

STATE GUIDE

WASHINGTON

by LESLIE STROOPE

WASHINGTONIANS' TENACIOUS SPIRIT began with the pioneers who braved the journey across the Oregon Trail, and it lives on in the state's newsmaking technology companies. And though Evergreen Staters have a history of hunting for elusive things—the Northwest Passage, gold, even Sasquatch—you needn't fear chasing genealogical bogeymen. Using these tips and resources, you'll have no problem tracking down your most elusive Evergreen State ancestors.

OUT OF OBSCURITY

In 1774, Spanish explorers became the first European explorers to set foot on Washington's soil while seeking the fabled Northwest Passage. Cartographers had their hopes for such a Northwest Passage dashed, but that didn't discourage the flood of explorers, missionaries and settlers that followed.

Spain ceded its original claim to "Oregon Country" to the United States in 1819, allowing simultaneous British and American settlement, and expansion of the maritime fur trade. In 1846, both nations agreed on the 49th parallel as the United States' northernmost boundary. Two years later, Congress created Oregon Territory, which encompassed modern-day Washington. Then, in 1853, Congress cleaved off Washington and parts of Idaho and Montana to create Washington Territory.

WESTHARD HO(ME)

Pioneers from across the United States hit the Oregon Trail and

arrived in Washington during the 1830s and 1840s. Look for these early settlers in *The Family Records of Pioneers*—books of marriage, death, Bible, cemetery and church records transcribed by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) <dar.org>. Images of the first 40 volumes are on Family History Library (FHL) microfilm and have been digitized at FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org>.

The US government's donation lands program further encouraged settlement by granting land patents to settlers or their heirs after four years of living on and cultivating the property. The state archives' Digital Archives <www.digitalarchives.wa.gov>, which has millions of digitized historical records, includes an index of Washington Territory donation land claims from

1852 to 1855. You'll find microfilm of indexed abstracts and the original claims from 1855 to 1903 at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) <archives.gov> and FHL. (The latter has digital images on FamilySearch.) Search early land ownership and township plats for Washington (and other states) at subscription site Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2179>.

The discovery of gold near Walla Walla and the institution of homestead laws fueled more settlement in the 1860s. Like donation lands, homesteads provided free land exchange for settlement, but also opened up the process to single women and widows. Research your ancestor's patent at the Bureau of Land Management <glorecords.

FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1889
- ★ **First federal census:** 1860
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1907
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** 1968
- ★ **Public-land state**
- ★ **Counties:** 39
- ★ **Contact for vital records:** Washington Department of Health, Center for Health Statistics, Town Center 1, 101 Israel Rd. SE, Turnwater, WA 98501, (360) 236-4300, <doh.wa.gov> (click on Licenses, Permits & Certificates)

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blm.gov>, then order copies of land entry case files from NARA <archives.gov/research/order>. Contact county auditors for deeds.

IMMIGRANT SIGHTINGS

As the first of three transcontinental railroads reached Washington in the late 1800s, the territory's population continued to skyrocket—the latest wave of immigrants came from Germany, Norway, Sweden, Britain, the Netherlands and the Philippines. Settlers from Canada and Midwestern states fueled Washington's next in-migration, followed by an influx of Japanese.

Seattle passenger and crew lists from 1882 to 1965 are searchable at Ancestry.com; a similar dataset is available at FamilySearch. However, most immigrants came to Washington overland, arriving to the United States via East Coast ports (records for which are also online).

The Digital Archives has county naturalization indexes, and images span 1849 to 1980; if you find your ancestor, you can order the full record. Order post-1906 naturalizations online from the Citizenship and Immigration Service at <www.uscis.gov/genealogy>. You also can find some naturalization records on Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.

STEPS TOWARD STATEHOOD

Washington's population boom and increasing accessibility by rail fueled the push for statehood, which it achieved in 1889.

By then, most of the state's American Indian tribes had been sequestered on reservations. The FHL has microfilmed Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) vital, school and family records from roughly 1887 to 1952; NARA's Seattle facility (which, as of 2020, is scheduled for

timeline

1792

Robert Gray becomes the first non-Indian to sail "Wimahl," which he renames the Columbia River

1805

Lewis and Clark cross into what's now Washington

1836

The *Beaver*, Puget Sound's first steamship, sails from Fort Vancouver

1845

Michael T. Simmons and George Bush establish the first US settlements north of the Columbia

1889

Fires burn much of Seattle, Ellensburg and Spokane Falls; Washington gains statehood

1893

The Great Northern Railway completes a transcontinental line to Seattle



closure) houses the originals. Begin investigating your tribal ties in the Portland, Ore., BIA office's collection of "Family Index Cards, 1938–1950," also on FHL microfilm and image on FamilySearch.

Whether your kin came before or after statehood, be sure to consult the Washington State Genealogical Resource Guide <rootsweb.ancestry.com/~wasgs/resguide.htm>: It has downloadable county-level fact sheets, with formation dates, history, settlement patterns and more.

MILITARY TRACKS

Washington Territory sided with the Union during the Civil War, and (though it didn't send soldiers east to fight the Confederacy) raised a regiment to maintain defenses in the northwest. To research your soldier ancestor, search the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System <www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-

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database.htm> and check FamilySearch for indexes to service records, pension applications and the 1890 special census of Union veterans.

The state archives holds Indian War muster rolls, and FamilySearch has a searchable collection of enlistment registers for 1798 to 1914 <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1880762>. Check NARA and FamilySearch indexes for soldiers who applied for Indian Wars pensions, as well as WWI and WWII draft registration

1937

The Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River is completed

1962

Seattle hosts the World's Fair

1979

Seattle native Bill Gates moves Microsoft from Albuquerque, N.M., to the Seattle area

1980

Mount St. Helens in Skamania County erupts, killing more than 50 people and spreading ash as far away as Oklahoma

1996

The "Kenwick Man," prehistoric remains of a human male, is discovered on the banks of the Columbia

2001

Puget Sound experiences a 6.8-magnitude earthquake, causing more than \$1 billion in damages

TOOLKIT

Websites

Cyndi's List: Washington <www.cyndislist.com/us/wa>

FamilySearch Research Wiki: Washington

<www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Washington,_United_States_Genealogy>

University of Washington Libraries Digital Collections <content.lib.washington.edu>

Washington Digital Newspapers <washingtondigitalnewspapers.org>

Washington GenWeb Project <www.wagenweb.org>

Washington History: Historical Maps <www.secstate.wa.gov/history/maps.aspx>

Washington State Archives Digital Archives <www.digitalarchives.wa.gov>

Publications

Exploring Washington's Past: A Road Guide to History by Carmela Alexander and Ruth Kirk (University of Washington Press)

Historical Atlas of Washington by James W. Scott and Roland L. De Lorme (University of Oklahoma Press)

Washington State Place Names: From Alki to Yelm by Doug Brokenshire (Caxton Press)

Archives & Organizations

Seattle Genealogical Society 6200 Sand Point Way, Seattle, WA 98115, (206) 522-8658, <www.seagensoc.org>

Seattle Public Library 1000 Fourth Ave., Seattle, WA 98104, (206) 386-4636, <www.spl.org>

Washington State Archives 1129 Washington St. SE, Box 40238, Olympia, WA 98504, (360) 586-1492, <www.sos.wa.gov/archives>

Washington State Genealogical Society 1901 S 12th Ave., Union Gap, WA 98903, <www.wasgs.org>

Washington State Historical Society 1911 Pacific Ave., Tacoma, WA 98402, (888) 238-4373, <www.washingtonhistory.org>

Washington State Library 6880 Capitol Blvd. SE., Box 42460, Olympia, WA 98504, (360) 704-5200, <www.sos.wa.gov/legacy/genealogy.aspx>

cards for 18- to 45-year old men—even if they ultimately didn't serve, they still had to register.

NOT-SO-EVASIVE ENUMERATIONS

Territorial and federal census records date back to 1850, when Washington was counted with Oregon Territory. Intermittent territorial censuses occurred between 1857 and 1892; you'll find them at the state library <www.statelib.wa.gov>, state archives and FamilySearch. Most are also indexed at Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1018>. Look for youngsters in censuses of Washington schoolchildren taken from the late 1800s to the 1930s; these are at the state archives.

SIGNS OF LIFE

Statewide birth and death registration wasn't mandatory until 1907, but many Washington counties were recording them by 1891. Research these pre-1907 vital records at county health departments or auditor's offices. Some county-level records are also available at FamilySearch, Ancestry.com and the state digital archives.

Until 2021, Washington was an open-records state. Anyone could order post-1907 birth and death records (plus post-1968 marriage and divorce records) from the state health department.

However, a records-access law that took effect January 2021 limited access to recent vital records only to certain relatives of those mentioned in them. Researchers can access eligible "historical" records at the state archives: birth records more than 100 years old, and marriage, divorce and death records more than 25 years old. (One silver lining: The department of health continues to provide noncertified, informational versions of the privacy-restricted birth and death certificates in its care.)

For marriages before 1968—the start of statewide reporting—contact the county auditor where the license was obtained. Most counties started recording marriages shortly after organization. The Digital Archives has marriage records from many counties, some with images of the originals.

Many vital records have been indexed by FamilySearch, Ancestry.com, and other websites—see a list at the FamilySearch Research Wiki <www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Washington_Vital_Records>.

You may find birth and death information in newspapers, too. The state library has a searchable database of newspapers <washingtondigitalnewspapers.org> dating back to September 1852—beginning with *The Columbian*, the first newspaper north of the Columbia River. Peruse these titles for news of your ancestors—and perhaps an occasional Sasquatch sighting. ●