexes; find a guide on the University of Delaware Libraries website <[guides.lib.udel.edu/c.php?g=85348&p=548475](http://guides.lib.udel.edu/c.php?g=85348&p=548475)>.

Don't forget migrations. Delaware is situated on the Delmarva Peninsula, so named because it also encompasses parts of Maryland and Virginia. Some families moved multiple times within the peninsula, irrespective of state or colonial borders. Check surrounding areas (and states) in case your ancestors wandered down the coast, ventured inland or simply hopped over to the opposite shore of the Delaware River.

### Family histories

To get a jump on your genealogy, take advantage of previously compiled, rich research on Delaware families. For example:

- The Delaware Historical Society (DHS) <[dehistory.org](http://dehistory.org)> maintains a Genealogical Surname File with 120,000-plus names from the society's record holdings. This includes unpublished notes on Delaware families.
- The Rev. Joseph Brown Turner Collection, compiled between 1900 and 1935, consists of notes on 3,000 Delmarva

Peninsula families. The DPA owns the collection and has posted portions at <[archives.delaware.gov/exhibits/document/turner/toc.shtml](http://archives.delaware.gov/exhibits/document/turner/toc.shtml)>.

- The Delaware Genealogical Society <[delgensoc.org](http://delgensoc.org)> has compiled a list of available family genealogies and journal articles; it's available online to society members. Also check J. Thomas Scharf's *History of Delaware, 1609-1888*, generally considered the best chronicle of the state's history. The Historical Society of Delaware published an index to it, and you can search the book for free online at Internet Archive <[archive.org](http://archive.org)>.

A "hundred," roughly equivalent to a township, is a division in a Colonial tax-districting system that's now unique to Delaware.

### Census records

Despite its "first state" status, Delaware's federal census records don't date back to the initial US head count. Fire destroyed the 1790 enumeration of Delaware. But Leon de Valinger's book *Reconstructed 1790 Census of Delaware* (National Genealogical Society), compiled from tax lists, can serve as a substitute.

You can search Delaware enumerations from 1800 to 1930 (except 1890, which also was destroyed by fire) on subscription sites Ancestry.com, Findmypast <[www.findmypast.com](http://www.findmypast.com)> and MyHeritage <[www.myheritage.com](http://www.myheritage.com)>, or on the free FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)>.

### Vital records

Statewide vital record-keeping began in 1913. Before that, each county's recorder of deeds was to register births, marriages and deaths, and forward copies to the state board of health. Delaware law makes birth records private for 72 years after they're created, and marriage and death records for 40 years. Children can request their parents' more-recent records (photo ID required).

The DPA holds all publicly available vital records, including a sizable collection covering 1880 to 1913. See details at <[archives.delaware.gov/collections/vital.shtml](http://archives.delaware.gov/collections/vital.shtml)>. For earlier births, deaths and marriages, check other records at the DPA or DHS: Both institutions hold vital stats compiled from church records, family Bibles, newspapers and other sources.

1783

Oliver Evans invents automated flour-milling machinery

1787

Delaware becomes first US state

1829

Chesapeake and Delaware Canal opens

1832

New Castle and Frenchtown Turnpike and Rail Road links Chesapeake Bay and Delaware River

1901

Delaware's Eldridge Johnson founds the Victor Talking Machine Co.

1924

Delaware's first paved road, the DuPont Highway, is completed

## TOOLKIT

## Websites

- **Delaware Resources at RootsWeb**  
<resources.rootsweb.ancestry.com/usa/DE>
- **Delaware Roots** <delawareroots.org>
- **Delaware USGenWeb Project** <theusgenweb.org/de>
- **A History of African-Americans of Delaware and Maryland's Eastern Shore** <udel.edu/BlackHistory>

## Publications

- **Colonial Families of Delaware**, six volumes, by F. Edward Wright (Willow Bend Books)
- **Delaware Genealogical Research Guide, 3rd ed.** edited by Thomas P. Doherty (Delaware Genealogical Society)
- **Maryland and Delaware Genealogies and Family Histories** by Donald Odell Virdin (Heritage Books)
- **Reconstructed 1790 Census of Delaware** by Leon de Valinger (National Genealogical Society)

## Archives &amp; Organizations

- **Delaware Genealogical Society**  
505 N. Market St., Wilmington, DE 19801,  
<delgensoc.org>
- **Delaware Historical Society**  
505 N. Market St., Wilmington, DE 19801,  
(302) 655-7161, <dehistory.org>
- **Delaware Public Archives**  
121 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., Dover, DE 19901,  
(302) 744-5000, <archives.delaware.gov>
- **Diocese of Wilmington Archives (Roman Catholic)**  
Box 2030, Wilmington, DE 19899, (302)  
655-0597, <cdow.org/archives.html>
- **Edward H. Nabb Research Center  
for Delmarva History & Culture**  
Salisbury University, 1101 Camden Ave, Salisbury, MD  
21801, (410) 543-6312, <salisbury.edu/nabb>
- **Fort Delaware Society**  
2711 Staff Lane, Box 553, Delaware City, DE 19706,  
(302) 834-1630, <fortdelaware.org>
- **Hagley Museum & Library**  
298 Buck Road, Wilmington, DE 19807,  
(302) 658-2400, <hagley.org/research>
- **Jewish Historical Society of Delaware**  
505 N. Market St., Wilmington, DE 19801,  
(302) 655-6232, <jhsdelaware.org>
- **University of Delaware Library**  
181 S. College Ave., Newark, DE 19717,  
(302) 564-7895, <library.udel.edu>

Contact the Office of Vital Statistics for more-recent records. You'll find indexes and digitized records on FamilySearch for Delaware births as early as 1710; marriages from 1713; and deaths and burials dating to 1815.

## Military records

With Delaware's long legacy of power struggles, there's a good chance your ancestors participated in—or witnessed—military action. Despite the state's small size, more than 4,000 men fought for independence in the Revolution. A border state during the Civil War, Delaware had a legacy of slavery but remained in the Union. The state sent about 12,000 soldiers to the Union cause; 2,000 residents joined the Confederate army. They're named in the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Database <[www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-soldiers.htm](http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/search-soldiers.htm)>.

The DHS holds state military records from the Colonial era through World War I. Consult the DPA's online guides to both Revolutionary and Civil War records (access both from <[archives.delaware.gov/collections/public.shtml](http://archives.delaware.gov/collections/public.shtml)>). You can view a selection of the DPA's Civil War collection in the website's Digital Archives.

The National Archives and Records Administration holds federal military service and pension records <[archives.gov/research/military](http://archives.gov/research/military)>, some of which are online at Ancestry.com, subscription site Fold3 <[fold3.com](http://fold3.com)> and FamilySearch.

## More records to research

The DPA website also hosts indexes to probate records (1680 to 1925) from the state, as well as and nearly 10,000 naturalization records for all three counties <[archives.delaware.gov/checklists](http://archives.delaware.gov/checklists)>. You can find many county naturalization records digitized (but not yet searchable by name) and free on FamilySearch. The state also published directories of residents, arranged by town, a few times between 1859 and 1895. Wilmington had a directory as early as 1814, and Delmarva Peninsula towns had their own directories in the late 1800s. Look for these at the DHS, University of Delaware Library and on Ancestry.com.

For African-American ancestors who were enslaved in Delaware, explore the DPA's collection of petitions for freedom, manumissions, court records and deeds. Find information about tracing African-American roots in the First State at <[archives.delaware.gov/aahm/genealogy/index.shtml](http://archives.delaware.gov/aahm/genealogy/index.shtml)>.

If your Delaware roots reach back before statehood, you'll discover that the colony's varied social and political landscape produced a bounty of records. Of course, this complex history also presents genealogical challenges: Your family's records might be in Pennsylvania, Maryland or New York—or even Sweden, the Netherlands or England. Luckily, the DHS's printed sources cover some of those early records. So don't get too discouraged if your research doesn't progress at a pace befitting Delaware's cartoon counterpart. You still can come out ahead—just like your clan's tiny home state. ■