

Tracing Ancestors on the Move in America

Class 4: Strategies for Tracing Migrations

Ann G. Lawthers, ann.lawthers@nehgs.org

Introduction

Tracing our ancestor's migration begins with identifying where they began the migration OR where they ended the migration. The next step involves learning as much as possible about one or both of these locations. If the date of the migration is after 1790, the U.S. Federal Census is the first tool of choice for learning about migration.

This presentation describes three strategies for tracing migrations:

- Learning the major migration trails that were available for each time period and location
- Using tools such as the U.S. federal census, land records, military records, maps, county histories and genealogies
- Leveraging techniques such as cluster analysis and chain migration study to trace your ancestor's path

Migration Trails

Your ancestor needed not only motivation but also a path – road or water – and a mode of transportation to migrate. During the colonial period, the modes of transportation were fairly limited, usually horseback and a few types of water travel.

It wasn't until late in the Revolutionary War that flatboats were introduced on the Ohio River to ship goods to New Orleans and became a dominant force in water migration for over a decade. The canal boat, towed by horses or mules, was introduced about 1795 on the South Hadley Canal in Massachusetts. Steamboats in the second decade of the nineteenth century revolutionized travel on the Mississippi and the Great Lakes. And once the railroad was introduced in 1827, it grew to become the dominant mode of transportation.

Time	Dominant modes of transportation
1600s	Horseback Canoe, rowboat, shallop, seafaring boat
1781	Flat boats – introduced for trade and travel on Ohio River and Mississippi
1795	Canal boat - South Hadley, MA Canal
1811	Steamboat - for lower Mississippi and 1818 for Great Lakes
1827	Railroad –Baltimore & Ohio



Consider the time period of your ancestor’s migration and the locations involved to make an educated guess as to whether they used any of the routes described below.

Routes of the Northeast

There were a handful of routes used by colonial and early nineteenth century settlers. The stopping places along these routes identify where your ancestor may have left records.

Table 1: Routes of the Northeast

Year Begun	Name and Description
1644	Boston Post Road – three branches – Boston to NYC
1699	Albany Post Road – Albany to NYC
1722	Mohawk Trail Boston to Utica, NY
1735	Kings Highway – continued Boston Post Road from NYC to Charleston SC.
1745	Catskill Road – Springfield to Catskill, Greene County, NY on Hudson
1753	Mohawk Trail - Utica to Oswego
1794	Great Genesee Road – Syracuse to Buffalo
1825	Erie Canal – Albany to Buffalo

Routes of the Mid-Atlantic and Ohio

Routes in the Mid-Atlantic region were shaped by the topography. The first three listed here followed the Appalachian valley, the fall line (a geologic feature between coastal flat land and piedmont plateau marked by waterfalls), and the Upper Road. The Great Valley Road, known by various names such as the Wagon Road, and Warrior’s Path. The next two listed were forged during the Seven Years war for military purposes. Zane’s Trace was to provide new access to Ohio lands and the last was a federal government initiative to facilitate travel into Indiana and Illinois.

Table 2: Routes of the Mid-Atlantic and Ohio

Year Begun	Name and Description
1730	Great Valley Road – Philadelphia to Roanoke
1735	Fall Line Road – Fredericksburg, VA to Camden, SC
1748	Upper Road – Fredericksburg, VA to Charlotte, NC
1755	Braddock’s Road – Cumberland, MD to Pittsburg, PA
1758	Forbes Road – Harrisburg, PA to Pittsburg, PA
1775	Wilderness Road – Bristol, VA to Lexington, KY
1800	Zane’s Trace - Wheeling WV to Maysville, KY
1818	National Road – Baltimore, MD to Vandalia, IL

Routes of the Southeast to the Mississippi

These roads are all post-Revolutionary War as settlement west of the Appalachian Mountain chain was off limits per proclamation of King Charles in 1763. Part of this area was also, as you learned in class one,

administratively under Spanish rule. Again, knowing the route helps you identify where to look for records.

The famous Natchez trace was founded in 1797 and was a way for merchants who had traveled by water down the Ohio to the Mississippi and thence to New Orleans, to leave their boats and goods in New Orleans and return on foot to their starting point.

The Federal Road was made possible when the Creek people granted permission for a “horse path” through their nation to allow more efficient delivery of mail between Washington, DC, and New Orleans. During the War of 1812, it was widened into a war road.

The War of 1812 also saw the creation of General Jackson’s Road, General Carroll’s Road and McCreay’s Path, the latter also known as St. Stephen’s Road, in Alabama and Mississippi.

Table 3: Routes of the Southeast and to the Mississippi

Year Begun	Name and Description
1797	Natchez Trace – Natchez MS to Nashville, TN
1806	Federal Road – Macon GA to Mobile, AL
1814	General Jackson’s Road – Nashville to New Orleans
1814	General Carroll’s Road – New Orleans to Jackson, MS
1814	McCreay’s Path – St. Stephens to Natchez, MS

Tools

The most frequently used tool for tracing migration is the U.S. Federal Census. Other tools include land and military records as well as maps, county histories and compiled genealogies.

Census

The U.S. Federal Census is the workhorse tool for tracing migrations. It captures the places your ancestor lived on a ten-year cycle but also, from 1850 forward, gives you clues about family movements between census years. These clues are provided by the ages and birth locations of children. Compare the list of children between two consecutive censuses and note the ages of the children and where they were born. Then create a timeline of the children by estimated birth year and birth location. This is the family’s migration pattern.

Each location may have records about the family and should be checked.

Land

Land records help with migration studies in several ways. First, a single deed may name the prior or subsequent residence of one of the parties. A series of deeds spread over different locations shows the path and timing of a migration.

Try to locate the first or last deed of an ancestor at a location as these may mention previous or subsequent locations.

Military

Military enlistment and pension records may show migration. On enlistment record pages, identify where the soldier enlisted and where he mustered out or deserted. These locations may be where he began a new life after military service. Pension files may include discharge certificates showing the same information as the enlistment file but may be easier to read.

The Pension Payment records document when a veteran moves after being approved for a pension. Once having gone through the extensive process of applying and being approved for a pension, a soldier wanted to be sure that he received his payments on time!

Maps

Maps serve as an important resource for tracing our migrating ancestors. Maps allow you to piece together your family puzzle. First, they show the travel and migration routes. Maps allow one to follow family groups over time and to visualize the land on which they lived. Were they near towns? What geographic barriers did they encounter? And you can use maps to summarize the data you have painstakingly assembled through your research. Maps allow you to think broadly and shift your focus away from an individual to a place to break down brick walls.

Many different types of maps may be used in your research such as:

- Cadastral maps (land/property ownership)
- Topographical maps (geographic features)
- Insurance (Sanborn)/real estate maps
- Ward and enumeration district maps
- Land surveys or plat maps
- Road maps

In addition to these primary map sources, there are maps that have been purpose constructed, that is for the purpose of showing and understanding historic trends.

You can also create your own migration map using Google maps -

<https://support.google.com/mymaps/answer/3024454?hl=en&co=GENIE.Platform%3DDesktop> .

County Histories and Genealogies

If you know your ancestor's migration endpoint, do check out local town and county histories. Many county histories include information about the origins of early settlers, including overseas origins. Similarly, compiled genealogies may provide valuable clues.

Cluster Research and Chain Migration

When we employ cluster research strategies, it's important to be flexible and think outside the box. Put your ancestor aside for the moment and learn more about their family, associates, and neighbors, and their greater community. This method helps us to learn more about chain migration and to determine if your ancestor participated in a migration with others.

Cluster Research is also known as FAN Club research because we look at the Family, Associates, and Neighbors of our Ancestor. We take the time to learn about each member of the FAN club and determine their unique identities including their relationships and origins. We learn about the community as a whole. If you are a history buff, this is the fun part – learning about the community and who settled there.

The key questions to get you started include:

- Who else is enumerated in your ancestor's household?
- Who is living next door? Nearby?
- Who is your ancestor buying land from or selling land to? Who are the witnesses?
- Who is mentioned in your ancestor's probate proceedings?
- Who are the witnesses to marriages? Sponsors to baptisms?
- Who is providing the affidavit when your ancestor naturalized?
- Who works alongside your ancestor? Where are they from?

When using cluster research for chain migration, you seek to identify the origins of each member of the FAN club. After you have assembled your list, go through it, and build family groups and research origins. People are more likely to settle in new locations where they know people, whether it be siblings, aunts, uncles, or cousins, or simply neighbors from home. Many of our ancestors followed in the footsteps of others. Through these contacts, new immigrants could settle into pre-established communities where they could find job opportunities and support.

Capturing your research in a spreadsheet can be very helpful as it helps you identify patterns. As cluster research tends to generate a lot of data, using a tool such as a spreadsheet keep you organized. Then plot your information on a map, if appropriate.

Resources

General Resources

19th Century U.S. Canals: An Index of Internet Resource.

<http://19thcentuscanals.net.mocha3030.mochahost.com/>

Dollarhide, William (and Leland K. Meitzler), *American Migration Routes, Part 1: Indian Paths, Post Roads & Wagon Roads* (Orting, WA: Family Roots Publishing, 2022)

Dollarhide, William. *Map Guide to American Migration Routes, 1735-1815* (Bountiful, Utah: Heritage Quest, 1997)

Family Search, "US Migration Trails and Roads,"

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/US_Migration_Trails_and_Roads

Library of Congress, "Native American Trails and Places,"

<https://guides.loc.gov/native-american-spaces/published-sources/trails>

Northeast

Eldridge, Carrie. *An Atlas of Northern Trails Westward from New England* (Chesapeake, OH : C. Eldridge, 2000)

Russell, Howard. *Indian New England Before the Mayflower* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1980)

Mid-Atlantic and Ohio

Eldridge, Carrie. *An Atlas of Appalachian Trails to the Ohio River* (Chesapeake, Ohio: Carrie Eldridge, 1998)

Wallace, Paul A. W. *Indian paths of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1987)

"Pioneer Migration Routes through Ohio" <http://homepages.rootsweb.com/~maggieoh/pioneer.html>

Southeast to the Mississippi and Beyond

Eldridge, Carrie. *An Atlas of Southern Trails to the Mississippi* (Chesapeake, Ohio: C. Eldridge, 1999)

Eldridge, Carrie. *An Atlas of Trails West of the Mississippi River* (Chesapeake, Ohio: C. Eldridge, 2001)

Eldridge, Carrie. *Atlas of Settlement Between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi-Missouri Valleys* (Chesapeake, Ohio: C. Eldridge, 2006)

Foster, Lynn V. and Lawrence Foster *Fielding's Spanish Trails in the Southwest* (New York, N.Y.: Fielding Travel Books, 1986)

McClure, Rhonda R. (2003) "Understanding Midwest Migration Patterns to Further Family History Research," *BYU Family Historian: Vol. 2, Article 2*

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byufamilyhistorian/vol2/iss1/2>

Meyer, William E., *Indian Trails of the Southeast* (Nashville, Tennessee: Blue & Gray Press, 1971)

Maps

Cyndi's List: Maps & Geography, <https://www.cyndislist.com/maps/>

General Land Office Records, Bureau of Land Management [Survey Plats], <https://gloreCORDS.blm.gov/>

Library of Congress [Digital Collections: Maps],

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/?fa=partof:geography+and+map+division>

Map of US [Historical Atlases and Maps of U.S. and States], <https://www.mapofus.org/>

Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center, <https://www.leventhalmap.org/>

Paullin, Charles Oscar. *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States*. Washington, D.C., New York: Pub. jointly by Carnegie institution of Washington and the American geographical society of New York, 1932.

Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, <https://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/>

Rumsey, David, [Historical Map Collection], <https://www.davidrumsey.com/>

The Newberry Library: Atlas of Historical County Boundaries,

<https://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp/index.html>

Cluster Analysis and Chain Migration

Evidence Explained, "Quick Lesson 11: Identity Problems & the FAN Principle,"

<https://www.evidenceexplained.com/content/quicklesson-11-identity-problems-fan-principle>

Norris, Michele, "Circumstantial Evidence, *Vita Brevis*,

<https://vitabrevis.americanancestors.org/2017/07/circumstantial-evidence/>

Describes the application of cluster research