Pennsylvania State Research Guide

Family History Sources in the Keystone State

Pennsylvania History

The Dutch first came to the area now known as Pennsylvania following Henry Hudson's exploration of the Delaware River, the state's waterway to the Atlantic, but they did little more than establish trading posts. Swedes arrived in 1638 and, with the Finns, who came about the same time, spilled over into what is now the Philadelphia area. The Dutch gained control of this New Sweden in 1655, but nine years later England conquered New Netherland, and Pennsylvania became a part of the Duke of York's new territory, which included New York, New Jersey, and Delaware. In 1673 and 1674 the Dutch regained control, but soon the colony was back under English rule.

None of these early settlements had a more lasting impression on Pennsylvania than did William Penn's colony. Chartered in 1681 by King Charles II to Penn, a Quaker, Pennsylvania received its new governor aboard the Welcome the following year. The new immigrants were primarily English Quakers, although some were of Welsh, Scottish, and Irish ancestry. Pennsylvania became a royal province briefly from 1692 to 1694, when Penn lost his power over the conflict between the proprietary and popular elements, but the colony then resumed under the proprietary government until the American Revolution. Penn and his descendants left a long-standing influence, especially in terms of governing, in dealing with the native population, and in providing a haven of religious tolerance.

Penn's "Holy Experiment" encouraged throngs of immigrants in the next century. The two largest groups were the Ulster-Scots (also referred to as the Scots-Irish), who first came in 1707 and in greater numbers from 1728 on, and the Germans, who first arrived in 1683. The Germans, mostly from the Rhine, included subgroups that characterize those who have become known, more culturally than ethnically, as the "Pennsylvania Dutch"— Lutherans, Reformed, Mennonites, Amish, Dunkers (Dunkards), Moravians, Roman Catholics, and Schwenkfelders. After an initial settlement in Germantown (now part of Philadelphia), they became a significant portion of the population in Montgomery, Lancaster, Northampton, Lehigh, Berks, Lebanon, and York counties. The Ulster-Scots settled first in Lancaster, Dauphin, and Chester counties, and then moved westward into the Cumberland Valley. Both groups eventually contributed to the settlement of southwestern Pennsylvania. The westward movements were made despite the Allegheny Mountains that diagonally divide the rectangular-shaped state, and early settlements tended to be made in the valleys, such as the Cumberland, Lebanon, and Lehigh. Other immigrants in the 1700s included Welsh (some of whom were Quakers), French (including Huguenots, later Acadians, and at the end of the century refugees from revolution-torn France and Haiti), Irish, Jews, and African Americans. In spite of the strong Quaker influence, slavery did exist in Pennsylvania, but of the 10,000 African Americans there in 1790, over half were free, and slavery was phased out in the early 1800s.

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Most of Pennsylvania's western settlers had migrated from the eastern part of the province. Some came up from Maryland and Virginia, such as Ulster-Scots and Germans, many of whom had ventured south from Pennsylvania earlier. The Holland Land Company's territory extended into the northwestern part of Pennsylvania, where New Yorkers met Pennsylvanians coming north from Washington, Allegheny, and other southwestern counties.

It has generally been believed that the Penns dealt fairly with the Native Americans, peacefully acquiring additional territory through treaties and purchase; however, some historians question this. As settlers pushed westward, they forced the natives ahead of them, and the resulting hostilities peaked during the French and Indian War. This conflict caused Pennsylvania to create its first militia in order to defend the frontier settlements.

Connecticut claimed northeastern Pennsylvania and began sending settlers there in the 1750s. A bitter conflict ensued until Connecticut relinquished its claim through the Decree of Trenton in 1782. Other boundary disputes took place with New York and, in the southwest, with Virginia. The most famous, however, was the controversy between the Penns and Lord Baltimore. A temporary line was drawn with Maryland in 1739, but the fixed boundary was not settled until Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon's work was ratified in 1769, creating what became the historic slave/free state division between the North and South.

At the time of the Revolutionary War, Pennsylvania was the "keystone" between the northern and southern colonies since many important events took place in Philadelphia that shaped the emerging nation; in fact, the state's charter referred to the "Commonwealth" of Pennsylvania, to help express democracy. The British invaded Philadelphia and defeated the patriots at Germantown in 1776, but Pennsylvania is probably best remembered for the harsh winter of 1777–78 that Washington's poorly trained army spent at Valley Forge. During the War of 1812, Pennsylvanians were instrumental in Commodore Perry's victory on Lake Erie. (The "Erie Triangle," now Erie County, was purchased from Native Americans in 1792, to provide the state with a port on the lake. Pennsylvania's third port is Pittsburgh, whose early development was the result of its location on the Ohio River.) The Commonwealth was greatly involved in the Civil War, including the Battle of Gettysburg, a major turning point for the Union army.

In the nineteenth century Pennsylvania experienced the same growth through transportation systems of canals, roads, and railroads, as did the other mid-Atlantic states. Like its neighbors, Pennsylvania also received a large influx of new immigrants, such as Irish and Germans, followed by Italians, Poles, Scandinavians, Russians, Slovaks, and others. Many of these groups, as well as African Americans migrating north, took part in the tremendous industrial growth of the Commonwealth—in the steel production in Bethlehem and Pittsburgh, the coal mining around Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, and in western Pennsylvania, and the oil fields in the northwest.

The above section is from _History of Pennsylvania_ in the _Ancestry.com Wiki,_ and was originally published in _Red Book: American State, County and Town Sources,_ ed. by Alice Eichholz, CG, Ph.D., chapter by Roger D. Joslyn.

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Pennsylvania Census Records

Pennsylvania was part of the first federal census in 1790. Although Pennsylvania did not take any state censuses, they did take what has become known as the "Septennial Censuses," beginning in 1779. These were lists of eligible taxpayers and do not include all residents of the state.

The following census collections are available on Ancestry:

- Pennsylvania, Septennial Census, 1779-1863
- Pennsylvania, Compiled Census and Census Substitutes Index, 1772-1890
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, African-American Census, 1847 [A listing by the Society of Friends (Quakers) of free African-Americans in the Philadelphia area; does not include those who were living with white families.]
- Selected U.S. Federal Census Non-Population Schedules, 1850-1880 (Includes the 1850, 1860, and 1870 Social Statistics schedules for Pennsylvania)
- U.S. Federal Census Mortality Schedules, 1850-1885
- U.S. Federal Census - 1880 Schedules of Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes
- U.S. Special Census on Deaf Family Marriages and Hearing Relatives, 1888-1895
- 1890 Veterans Schedules
- 1930 Census of Merchant Seamen
- U.S. Enumeration District Maps and Descriptions, 1940

Population	
1790	434,373
1800	602,365
1810	810,091
1820	1,049,458
1830	1,348,243
1840	1,724,033
1850	2,311,786
1860	2,906,215
1870	3,521,951
1880	4,282,891
1890	5,258,113
1900	6,302,115
1910	7,665,111
1920	8,720,017
1930	9,631,350
1940	9,990,180

Pennsylvania Vital Records

Civil vital records in Pennsylvania are practically nonexistent before 1885. Some counties recorded births, marriages and burials when a state law required it from 1852-1854; surviving copies can be found at the Pennsylvania State Archives. Some locations took it upon themselves to maintain vital records, the largest being Philadelphia (1860-1893). Other locations with scattered local coverage include Allegheny, Easton, Harrisburg, Pottsville, Pittsburgh, and Williamsport.

Statewide registration of births and deaths began in 1906; compliance with the statewide registration was incomplete for the first several years. Birth records are public record 105 years after the birth; death records become public 50 years after the death.

County Orphans' Courts began recording marriages in 1885. Marriages are not recorded on the state level. Marriage records can be found in the Orphans Court in the county where the marriage license was granted.

- Pennsylvania Department of Health: Holds birth and death records from 1906 to present.
- Pennsylvania State Archives: Has copies of various vital records, including some from localities that kept records before mandated by the state.

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Vital Records on Ancestry.com
- Pennsylvania, Death Certificates, 1906-1944
- Pennsylvania, Veterans Burial Cards, 1777-1999
- Pennsylvania, Oliver H. Bair Funeral Records Index, 1920-1980 (mostly Philadelphia records)
- Pennsylvania, Marriage Records, 1700-1821
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Death Certificates Index, 1803-1915

Immigration & Travel

- Philadelphia Passenger Lists, 1800-1948
- Philadelphia, Passenger and Immigration Lists, 1800-1850
- Pennsylvania, U.S. Naturalization Originals, 1795-1930
- Philadelphia Bank Immigrant Passage Records, 1890-1949
- U.S. Naturalization Record Indexes, 1791-1992 (Indexed in World Archives Project)
- U.S. and Canada, Passenger and Immigration Lists Index, 1500s-1900s

All Pennsylvania Immigration & Travel collections

Military Collections

- Pennsylvania, Veteran Compensation Applications, WWII, 1950
- Pennsylvania, Revolutionary War Battalions and Militia Index, 1775-1783
- Pennsylvania, Spanish War Compensation, 1898-1934
- Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of 1812
- Pennsylvania, War of 1812 Pensions, 1866-1879

Other Collections

- Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Church and Town Records, 1708-1985
- Pennsylvania, Tax and Exoneration, 1768-1801
- U.S., Quaker Meeting Records, 1681-1935
- U.S., Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy, Vol I-VI, 1607-1943
- U.S., Indexed Early Land Ownership and Township Plats, 1785-1898
- U.S., Indian Census Rolls, 1885-1940
- U.S. Map Collection, 1513-1990
- U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989 (Use the browse box in the upper right corner to determine what directories are available for your ancestor's area. If they lived in a rural area, check to see if that area was included with a larger city in the vicinity.)
- U.S. School Yearbooks, 1880-2012 (Search by name or use the browse box on the right-hand side of the page to look for yearbooks from your ancestor's school.)

View all Pennsylvania collections on Ancestry

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Other State Resources

The organizations listed below provide information about Pennsylvania history and genealogy. In addition to these state-level resources, many counties and towns maintain important genealogical collections in local libraries, genealogical societies, or historical societies, so check for a local resource when researching.

- Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania
- Historical Society of Pennsylvania
- PAGenWeb
- Pennsylvania State Archives
- State Library of Pennsylvania
  - Genealogy and History
- The National Archives at Philadelphia: This facility maintains records from Federal agencies and courts in Pennsylvania, including census, military, court, naturalization, and immigration records.

Local and Regional Research

- Afro-American Historical and Genealogical Society, Pittsburgh Chapter
- Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh
- Family Quest Society of Philadelphia (focus on African-American research)
- Mid-Atlantic Germanic Society
- Western Pennsylvania Genealogical Society

Help and Advice

- Map of Pennsylvania
- Pennsylvania Family History Research
- Pennsylvania County Resources

Pittsburgh, Pa., Pittsburgh Harbor, The Point and Three Rivers, from Mt. Washington.
From U.S. Historical Postcards

Significant Dates (through 1940)

Native American tribes inhabiting present-day Pennsylvania include the Lenni-Lenape (Delaware) in the east, the Shawnee and Susquehannock in the west, and the tribes of the Iroquois confederation in the north.

1609 – Henry Hudson claimed much of present-day Pennsylvania for the Dutch.

1643 – Swedes established first permanent settlement in Pennsylvania on Tinicum Island.

1655 – The Dutch seized the Swedish settlements.

1664 – England seized the Dutch settlements.

1681 – King Charles II issued a royal grant to William Penn.

1682 – Duke of York deeded additional land to William Penn; Penn arrived in Pennsylvania (Latin for "Penn's Woods").

1683 – Penn and the Lenni Lenape (or Delaware) Indians signed a friendship treaty.

1683 – Mennonites from Germany founded Germantown.

1686 – Penn purchased land by the Lehigh River from the Lenni Lenape Indians.

1688 – Quakers in Germantown passed first antislavery resolution in America.

1701 – The Charter of Privileges was adopted. It recognized the authority of the King and created a local governing body to propose and execute laws.

1712 – The Pennsylvania Assembly banned the importation of slaves.

1727 – William Penn's three sons became Proprietors of Pennsylvania; agents sent to the Minisink Lands along the upper Delaware River to settle matters between local Native Americans and settlers from New York who were outside of the lands that Penn had purchased.

1731 – Benjamin Franklin founded The Library Company, the first library open to the public in America.

1733 – Reading was founded; became home to numerous iron foundries.

1737 – The "Walking Purchase" resulted in Pennsylvania gaining more land from Native Americans. The new boundary was supposed to be the point where a man could walk in a day and a half. Despite the popular notion that whites gained more land by running instead of walking, the real trouble was with the politics surrounding the treaty and its later enforcement. (See "The Walking Purchase" by the Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission.)

1740 – The oldest synagogue in Pennsylvania, Kahal Koadosh Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, was organized. It is the second oldest congregation in the United States.

1754 – The French and Indian War began.

1755 – British General Edward Braddock and his men failed in their attempt to capture Fort Duquesne (present-day Pittsburgh). It was a huge disaster and became known as Braddock's Defeat.

1758 – Fort Duquesne was captured by the British.

1767 – The border between Pennsylvania and Maryland was established; it came to be called the Mason-Dixon Line.

1774 – The First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia.

1774 – Citizens of Carlisle passed their own declaration of independence from Great Britain.

1776 – The Declaration of Independence was written and signed.

1780 – Pennsylvania became the first state to abolish slavery.

1787 – Pennsylvania ratified the U.S. Constitution.

1790 – Philadelphia became the capital of the United States. It moved to Washington, D.C. in 1800.

1793 – Yellow fever killed 2,000 people in the Philadelphia area.

1794 – Farmers in the western part of the state led what came to be called "Whiskey Rebellion," a protest against an excise tax on distilled spirits.

1808 – In Wilkes-Barre, anthracite coal was burned for the first time as fuel.

1811 – The first steamboat left Pittsburgh for New Orleans.

1812 – The state capital moved to Harrisburg.

1816 – Pittsburgh was incorporated on the site of Fort Pitt.

1829 – Yuengling Brewery opened in Pottsville; it is America's oldest brewery.

1833 – The Naval Asylum (later named the Naval Home) opened in Philadelphia for pensioners of the American Navy.

1840 – Pennsylvania defaulted on its bond debt.

1845 – A major fire in Pittsburgh destroyed more than 1,000 buildings.

1850 – Law was passed stating that a woman's property could not be subject to her husband's debts.

1851 – The Christiana Riot occurred when African-Americans and abolitionists fought with a group from Maryland who were trying to recapture four fugitive slaves.

1859 – Oil was discovered near Titusville, beginning a major oil boom.

1861 – The Civil War began. Pennsylvania contributed approximately 360,000 men to the Union Army; 40,000 to the Union Navy; 25,000 in the state militia, and 8,600 in the United States Colored Troops.

1863 – In July, Union and Confederate armies fought the Battle of Gettysburg. It became a turning point in the war. In November, Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address and dedicated the national cemetery there.

1869 – A coal mine fire in Avondale killed 108 miners and two would-be rescuers. The disaster spurred the labor union movement.

1877 – The Great Railroad Strike of 1877 began with workers striking against the Pennsylvania Railroad in Pittsburgh. It spread to become a national strike across several states and against multiple railroads.

1879 – The Carlisle Indian Industrial School opened.

1885 – County Orphans' Courts began keeping marriage records.

1889 – The Johnstown Flood, the results of the bursting of the South Fork Dam, destroyed much of the town and killed more than 2,000 people.

1894 – Milton Hershey founded Hershey Foods and the town of Hershey.

1897 – The state capitol in Harrisburg was destroyed by fire.

1902 – Strikes closed coal mines all summer; President Roosevelt forced mine owners into arbitration.

1906 – Statewide registration of births and deaths began.

1918 – Influenza pandemic hit the United States. Philadelphia became the city with the highest death toll in the nation; more than 11,000 people died there.

1918 – Race riots broke out in Philadelphia; four people were killed.

1933 – Blue laws that prohibited Sunday sports were repealed.

1938 – Crystal Bird Fauset became the first African-American woman elected to a state legislature.