

RESEARCH GUIDE

FLORIDA

by ANDREW KOCH



FLORIDA'S SUNNY BEACHES AND TROPICAL CLIMATE make it a coveted vacation and retirement hub today, but that wasn't always the case. Hurricanes, heat, swamps, geopolitical conflict, and even marauding scalawags made early settlement on the peninsula difficult, if not impossible.

But settlers came all the same—from other Spanish colonies, from other US states, and even from the Caribbean. Read on for a brief history of the Sunshine State and how to research your ancestors who have left their marks there.

FLORIDA: A HISTORY

Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León was the first European known to step foot in what is now Florida. Having arrived in the Easter season, he named the area “Florida” after the Spanish *Pascua Florida* (“season of flowers”), in reference to the land's lush vegetation.

An inhospitable climate, bad weather, raids from other European powers, and conflict with pirates and Native populations hampered settlement for decades after de León's expedition. Both Spain (in Pensacola) and France (in Fort Caroline, near modern Jacksonville) failed to establish early lasting colonies.

St. Augustine, the Spanish settlement founded in 1565, marked the first successful foothold of a European power in the area. The city today remains the oldest, continually inhabited settlement founded by Europeans in the modern contiguous United States.

Though indigenous cultures (including the Calusa, Ais, Mayaimi, Tequesta and Tocobaga) had lived in Florida for thousands of years, much of the Native population had died of disease or migrated during Spanish control of Flor-

ida. One sizable group who remained were the Muskogee Creek, who arrived in the region by the 1700s and became known as the Seminole (from the Muskogee *simanó-il* or the Spanish *Cimarrón*). Other groups included the Pensacola, Yuchi and Choctaw.

In 1763, Great Britain received Florida in exchange for the port city of Havana, Cuba, as part of a peace treaty with Spain. The Crown separated the region into two separate colonies: East and West Florida, divided by the Apalachicola River.

Florida remained sparsely populated, though its geographical location made it a battleground for competing national interests. Spain controlled Florida after American independence, but Spanish and US settlers fought over the land, especially West Florida (comprising much of the panhandle and land well north into modern Mississippi and Alabama). Spanish Florida became a safe haven for runaway US slaves, who were granted freedom if they adopted Catholicism upon arriving.

Tensions resolved with the Adam-Onís Treaty in 1821, which formally granted the whole of Florida to the United States. The US government organized the area into a single territory the next year, opening it for more fervent settlement.

The Indian Removal Act of 1830 set into motion numerous forced migrations of Native peoples out of the American Southeast. In 1832, the Seminole in Florida were forced to sign a treaty that relocated them to Oklahoma. Some refused; Seminole tribes and the US government engaged in multiple armed conflicts throughout the 19th century in the “Seminole Wars” (1817–1818, 1835–1842, 1855–1858). The Seminole, one of the “Five Civilized Tribes,”

FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:
1845

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:
1830

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:
1899

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:
from establishment (county); 1927 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:
Fla. Bureau of
Vital Statistics

would go on to be recorded in the Dawes Rolls of the late 19th and early 20th century.

Florida was admitted as a state in 1845. At the time, nearly half the state's population was enslaved. Heavily pro-slavery and reliant on the institution, the state joined the Confederacy in 1861, but was spared the widespread destruction that other states experienced.

The population of Florida changed greatly in the 20th century. A land boom in the 1920s attracted new residents from around the country, while systemic discrimination and segregation led to many African Americans leaving as part of the Great Migration. Meanwhile, political unrest drove many Cubans and others from the Caribbean to the state.

Later in the century, the advent of air-conditioning attracted many people (particularly retirees from northern and eastern states) to migrate, and Florida's tourism industry has boomed with its many beaches and attractions (notably theme parks and Cape Canaveral).

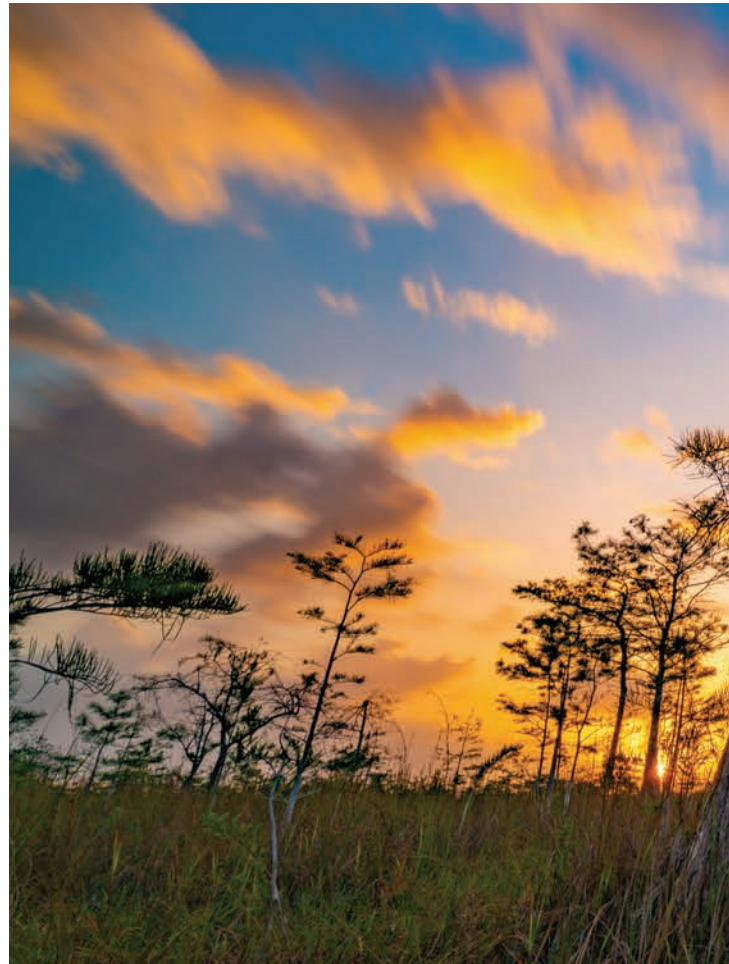
LIVING AMONG THE PALM TREES

Florida first mandated statewide registration of births and deaths in 1899, but record-keeping wasn't widespread until about 1917. Birth and death records pre-dating mandatory registration are spotty, but do exist as early as 1865.

Births less than 100 years old and deaths less than 50 are held by the Bureau of Vital Statistics; privacy laws restrict access only to qualified family members and representatives. But you can request any surviving older records from the bureau or from local county health departments.

Ancestry.com and FamilySearch both have an index to Florida deaths that spans from 1877 to 1998 <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1946805>, and FamilySearch has a few other death record collections (some with linked images). FamilySearch also has a relatively short index to birth and baptism records from 1880 to 1935 <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1674799>.

Counties generally kept marriage records from the time of their creation, but statewide registration wasn't implemented until 1927. County clerks of court have records from before 1927, while the Bureau of Vital Statistics holds



those created after. Ancestry.com and FamilySearch each have collections of marriage records and indexes.

SUNSHINE CENSUSES

Florida first appeared in the US federal census in 1830 as a territory, and several genealogy websites host searchable federal censuses online.

Prior to becoming part of the United States, the land was enumerated in various years by Spain. These censuses are bound up with other administrative data from the 1783–1821 period of Spanish rule in the East Florida Papers,

TIMELINE

1513

Spaniard Juan Ponce de León explores the region and claims it for Spain

1565

St. Augustine, the first permanent European settlement in the contiguous United States, is founded

1763

Great Britain gains control of the area, dividing it into West and East Florida

1783

Spain regains control of Florida, but US settlers encroach on the land

1821

The United States formally annexes both East and West Florida, and creates a united Florida Territory the next year



Cypress trees
at Everglades
National Park

a collection held by the Library of Congress. (The lone *US* territorial census of Florida, taken in 1824, has been almost entirely lost.)

Florida took several of its own state censuses (including in 1885, 1935 and 1945), a potential boon for researchers. You can find those three enumerations indexed and imaged on FamilySearch and MyHeritage; original records are housed at the National Archives (1885) or Florida State Archives (1935, 1945).

Earlier state censuses (1845, 1855, 1867 and 1875) only survive for select counties. These fragments are included

with the later extant censuses in an Ancestry.com collection <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1506>.

OTHER RECORDS

Continue researching your Floridian ancestors in these documents:

- **Land Records:** Florida is a public-land state, meaning the US government owned and sold most of the land within its borders. Before Florida joined the Union, though, Spain encouraged its residents to apply for land grants from that government. The United States had to honor those Span-

1832

Most of the Seminole are forced to relocate to Oklahoma

1845

Florida becomes the 27th state

1861

Florida secedes from the Union; it's readmitted in 1868

1926

Gilchrist County is formed from Alachua County, the last major shift in Florida's county boundaries

1992

Hurricane Andrew strikes Florida as a Category 5 storm

TOOLKIT

Websites

Cyndi's List <www.cyndislist.com/us/fl>

Documenting the American South <docsouth.unc.edu>

FamilySearch Research Wiki: Florida <www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Florida,_United_States_Genealogy>

FLGenWeb Project <www.fl-genweb.org>

Florida Digital Newspaper Library <ufdc.ufl.edu/newspapers>

Florida Memory <www.floridamemory.com>

Linkpendium: Florida <www.linkpendium.com/fl-genealogy>

Publications

African Americans in Florida by Maxine D. Jones (Pineapple Press)

The Complete Seminole by John E. Ernest (Genealogical Publishing Company)

A Concise History of Florida by James C. Clark (The History Press)

Florida Atlas of Historical County Boundaries edited by John H. Long (Charles Scribners Sons)

The History of Florida by Michael Gannon (University of Florida Press)

Archives & Organizations

The Florida Historical Society <www.myfloridahistory.org>

The Florida State Genealogical Society <www.flsgs.org>

Florida State Library and Archives <dos.myflorida.com/library-archives>

National Archives at Atlanta <www.archives.gov/atlanta>

P.K. Yonge Library of Family History <ufdc.ufl.edu/PKYONGE>

St. Augustine Historical Society <www.saintaugustinehistoricalsociety.org>

University of Florida Digital Collections <ufdc.ufl.edu>

ish land claims after annexing Florida; you can find related documents at Florida Memory <www.floridamemory.com/discover/historical_records/spanishlandgrants>. You can find (US) federal land patents as well as tract books and survey plats at the Bureau of Land Management's General Land Office <gloreCORDS.blm.gov>. Subsequent sales between private individuals or businesses would have been recorded by the county clerk of the circuit court.

- **Military Records:** Find Civil War service records for Floridians in both the Confederacy and Union at Ancestry.com, MyHeritage and FamilySearch, as well as through Fold3 <www.fold3.com> and the Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System <www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>. Florida Memory has a Confederate pension application index (also on FamilySearch), browsable-by-name militia muster rolls, and WWI service cards <www.floridamemory.com/discover/historical_records>.

- **Newspapers:** Florida's newspaper industry dates to 1783, when a Loyalist published the short-lived *East Florida Gazette*. The Florida Digital Newspaper Library <ufdc.ufl.edu/newspapers> includes 1.5 million pages of print, collected from the P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History and several other organizations. Find additional free historical newspapers at Chronicling America <chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>.

- **Church Records:** Once part of Spain, Florida had large Catholic populations from early in its history. In fact, the enslaved from the United States seeking freedom in Spanish land were granted it if they agreed to adopt Catholicism. Settlers from the United States and Protestant Europe brought their belief systems with them, leading to larger followings of Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians and more. Florida Memory has digitized the Works Projects Administration's extensive survey of churches in Florida <www.floridamemory.com/discover/historical_records/churchrecords>, and you can find published histories of specific religious communities in the state using WorldCat <www.worldcat.org> or the FamilySearch Catalog <www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>. As discussed earlier, FamilySearch has statewide collections of births/christenings, deaths/burials and marriages.

- **City Directories:** The Family History Library holds 20th-century city directories for Miami and Jacksonville, and the State Library of Florida has several from throughout the state. Florida is also included in Ancestry.com's <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2469> and MyHeritage's <www.myheritage.com/research/collection-10705/us-city-directories> collections of indexed US city directories.

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