

Pennsylvania Historical Background

History

Effective family research requires some understanding of the historical events that may have affected your family and the records about them. Learning about wars, governments, laws, migrations, and religious trends may help you understand political boundaries, family movements, and settlement patterns. These events may have led to the creation of records that your family was listed in, such as land and military documents.

The following are important dates in the history of Pennsylvania that affected political boundaries, record keeping, and family movements:

1633-1674	The Dutch, Swedes, and English established the first European settlements in Pennsylvania.
1680s	William Penn founded the colony of Pennsylvania after receiving a grant in 1681 from the king of England. His colony offered religious freedom, liberal government, and inexpensive land. Quakers established the city of Philadelphia.
1700-1754	Welsh, German, and Scotch-Irish groups arrived.
1754	The French and Indian War started in western Pennsylvania.
1763-1789	The boundaries between Pennsylvania and the neighboring states were settled: Connecticut (1782), Maryland (1763), New York (1789), and Virginia (1779).
1776	The Revolutionary War began. The state constitution was adopted.
1787	Pennsylvania became the second state to ratify the Constitution.
1790-1800	Philadelphia was the capital of the United States.
1811	Steamboats began traveling from Pittsburgh to New Orleans.
1834	The railroad-canal line extended from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh.
1898	Over 300,000 men were involved in the Spanish-American War, which was fought mainly in Cuba and the Philippines.
1917-1918	More than 26 million men from the United States ages 18 through 45 registered with the Selective Service for World War I, and over 4.7 million American men and women served during the war.
1930s	The Great Depression closed many factories and mills. Many small farms were abandoned, and many families moved to cities.
1940-1945	Over 50.6 million men ages 18 to 65 registered with the Selective Service. Over 16.3 million American men and women served in the armed forces during World War II.
1950-1953	Over 5.7 million American men and women served in the Korean War.
1950s-1960s	The building of interstate highways made it easier for people to move long distances.
1964-1972	Over 8.7 million American men and women served in the Vietnam War.

Your ancestors will become more interesting to you if you also use histories to learn about the events that were of interest to them or that they may have been involved in. For example, by using a history you might learn about the events that occurred in the year your great-grandparents were married.

Historical Sources

You may find state or local histories in the Family History Library Catalog under Pennsylvania or the county or the town. For descriptions of records available through Family History Centers or the Family History Library, click on Family History Library Catalog in the window to the left. The descriptions give book or film numbers, which you need to find or to order the records.

Local Histories

Some of the most valuable sources for family history research are local histories. Published histories of towns, counties, and states usually contain accounts of families. They describe the settlement of the area and the founding of churches, schools, and businesses. You can also find lists of pioneers, soldiers, and civil officials. Even if your ancestor is not listed, information on other relatives may be included that will provide important clues for locating your ancestor. A local history may also suggest other records to search.

Most county and town histories include separate sections or volumes containing biographical information. These may include information on 50 percent or more of the families in the locality.

In addition, local histories should be studied and enjoyed for the background information they can provide about your family's lifestyle and the community and environment in which your family lived.

About 5,000 county histories have been published for over 80 percent of the counties in the United States. For many counties there is more than one history. In addition, tens of thousands of histories have been written about local towns and communities. Bibliographies that list these histories are available for nearly every state.

For descriptions of bibliographies for Pennsylvania available through Family History Centers or the Family History Library, click on Family History Library Catalog in the window to the left. Look under BIBLIOGRAPHY or HISTORY - BIBLIOGRAPHY.

Local histories are extensively collected by the Family History Library, public and university libraries, and state and local historical societies. Two useful guides are:

Filby, P. William. *A Bibliography of American County Histories*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1985. (FHL book 973 H23bi.)

Kaminkow, Marion J. *United States Local Histories in the Library of Congress*. 5 vols. Baltimore: Magna Charta Book, 1975-76. (FHL book 973 A3ka.)

State History

The Family History Library has many local histories and handbooks to help you with your research. Sources for studying the history of Pennsylvania include:

Egle, William Henry. *An Illustrated History of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: Civil, Political, and Military from its Earliest Settlement to the Present Time, Including Historical Descriptions of Each County in the State, Their Towns, and Industrial Resources*. Philadelphia: E. M. Gardner, 1880. (FHL book 974.8 H2eg; film 1697290 item 11.)

Donehoo, George P. *Pennsylvania; A History*. 9 vol. contents: [1-4] History. [5-9] Biography. New York: Lewis Historical Pub. Co., 1926-1931. (FHL book 974.8 H2ph; vols. 4, 5, and 8 are on 3 FHL films beginning with 1320599 item 5.)

Stevens, Sylvester Kirby. *Pennsylvania: The Heritage of a Commonwealth*. 4 vol. West Palm Beach, Florida: The American Historical Company, 1968. (FHL book 974.8 H2sp.)

Pennsylvania has the following excellent bibliographic resources for materials on history:

- Bining, Arthur C., et al. *Writing on Pennsylvania History: A Bibliography*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1946. (FHL book 974.8 A3bw.) This and the following book often provide comments about the value of the source being described.
- Wilkinson, Norman B. *Bibliography of Pennsylvania History*. 2d ed. Harrisburg, Pa.: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1957. (FHL book 974.8 H23b; film 1036387 item 3.) This book updates and expands the previous book.
- Wall, Carol. *Bibliography of Pennsylvania History: A Supplement*. Harrisburg, Pa.: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1976. (FHL book 974.8 H23b supp.; film 1036387 item 4.) This and the following book continue the effort of the previous works, although they do not provide comments on the value of any listing.
- Trussell, John B. B. Jr. *Pennsylvania Historical Bibliography*. Vols. 1-6. Harrisburg, Pa.: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1979-1989. (FHL book 974.8 H23p.) This work updates the bibliographies cited above. The library has vol. 1 only.

A very helpful source in addition to the above bibliographies is Dennis B. Downey and Francis J. Bremer, *A Guide to the History of Pennsylvania* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993; FHL book 974.8 H23g.) Of special value is the description of research collections in Pennsylvania archives and manuscript repositories. However, it does not include genealogy societies.

Potentially helpful histories of Pennsylvania counties compiled in 1939-1942 as in the Historical Records Survey (Pennsylvania), *Notes on County Histories and Points of Interest for American Guide Series* (FHL films 1016396-401). The counties are filed mostly in alphabetical order, and while a general format seems to be followed, they vary in the kind of information given.

United States History

The following are only a few of the many sources that are available at most large libraries:

- Schlesinger, Jr., Arthur M. *The Almanac of American History*. Greenwich, Conn.: Bison Books, 1983. (FHL book 973 H2alm.) This provides brief historical essays and chronological descriptions of thousands of key events in United States history.
- Webster's Guide to American History: A Chronological, Geographical, and Biographical Survey and Compendium*. Springfield, Mass.: G&C Merriam, 1971. (FHL book 973 H2v.) This includes a history, some maps, tables, and other historical information.
- Dictionary of American History*, Revised ed., 8 vols. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976. (FHL book 973 H2ad.) This includes historical sketches on various topics in U.S. history, such as wars, people, laws, and organizations.