

Pennsylvania Research: Four Centuries of History and Genealogy

Class 3: 19th Century Pennsylvania, Boom Town

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History

The nineteenth century in Pennsylvania was a time of enormous change. The population grew steadily from under 1 million to over 6 million in just a century, with a sharp increase in population growth during the period of Irish potato famine.

Four wars affected Pennsylvania in the 1800s: the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War, and the Spanish-American War. But the biggest driver of change was the industrial revolution. The Steerage Act of 1819 affected transportation into the United States and the Main Line Canal and later Pennsylvania Railroad made it possible to quickly cross the mountainous state. The construction of the canals and the railroads required vast numbers of workers, many of whom were Welsh or Irish in the early part of the 19th century. In industry, mining, petroleum, and steel development attracted thousands of immigrants and fueled the population growth.

The State of Pennsylvania authorized the Main Line of Public Works to build a canal linking Philadelphia and Pittsburgh beginning in 1826. The canal and portage opened in 1834. The project nearly bankrupted the state as the Pennsylvania topography for a canal was vastly different than the New York State topography. When completed, the trip from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh only took four days.

Railroad technology advanced rapidly in the 1830s and by the 1840s and 50s, Pennsylvania became a national leader in railroad development. The first rail transport in Pennsylvania began in 1827, operated at first by horsepower or cables. The tracks connected anthracite fields with canals or rivers to transport the coal. The most important of all was the Pennsylvania Railroad, chartered April 13, 1846, and completed to Pittsburgh by 1852. It absorbed so many short railroad lines by 1860 that it had nearly a monopoly on rail traffic from Chicago through Pennsylvania. And whereas Pennsylvania had reached its maximum of 954 canal miles by 1840, total railroad trackage grew by 1860 to 2,598 miles. In miles of rail and in total capital invested in railroads, Pennsylvania led all other states on the eve of the Civil War.

The combination of rail, canals, and turnpikes fueled the massive Pennsylvania industrial growth of the 19th century, especially in the fields of mining, petroleum, and steel.

Records

The range of records for family historians in 19th century Pennsylvania includes:

- Census and census substitutes
- Vital and religious records
- Immigration and naturalization
- Newspapers
- Military and pension records

Census

Pennsylvania never conducted a state census. The so-called Septennial Census Returns, 1779-1863, counted taxpayers every seven years for the purpose of determining representation in the General Assembly. It is complete for 1800 only. Many towns also counted the number of enslaved individuals living in a county. Sometimes this data is more complete than the regular census. The table below shows surviving returns for Pennsylvania counties. If the county has both the standard and the enslaved persons census, the number “2” appears in the cell.

County	Year									
	1=standard, 2= standard + enslaved census									
	1800	1807	1814	1821	1828	1835	1842	1849	1856	1863
Allegheny	1									
Armstrong	1									
Bedford	2									
Berks	2									
Bucks	2									
Centre	1									
Chester	2	2	2							
Cumberland	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	2		
Dauphin	2	2								
Delaware	2									
Fayette	2									
Franklin	2	2	2	2	2	2	2			
Greene	1									
Huntingdon	2			2						
Lancaster	2									
Luzerne	1									
Lycoming	2									
Mifflin	1			2						
Montgomery	2	2	1	1	1	1	2			

County	Year									
	1800	1807	1814	1821	1828	1835	1842	1849	1856	1863
Northampton	2									
Northumberland	2									
Philadelphia	2									2
Somerset	2									
Washington	2									
Wayne	2									
Westmoreland	2									
York County	1	1								

Vital and Religious Records

Vital Records

Consistent Pennsylvania vital record keeping did not begin until the 20th century. There was a brief, three-year period, 1852-1855 where vital records were required to be collected by the register of wills in a county, but compliance was spotty. Only 49 counties collected some data.

Church and Cemetery Records

Church and cemetery records are the principal alternatives to civil vital records. See below under **Resources** for references.

Immigration and naturalization

Passenger lists

Before passenger lists were mandated in 1820, the go-to source for 19th-century passenger lists is Michael Tepper's book on passenger arrivals in Philadelphia. His book draws on "baggage lists" compiled to exempt incoming passengers from paying duty on their personal belongings, providing proof of immigration in the first two decades of the 19th century.

The National Archives maintains passenger lists from 1820 forward and these are available through multiple providers. See below under **Resources**.

Naturalization

In the 19th century, immigrants could file for naturalization in a variety of courts: city, county, state, or federal courts, but most often in a county court. The process involved filing a Declaration of Intent to become a citizen, filing a Petition, and then taking a final oath of allegiance to the United States and receiving a certificate.

Newspapers

The growth of newspapers exploded during the 19th century. Early newspapers tended to provide bare facts about genealogical events such as births, marriages, and deaths. By the end of the century, newspaper accounts included details about the extended family in addition to the facts of the event. See below under **Resources** for newspaper sources.

Military and pensions

Four wars affected Pennsylvania in the 19th century:

- War of 1812 (1812-1815)
- Mexican-American War (1846 to 1848)
- Civil War (1861-1865)
- Spanish American War (1898)

Of these, the Civil War was the most devastating. All conflicts generated records such as muster rolls, service records, pension applications and—for the War of 1812—bounty land applications.

County Histories

County histories became very popular at the end of the 19th century. They usually contain details of the early settlement of a county including the names of first settlers, the names of first churches, and descriptions of industry and growth. County histories often have information not found elsewhere. As a helpful finding aid for ancestors, county histories may be unparalleled. Any book published before about 1925 may be digitized and available online—see **Resources**.

Manuscripts

Even if our ancestor did not keep a diary or journal, we may find them in the diaries or journals of other individuals who lived in the same community as our ancestor. Check local historical societies for manuscript collections—see **Resources**.

Common Problems and Solutions

Typical problems in 19th-century family history research include finding vital record substitutes, distinguishing between people of the same name in the same community, making sense of the flexible spelling of names, and ascertaining the origins of immigrant ancestors.

Cluster research or FAN Club research (researching family, friends, associates, and neighbors) is an essential strategy for 19th-century research. Our ancestors did not live in a vacuum. Their associates and neighbors may have left clues about our ancestor.

For the problem of scarce Pennsylvania vital records, use substitutes such as church and cemetery records, newspapers, military records, censuses, city directories, and family papers.

A strategy for sorting common names involves identifying what makes each person unique, e.g., dates of vital events, names of wife and children, as well as the specific plot of land occupied. Constructing a timeline of documentation and events can be very helpful in this situation.

Since spelling in the 19th century continued to be flexible, the family historian should consider how a name would have sounded. Would a regional accent have altered the pronunciation? When using a search engine, employ wildcards when possible.

Finally, to start of the work of finding the ancestral home in the old country, learn all you can about the immigrant: spouse and children, siblings, associates, and neighbors.

Resources

Census

Ancestry (\$): [Pennsylvania, U.S., Septennial Census, 1779-1863](#)

City Directories

FamilySearch.org: Search the catalog. Use the “Place” field – [state], [county], [city]

Ancestry.com (\$): [“U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995”](#)

Fold3.com (\$): Select “browse” from header, type “city directories” into search and scroll to find city.

[City Directories of the United States](#) Mostly 20th century directories but includes some 19th century material.

Vital Records

Ancestry.com (\$)

- [Pennsylvania, U.S., Births, 1852-1854](#)
- [Pennsylvania, U.S., Marriages, 1852-1854](#)
- [Pennsylvania, U.S., Deaths, 1852-1854](#)

Books:

Pennsylvania vital records: from the Pennsylvania genealogical magazine and the Pennsylvania magazine of history and biography, 3 Volumes, introduction by Don Yoder (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1983). Mostly church records from southeastern Pennsylvania. Available online at Archive.org <https://archive.org/details/pennsylvaniavita0000unse> .

Church and Cemetery Records

Church Records

FamilySearch.org: Search by place – Pennsylvania, [County], [Town]

Ancestry.com (\$)

- [Pennsylvania and New Jersey, U.S., Church and Town Records, 1669-2013](#)
- [Pennsylvania, Published Archives Series](#) (series 2 and 6)

[Idreamof.com](#): By county databases

Cemetery Records

FamilySearch.org

- [Pennsylvania Cemetery Records – 1700-1950](#) (collection)
- [Cemetery Records of Pennsylvania](#) (digital book – 9 volumes)
- [Pennsylvania Cemetery Records Inventory](#) (research wiki)

FindAGrave.com

Ancestry.com

- [Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, U.S., Gettysburg National Cemetery, 1863-2009](#)
- [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S., Philadelphia National Cemetery, 1862-2010](#)

Immigration and Naturalization

Passenger Lists Pre-1820

Michael Tepper, ed., *Passenger Arrivals at the Port of Philadelphia, 1800-1819* (Baltimore: Genealogical Pub. Co., 1986)

Passenger Lists 1820 – 1899

FamilySearch.org:

- [Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Passenger Lists, 1800-1882](#) – corresponds to NARA publication M425
- [Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Passenger Lists, 1883-1945](#) – corresponds to NARA publication T840

Ancestry.com:

- [Pennsylvania, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists, 1798-1962](#) – corresponds to NARA publications M425 and T840
- [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S., Passenger and Immigration Lists, 1800-1850](#) - from M425



National Archives –

- [Access to Archival Databases](#) Three databases (Russian, German, Italian) with unique searching capabilities

Naturalizations

FamilySearch.org

- See the Pennsylvania Research Wiki articles on [Pennsylvania Naturalization and Citizenship](#)

Ancestry.com (\$)

- [Pennsylvania, U.S., Federal Naturalization Records, 1795-1931](#)
- [Pennsylvania, U.S., Naturalization Records from Supreme and District Courts, 1794-1908](#)

Newspapers

- [Ancestor Hunt](#) - Kenneth R. Marks of Arizona maintains this blog with links to online newspapers, arranged by state
- [Cyndi's List](#) - Links to online newspaper sources
- [Elephind](#) - Elephind searches across multiple online newspaper repositories simultaneously. Most sources are from the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.
- [Google News Newspaper Archive](#) - Although Google no longer digitizes newspapers, it does maintain this archive
- [Library of Congress Chronicling America \(1789-1963\)](#) - Searches historic newspapers
- [Pennsylvania Civil War Era Newspapers](#) - Collection contains all the words, photographs, and advertisements from selected newspapers published during the pivotal years before, during, and after the U.S. Civil War.
- [Pennsylvania Newspaper Archive](#) - Penn State University Libraries provides access to many of Commonwealth's digitized historical newspapers.
- [State Library of Pennsylvania](#)
- [State Library of Pennsylvania - Pennsylvania Genealogy Collection](#) Includes the Harrisburg Newspaper Index containing marriages and deaths from four newspapers from 1799 to 1827

Military and Pension

War of 1812

- Muster Rolls
 - Pennsylvania Archives: [War of 1812 Records](#)
- Service Records
 - Index at Family Search [United States War of 1812 Index to Service Records, 1812-1815](#)
 - Files at NARA: [Compiled Military Service Records for the War of 1812](#)

- Pensions
 - Index at Family Search: [United States War of 1812 Index to Pension Application Files, 1812-1910](#)
 - Index at Ancestry: [U.S., War of 1812 Pension Application Files Index, 1812-1815](#)
 - Files and index at Fold3: [War of 1812 Pension Files](#)
- Bounty Land
 - Warrants
 - Ancestry: [U.S., War Bounty Land Warrants, 1789-1858](#)

Civil War

- Draft Records
 - Ancestry:
 - [U.S., Civil War Draft Registrations Records, 1863-1865](#)
- [U.S., Civil War Prisoner of War Records, 1861-1865](#)
- Muster rolls, registers, and service records
 - PA Volunteers in the Civil War - <http://www.pacivilwar.com/cwpa55e.html>
 - Ancestry.
 - [Pennsylvania, U.S., Civil War Muster Rolls, 1860-1869](#)
 - [U.S., Army, Register of Enlistments, 1798-1914](#)
 - [U.S., Civil War Soldier Records and Profiles, 1861-1865](#)
- Pensions
 - Ancestry
 - [U.S., Civil War Pension Index: General Index to Pension Files, 1861-1934](#)

Other Wars

- Mexican War <https://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/Mexican-Conflicts.aspx>
- *Record of Pennsylvania volunteers in the Spanish-American war, 1898*: Published under the provisions of the act of assembly, approved April 13, 1899 / Comp. under the supervision of Thomas J. Stewart, adjutant general. <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008588041>

Other Resources

County Histories

- [Archive.org](#)
- [HathiTrust](#)
- [FamilySearch books](#)

Manuscripts

Pennsylvania Historical Societies - <https://www.statelibrary.pa.gov/GeneralPublic/Learn/Genealogy-and-Local-History/Pages/Pennsylvania-Genealogical--Historical-Societies.aspx>

ArchiveGrid -- <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>



American Ancestors
by NEW ENGLAND HISTORIC GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY