

STATE GUIDE

NORTH DAKOTA

by DAVID A. FRYXELL

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING to know before starting your North Dakota family research is that *two* states have “Dakota” in their name. Folks in the upper Great Plains hate it when newscasters refer to “the Dakotas,” as if it’s one big state—perhaps because this area spent many pre-statehood years being fobbed off from one territory to another. (But it’s true that North Dakota legislators have considered renaming the state simply “Dakota,” forever consigning their southern neighbor to add-on status.)

When North Dakota first became part of the United States, it was part of one big chunk of land—the 1803 Louisiana Purchase from France, which included the southwestern half of today’s state. French explorers arrived in 1738, but permanent white settlement didn’t start until 1812, when Scottish pioneers from Canada settled in Pembina. Six years later, the United States acquired that part of northeastern North Dakota; all of North Dakota then became part of the Missouri Territory.

American Indians had lived there for more than 11,000 years: Early explorers encountered Mandan villages along the Missouri River. The Sioux and Chippewa later conflicted with settlers before being confined to reservations. If your North Dakota ancestors include American Indians, the Family History Library (FHL) <familysearch.org/locations/saltlakecity-library> has microfilmed Bureau of Indian Affairs records spanning 1872 to 1952. Originals are at the Kansas City branch of the National Archives and Records Administration’s (NARA) <archives.gov/kansas-city>.

From 1834 until the creation of Dakota Territory in 1861, various pieces of what’s now North Dakota were in the territories of Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota and Nebraska. North Dakota was included in the 1836 Wisconsin, 1840 Iowa and 1850 Minnesota territorial censuses. Dakota Territory censuses took place in 1860, 1870, 1880 and 1885. Find a free 1885 census index—151,500 names from the northern part of the territory—at <library.ndsu.edu/db/census>. Other territorial census indexes are searchable on Ancestry.com <ancestry.com>.

Dakota Territory land went up for grabs under the Homestead Act of 1862, but Indian attacks and the Civil War delayed settlement. In 1871, the railroad reached the Red River, sparking a “Dakota boom”: From 1878 to 1886, 100,000 immigrants arrived. Some founded “Bonanza farms” of up to 65,000 acres in the Red River Valley. Those who went farther west launched a cattle industry that thrived until the winter of 1886–1887 wiped out three-quarters of herds.

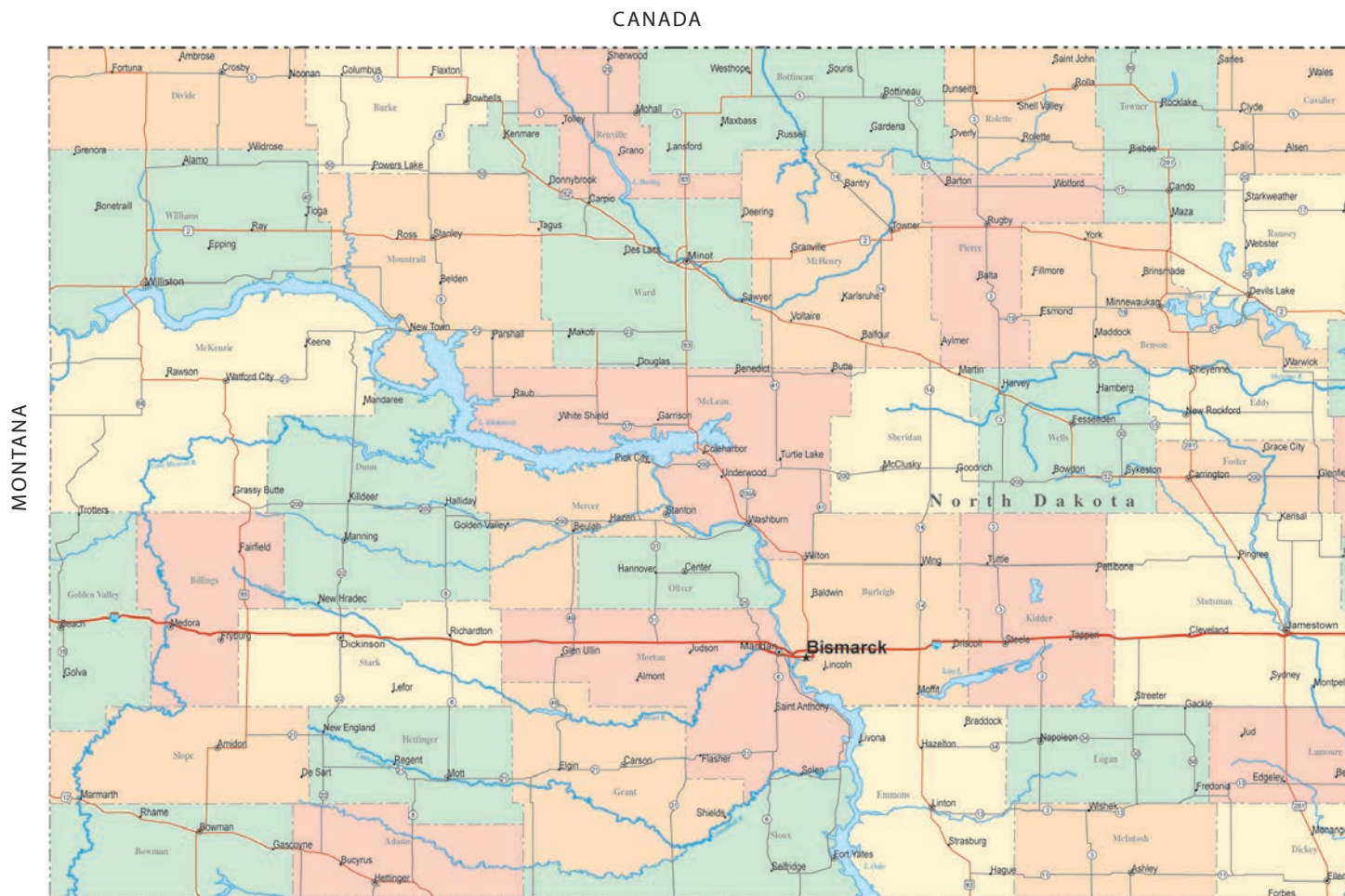
Appropriately, North Dakota’s first homesteader, N.E. Nelson, was Norwegian—the hordes who followed him made North Dakota the nation’s most Norwegian state. More than a third of its population claims ancestry from Norway. Others came from Germany, Russia, England, Ireland, Sweden, and Canada.

Look for North Dakota immigrants in the state historical society’s Naturalization Records Database <library.ndsu.edu/ndsarchives/north-dakota-naturalization-records-database>. The society also has original naturalization records.

FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1889
- ★ **First federal census:** 1900
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1893
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** 1925
- ★ **Public-land state**
- ★ **Counties:** 53
- ★ **Contact for vital records:** Division of Vital Records, 600 E. Boulevard Ave., Dept. 301, Bismarck, ND 58505, (701) 328-2360 <ndhealth.gov/vital>

NORTH DAKOTA



SOUTH DAKOTA

PEACE-ING TOGETHER THE PAST

In 1889, the US government split the northern and southern parts of Dakota Territory into two states. Because the 1890 census was largely destroyed, the first extant census for North Dakota is the 1900 tally. The 1890 Union veterans schedule did survive, and is available at the FHL and on Ancestry.com.

Birth and death records began in 1893, although gaps exist. Counties kept some early marriage records, but state-

wide recording didn't start until 1925. Immediate relatives (including grandchildren) can order copies of birth and death records from the Department of Health ndhealth.gov/vital and marriage and divorce records from county offices, which you can link to from the Vital Records website. Find links to a few marriage indexes at history.nd.gov/archives/genmarriage.html. Search a database of death certificates beginning in 1881 at apps.nd.gov/doh/certificates/deathCertSearch.htm. Some county-level

timeline

1801

Alexander Henry Jr. founds a fur-trade post at Pembina

1804

Lewis and Clark winter at Fort Mandan on their way to the Pacific

1868

Laramie Treaty defines Sioux lands as those west of the Missouri River

1876

Gen. George Armstrong Custer leaves Fort Abraham Lincoln, never to return

1883

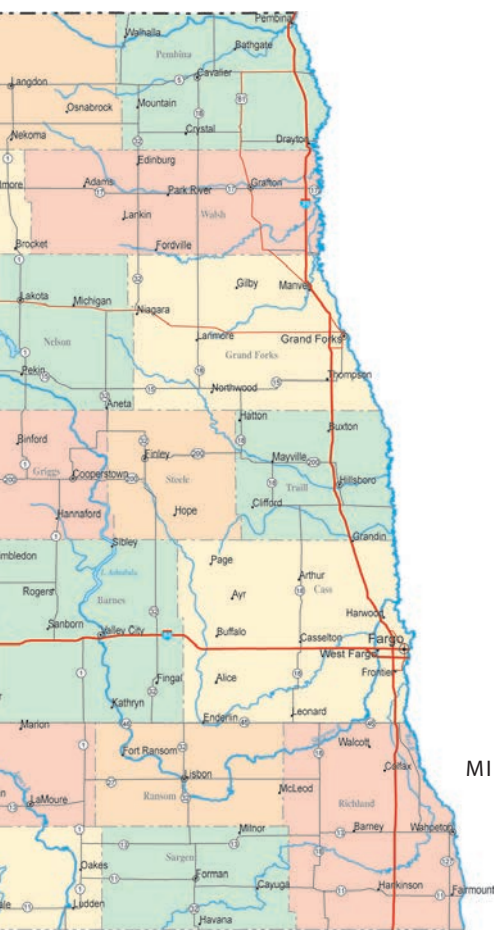
Territorial capital moves to Bismarck

1901

Former North Dakota rancher Theodore Roosevelt becomes president

NORTH DAKOTA

During a second “Dakota boom” between 1898 and 1915, more than 250,000 newcomers flocked to the state.



During a second “Dakota boom” between 1898 and 1915, more than 250,000 newcomers flocked to the state. This wave of immigrants worked smaller farms and ranches and helped fuel the growth of cities such as Bismarck, Fargo and Grand Forks. Bismarck gave birth to what’s now North Dakota’s oldest newspaper, the *Tribune*, back in 1873. The *Fargo Express* followed the next year. The state historical society maintains a large collection of historical papers. The *Tribune* is indexed on Ancestry.com.

RESEARCHING ACCORDINGLY

North Dakota researchers can tap a wealth of other records. The North Dakota Biography Index <library.ndsu.edu/db/biography> references about 250,000 names from some 800 sources, including county, community, church and business histories, as well as WPA files. Once you’ve found an ancestor’s biographical sketch, it’s easy (and inexpensive) to order copies.

records, including probate, have been indexed and/or digitized at local library or society websites.

North Dakota was a public-land state, so records of its land boom are at the Bureau of Land Management’s office in Billings, Mont., and at NARA. The state historical society also keeps local land-office records, and township plats are at the state water commission <www.swc.state.nd.us>. Search Peace Garden State land patents free online at <www.gloreCORDS.blm.gov>.

1903

Lawrence Welk is born in Strasburg

1929

The driest June on record begins “Dirty Thirties” drought

1961

Fargo native Roger Maris breaks Babe Ruth’s single-season home run record

1977

North Dakota completes its part of the interstate highway system

1996

The movie “Fargo” premieres

TOOLKIT

Websites

Digital Horizons: A Plains Media Resource

<digitalhorizonsonline.org>

Ghost Towns of North Dakota

<www.ghostsofnorthdakota.com>

North Dakota Genealogy Forum <www.genealogy.com/forum/regional/states/topics/nd>

North Dakota GenWeb Project <sites.rootsweb.com/~ndngenweb>

Resources

Early History of North Dakota by Clement A. Lounsberry (Liberty Press, out of print)

History of North Dakota and North Dakota Biography, 3 volumes, by Lewis F. Crawford (American Historical Society, out of print)

North Dakota Place Names by Douglas A. Wick (Prairie House, out of print)

Prairie Mosaic: An Ethnic Atlas of Rural North Dakota by William C. Sherman (Institute for Regional Studies, out of print)

Reference Guide to North Dakota History and North Dakota Literature by Daniel Rylance and J.F.S. Smeall (University of North Dakota, out of print)

Tracing Your Dakota Roots by Jo Ann B. Winistorfer and Cathy A. Langemo (Dakota Roots)

Archives & Organizations

Fargo Public Library 102 Third St. N., Fargo, ND 58102, (701) 241-1472, <fargond.gov/city-government/departments/library>

Institute for Regional Studies Collections North Dakota State University Library, Box 5599, Fargo, ND 58105, (701) 231-8914, <library.ndsu.edu/ndsuarquivos/institute-regional-studies-collections>

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

State Historical Society of North Dakota State Archives and Historical Research Library, 612 E. Boulevard Ave., Bismarck, ND 58505, (701) 328-2666, <www.history.nd.gov>

The Sioux Valley (South Dakota) Genealogical Society's index of people who lived in Dakota Territory at the time of statehood <www.siouxvalleygenealogicalsociety.org/pioneers> is worth checking out, too. These early arrivals have been honored with pioneer certificates; the index gives each person's birth and death dates, birthplace and pioneer certificate number, which you can use to obtain further information.

The North Dakota historical society's Oral History Project <www.history.nd.gov/archives/dataoralhistory.html> has captured the lives of early North Dakotans. Browse an inventory of over 1,200 interviews online; it's indexed by individuals' names. Order digital audio files of interviews for a small fee; ask about companion photographs collected as part of the project.

The State Archives and Historical Research Library <www.history.nd.gov/archives>, located in Bismarck, is a division of the state historical society. Its collections are available to researchers in the Orin G. Libby Memorial Reading Room of the North Dakota Heritage Center. Many microfilmed holdings, including state censuses and early atlases, are available.

Because of its late settlement and statehood, large collections of data on North Dakota veterans don't really exist until about the Civil War era. Dakota Territory Civil War service records for Union soldiers are digitized and searchable at FamilySearch.org. The FHL has an 1883 veterans' census and a statewide WWI roster on microfilm (the latter is also searchable on Ancestry.com). A Veterans Oral History Project <www.history.nd.gov/archives/whatvethist.html> by the state historical society has collected stories in recent years.

Don't forget to check with local, regional and ethnic sources. County courthouses are an excellent place to look for records specific to your family. The Red River Valley Genealogical Society <rrvgs.org> is a rich resource for researchers in eastern North Dakota (see its website for information on obituaries and cemetery records, and indexes to funeral homes). The Germans from Russia Heritage Society <www.grhs.org> and the Norwegian Collection at the Red River Valley Genealogical Society can help you trace ancestors of those ethnicities.

Just remember that unless you're talking about Dakota Territory, remember to call it *North Dakota*. ●