

Pennsylvania Research: An Overview

1. **Census:** There are no state census records for Pennsylvania, **None!** Records or books that purport to be a Pennsylvania state census are actually reconstructed tax lists or city directories.
2. **Vital Records:** The keeping of vital records began late in Pennsylvania history. There are some for the mid 1850s but because compliance was poor recording ceased.
 - a. Birth records were kept at the county level beginning in 1893. Some larger cities began keeping birth records earlier:
 - i. Pittsburgh, 1870
 - ii. Philadelphia, 1860
 - iii. Reading, 1876
 - iv. Scranton, 1878In 1906 the state began to record births.
 - b. Marriage records were kept by the counties beginning in 1885. Again, the larger cities began at earlier time periods.
 - c. Death records at the county level began in 1893 and the state took charge in 1906. Earlier records may have may have been kept in larger cities.

Records of birth, marriage or death prior to the above dates may be recorded in church records.

In February 2012 birth records for 1906 and death records 1906-1961 were released to the general public. The indexes are on-line at the following site:

- http://www.portal.health.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/department_of_health_home/17457

The actual certificates are available at the Pennsylvania State Archives and are currently not on-line.

3. **Church Records:** Due to the lack of vital records in Pennsylvania it is of great importance that a researcher use church records. These records, depending on the denomination, may include:
 - a. baptism or christening
 - b. marriage
 - c. burial
 - d. confirmation and membership records.

A review of county histories may help determine what denominations are in your particular county and where the churches are located. Church records may be kept in the church itself or copies may be found in local historical and genealogical societies. Denominational repositories may also house records for a defunct church.

If the records are kept at an existing church, call ahead before visiting. Most churches allow access to their records. While many churches do not require a payment before checking their records, it is always a nice gesture to give a donation.

4. **Land Records:** Land records are very useful to identify the location where your ancestor lived within a county. They may also be useful in making family connections in the absence of church or vital records. After searching census records and locating where in Pennsylvania your ancestor lived, search the county land records.

It is a good idea to search the county level first and work back in time. The first purchaser of a piece of property usually obtained his land from the proprietors or the colonial government. This involved a five step process:

- Application
- Warrant
- Survey
- Return of Survey
- Patent

An important guide to understanding Pennsylvania land distribution is Donna Bingham G. Munger's *Pennsylvania Land Records: A History and Guide for Research* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1991; FHL book 974.8 R2m)

Many Pennsylvania land records are now available online. A good land and property overview is found at:

https://wiki.familysearch.org/en/Pennsylvania_Land_and_Property

5. **Probate Records:** Probate records can include wills, administrations, inventories and accounts. Among other things, these court records can reveal family relationships, economic status, and religious affiliation. Some common courts found in Pennsylvania include:

Orphan's Court: Orphan's court was to inspect and take care of the estates, usage and employment of orphans. Usually these records were kept when no will was made and property needed to be distributed to heirs. However, other records were also kept within the Orphan's Court system. Information found in these records can include:

- Approximate dates of death
- Names of survivors
- Location of property
- Marriage records
- Some births (1893-1905)
- Adoptions (since 1925)

Register of Wills: Wills are filed in each county in the "register of wills". They are indexed and may include:

- Records relating to the Probate of Wills
- Granting of Letters of Administration and Testamentary
- Responsible for collecting state inheritance taxes
- Estate inventories
- Administrator, Trustee, and Guardian Bonds
- Executor and Administrator Oaths

Prothonotary: The chief clerk and record keeper, or prothonotary is responsible for all filings related to civil cases, including:

- Filing, recording and processing all civil actions
- Equity actions
- Judgements
- Federal and local tax liens
- Family court matters
- Arbitrations
- License suspension appeals
- Applications for passports

6. **County Histories:** Many counties published local histories. These histories may include:

- Lists of early settlers
- Migration information
- Information about churches and ministers in the area
- Vital record information
- Names of missing ancestors
- Historical context for the family

Some counties have multiple histories and it is important that all available histories be used. Township histories may provide greater detail concerning the aforementioned subjects. Also, histories of the major cities in a county may prove useful.

Index to Pennsylvania County Histories. This is a 75,000-card index to people of western Pennsylvania. The index is located at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. The staff will search for two or three specific names, and there is a fee if photocopies are requested.