

Migration Routes Across America

Throughout American History, people have gathered their family, their possessions, sold heir land, and moved onward to a new locality. Understanding the reasons and routes for your ancestor's migration journey is an important part of family history research.

Why Migration Matters

- People traveled along pre-existing migration routes and settled near roads and waterways.
- Understanding migration routes and trails can help you retrace your ancestor's steps and identify their place of origin.
- Following migration routes helps to identify additional localities where you are ancestor may have lived, identifying new avenues and new localities for additional research.
- Understanding the migration route followed by your ancestors can add historical background to their life story and help you understand their migration journey.

Reasons for Migrating

- Land on which your ancestor resided may have become too depleted or the acreage too small to support a family. Migration offered to opportunity to purchase large tracts of cheap land which was relatively untouched.
- Families often migrated together. One family member may have migrated and then encouraged other family members to follow. The same is true of religious and ethnic groups.
- New settlements brought new economic opportunities. Whereas cities in the east were becoming overcrowded, the west offered a chance to start fresh.

Colonial Roads

Most migration during the colonial area took place by sea. Roads in this time period connected individual towns. Major roads in this time period include:

Boston Post Road (1664). In 1664, after England took control of New York (formerly New Netherland), King Charles II expressed a desire for a postal road to connect Boston, Massachusetts and New York City, New York. Early on, this road was difficult to locate unless you were a post rider. The route was eventually widened and a stagecoach started making regular trips between the two cities in 1735.

Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Boston_Post_Road.

King's Highway (1664-1735). The King's Highway ran along the coast from Boston, Massachusetts to Charleston, South Carolina, covering the Boston Post Road from Boston to New York. South of New York, after a ferry ride, the route headed south along the Virginia coast. The tidewater region of Virginia and the Carolinas was difficult to traverse and it was often faster to travel to Charleston by boat. The final section of road connecting to Charleston was not completed until 1735. The King's Highway eventually stretch from Maine to Georgia, though the name "King's Highway" fell out of favor during the American Revolution. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/King%27s_Highway.

Fall Line Road (1735). On the eastern coast, water falls where the land drops from the piedmont to the coastal plain. Towns were built along the fall line, some as forts against Native American attacks and some to help transport goods up the river. These towns were connected by the Fall Line Road. The Fall Line Road splits off from the King's Highway at Fredericksburg, Virginia and runs parallel to the King's

Highway. The Fall Line Road travels through Macon, Georgia, and eventually ended at Montgomery, Alabama. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Fall_Line_Road.

Upper Road (1740s). The Upper Road runs parallel to King's Highway and the Fall Line Road. It separates from the Fall Line Road at Fredericksburg and reconnects with the same road at Macon, Georgia. The Upper Road was used by the Scots-Irish who settled the backcountry of Virginia and the Carolinas. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Upper_Road.

Great Valley Road (1740s). The Great Valley Road or Great Wagon Road was one of the most important migration routes in the American South. The Great Valley Road started at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The road headed west through Lancaster and Gettysburg before turning southwest through the Shenandoah Valley, eventually ending at Knoxville, Tennessee. Migrants traveling along the Great Valley Road had several access points to other roads that would take them beyond the Appalachians. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Great_Valley_Road.

Pioneer Road (1746). The Pioneer Road is a short road that connects the towns of Alexandria, Virginia and Winchester, Virginia. The Pioneer Road effectively connects the King's Highway with the Great Valley Road, allowing immigrants to enter the United States at Baltimore and connect with the Great Valley Road. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Pioneer_Road.

Beyond the Appalachians

The Appalachian Mountains were a natural barrier to westward migration. Finding a route through the mountains was essential to opening up migration into the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys.

Braddock's Road (1755). During the French and Indian War, British General Edward Braddock constructed a road from Fort Cumberland (on the Potomac River) to the French owned Fort Duquesne, located on the forks of the Ohio and Allegheny Rivers. General Braddock employed 3,000 men to construct a road 12 feet wide following a path laid out by George Washington. Unfortunately, General Braddock did not reach Fort Duquesne and he died in an ambush along the way. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Braddock%27s_Road.

Forbes' Road (1758). Following Braddock's death, General John Forbes constructed a second road through Pennsylvania starting at Carlisle (located west of Harris' Ferry or Harrisburg). General Forbes employed 4,000 men to complete the road that bears his name. When General Forbes and his men reached Fort Duquesne, the French had abandoned the Fort. General Forbes renamed it Fort Pitt (now Pittsburgh). Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Forbes_Road.

Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. After the American Revolution, migrants could travel either Braddock's or Forbes roads to Pittsburgh. From there, they could buy or rent a boat to take them down the Ohio River to one of the many settlements along either the Ohio or Mississippi Rivers. Eventually, a road from Uniontown, Pennsylvania (along Braddock's Road) to Wheeling, West Virginia, shortened the journey. Learn more about the Ohio River at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Ohio_River. Learn more about the Mississippi River at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Mississippi_River.

Kanawha Trail. Departing from the Great Valley Road at Stanton, Virginia, the Kanawha Trail traveled northwest until it reached the Ohio River. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Kanawha_Trail.

Wilderness Road (1775). Starting at Sapling Grove (Bristol), Virginia, located on the Great Valley Road near the Tennessee border, Daniel Boone and company blazed the Wilderness Road through the Cumberland Gap in 1775. In Kentucky, the Wilderness Road diverges and the north fork eventually ended at Maysville, Kentucky on the Ohio River. By 1790, more than 70,000 people had traveled the

Wilderness Road. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Wilderness_Road.

Zane's Trace (1796-1797). Zane's Trace started at Wheeling, West Virginia and traveled southwest to Maysville, Kentucky, connecting Braddock's Road and the Wilderness Road. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Zane%27s_Trace.

Avery's Trace (1787-1788). Avery's Trace connected Knoxville (at the end of the Great Valley Road) with Nashville, Tennessee. Learn more https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Avery%27s_Trace.

Natchez Trace (early-1796). Starting at Natchez, Mississippi, the Natchez Trace traveled northeast to Nashville, Tennessee, connecting with Avery's Tracy. By 1796, the Natchez Trace was extended Maysville, Kentucky. This allowed boatmen to travel down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers and then return to Wheeling along the Natchez and Zane's Trace. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Natchez_Trace.

National Road (1811-1850). The first federally funded road project, the National Road connected Cumberland, Maryland with Vandalia, Illinois. Though authorized in 1806, construction did not start until 1811. Early parts of the National Road were 30 feet wide and macadamized. The National Road replaced parts of Braddock's Road and Zane's Trace. The National Road reached Springfield, Ohio in 1838 and Vandalia, Illinois in 1850. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/National_Road.

Federal Road (early 1800s). The Federal Horse Path was a postal route connecting Macon, Georgia, and New Orleans, Louisiana. The path was widened to accommodate wagons during the War of 1812. The Federal Road was one of the primary routes used by migrants headed for Texas. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Federal_Horse_Path.

Mohawk or Iroquois Trail. The Mohawk or Iroquois Trail connected Albany, New York with Oswego, New York on Lake Ontario with a fork connecting Albany to Lake Ontario. The Mohawk Trail (later a Turnpike) was one of the primary routes used by emigrants heading for Canada (including Loyalists). Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Mohawk_or_Iroquois_Trail.

Great Genesee Road. The Great Genesee Road connected Albany, New York with Lake Erie. This allowed for migration across Lake Erie to Cleveland and access to Detroit and Chicago. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Great_Genesee_Road.

Erie Canal. Connecting the Hudson River (at Albany, New York) with Lake Erie, the Erie Canal was constructed from 1817 to 1825. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Erie_Canal.

Settling the West

Settling the west brought new challenges. Early settlement along the west coast required migrants to traverse unsettled land before reaching their destination. These early routes had to navigate a desert landscape with less available water while also crossing mountain ranges.

Santa Fe Trail (1821). After Mexico gained independence in 1821, the Santa Fe Trail moved goods into and out of Mexico. The trail connected western Missouri with Santa Fe, New Mexico. Existing trails out of Sant Fe connected to Mexico City, Mexico (along the Camino Real) and Los Angeles, California (along the Old Spanish Trail). Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Santa_Fe_Trail.

Oregon Trail (1841). The Oregon Trail was used by migrants headed to the Columbia River Valley in present-day Oregon and Washington. The Oregon Trail connected the Mississippi River with Oregon City, Oregon, a distance of almost 2,000 miles. More than 100,000 migrants traveled the Oregon Trail between 1841 and 1869. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Oregon_Trail.

Mormon Trail (1847). After leaving Nauvoo, Illinois, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

day Saints (known colloquially as Mormons) traversed the land across Iowa to Florence, Nebraska and then Salt Lake City, Utah along the Mormon Trail. The Mormon Trail overlapped or paralleled the Oregon Trail for much of its distance. Before 1869, more than 70,000 migrants followed the Mormon Trail. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Mormon_Trail.

California Trail (1849). After gold was discovered in California in 1848, more than 250,000 people traveled to California along the California Trail. The California Trail followed the Oregon Trail until central Idaho where the trail headed southwest along the Humboldt River. An alternate route took migrants along the Mormon Trail to Salt Lake City, Utah before joining the California Trail in Idaho. Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/California_Trail.

Ocean Route to San Francisco (1849). An alternate route to California took migrants around Cape Horn at the tip of South America, a journey lasting 4-6 months. To shorten the trip, some migrants traveled by ship to Panama, crossed the Panama Isthmus, and caught another ship to San Francisco. Upwards of 40,000 people traveled to San Francisco by boat between April 1849 and January 1850.

First Transcontinental Railroad (1869). Starting in 1868, the Union Pacific Railroad laid tracks west from Omaha, Nebraska, and the Central Pacific Railroad laid tracks east from Sacramento. On May 10, 1869, the two rail lines met at Promontory Point (north of Ogden, Utah). Learn more at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/First_Transcontinental_Railroad. Learn more about other transcontinental railroads at https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/US_Migration_Railroads

Migration Records

Very few migration records exist. However, many other record types can help when researching ancestors who migrated, including:

- **Home Sources.** Family bibles, letters, diaries, journals, and biographies may include the details of a migration.
- **County Histories.** County histories describe early settlers and may indicate why the area was settled. Histories may also include biographies which may include information about migrations.
- **Newspapers.** Newspapers may have published lists or information about individuals arriving or leaving a locality. Newspapers may also provide evidence of migrations in obituaries.
- **Federal Land Records.** The federal government offered free land (called Donation Lands) to individuals who arrived in Oregon or New Mexico by a certain date. Migrants who obtained land under these acts would need to verify their migration and date of arrival.
- **Census Records.** Use census records to identify when your ancestor migrated. Also use birth years and places of children to identify migrations not directly suggested by census records.
- **Land and Tax Records.** Use land records and tax records to determine when your ancestor first purchased land or paid taxes in a new area, suggesting a date of migration.

Migration Strategy

Determining when and how your ancestor migrated may help determine their point of origin. Follow migration routes backwards, exploring localities and record along the way. Research the other members of your ancestor's ethnic and religious group. Identify their migration patterns. Also identify the migration patterns of your ancestor's neighbors. Use these tools to help identify your ancestor's migration story.