Pennsylvania Research: Four Centuries of History and Genealogy

Class 4: 20th-Century Pennsylvania, Growth and Decline

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Continued urbanization characterized much of 20th-century Pennsylvania. This final session will look at records that emerge in the 20th century—including state-wide vital records—as well as changes in records and record keeping that persisted since the 17th century. We will also discuss the topic of "access" and a review of key research repositories.

Growth: Immigration and Urbanization

Over the 20th Century, Pennsylvania experienced shifts in its population. During the height of immigration to the U.S. in the years leading up to 1924, those choosing Pennsylvania were coming from more southern and eastern parts of Europe. After the Immigrant Act of 1924 set quotas on the numbers from each country allowed entry into the U.S., exempt populations like Puerto Ricans and African Americans from the south came to Pennsylvania in large numbers. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 ended that restrictive system, opening Pennsylvania's doors for Africans, Southeast Asians, Indians, Mexicans, and Eastern Europeans.

Populations arriving in Pennsylvania	
When:	**Who:**
1880s-1920	Italians, Greeks
1880s-1920	Poles, Russians, Slovaks, Serbs, Croatians
1900-1920	African Americans from South
1905-1918	Jewish
1920s	Spanish-speakers
1890s-2010	Puerto Ricans
1940s-1980s	African Americans from South
1965-2000s	Africans
1970s-1990	Southeast Asian refugees, Koreans
1980s-1990s	Indians, Mexicans, Eastern Europeans

Pennsylvania's population grew during the first half of the century before plateauing. Thanks to their industrial and manufacturing might, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh were most attractive during the era of urbanization. With the decline of these and rise of the highway system, many chose to spread out into suburbs and planned communities, like Levittown.

Pennsylvania's urbanizing population			
Year	Pennsylvania	Philadelphia	Pittsburgh
1900	6.3	1.3	.322
1910	7.67	1.55	.534
1920	8.72	1.82	.588
1930	9.63	1.95	.670
1940	9.9	1.93	.672
1950	10.5	2.07	.677
2000		1.52	.335

Based on Tables 6.1 and 7.2 in *Pennsylvania: A History of the Commonwealth* (2002), 260, 323.

Key Records

Naturalization Records
The key 20th-century date for U.S. naturalization is 1906. Prior to 1906, citizenship was handled by courts of common pleas and quarter sessions. With the Comprehensive Naturalization Law of 1906, the U.S. District Courts and Supreme Court held jurisdiction over naturalizations, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) was established, and record-keeping was standardized.

Pennsylvania was divided into three U.S. court districts:
1. **Eastern** – includes Philadelphia and 8 counties: Berks, Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Lancaster, Lehigh, Montgomery, Northampton

2. **Western** – includes 25 counties: Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Bedford, Blair, Butler, Cambria, Clarion, Clearfield, Crawford, Elk, Erie, Fayette, Forest, Greene, Indiana, Jefferson, Lawrence, McKean, Mercer, Somerset, Venango, Warren, Washington, Westmoreland

3. **Middle** – created in 1901; includes 33 counties: Adams, Bradford, Cameron, Carbon, Centre, Clinton, Columbia, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata, Lackawanna, Lebanon, Luzerne, Lycoming, Mifflin, Monroe, Montour, Northumberland, Perry, Pike, Potter, Schuylkill, Snyder, Sullivan, Susquehanna, Tioga, Union, Wayne, Wyoming, York

Digitized:
- Fold3.com Naturalizations:
    - [PA Eastern](#) – 1795-1930, but goes beyond
    - [PA Middle](#) – 1901-1930, but goes beyond
    - [PA Western](#) – 1820-1930, but goes beyond

- Ancestry.com:
  - *[Pennsylvania, U.S., Federal Naturalization Records, 1795-1931](#)*
- FamilySearch.org:
  - *[Pennsylvania, Eastern District Court, Naturalization Records, 1795-1952](#)*
  - *[Pennsylvania, Eastern District Petitions for Naturalization, 1795-1931](#)*
  - *[Pennsylvania, Western District Naturalizations, 1820-1930](#)*
  - *[Pennsylvania, Allegheny, Pittsburgh, Naturalization Card File Index, 1906-1990](#)*
  - *[Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Case Files of Chinese Immigrants, 1900-1923](#)*

Passenger Lists

The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) retains passenger arrival records for U.S. ports dated between 1820 and 1982 (with some gaps). USCIS keeps post-1982 documentation. Restrictions have been placed on certain record sets within the most recent 75 years.

In 1906, manifests began to include passenger descriptions, birthplaces, and the nearest relative living in the country of origin.

Digitized:
- FamilySearch.org:
  - *[Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Passenger List Index Cards, 1883-1948](#)*
  - *[Pennsylvania, Philadelphia Passenger Lists, 1883-1945](#)*
  - *[Pennsylvania, Crew Lists arriving at Erie, 1952-1957](#)*
- Ancestry.com:
  - *[Pennsylvania, U.S., Arriving Passenger and Crew Lists, 1798-1962](#)*

City Directories

Not only do city directories help us track Pennsylvanians' addresses and occupations, but they provide information about family businesses through listings and advertisements. Beyond searching for names, try searching by address to see who lived together and by company name. Use directories to establish a timeline for when and where a person and/or business lived and died/ended.

Digitized:
- Ancestry.com:
  - [U.S., City Directories, 1822-1995](#) – includes Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and at least 75 other Pennsylvanian towns (with at least three 20th-century directories)
- Genealogy Research Associates:
  - [City Directories](#) – includes many Pennsylvanian towns
- Fold3.com City Directories:
  - [Philadelphia](#) – to 1922
  - [Pittsburgh](#) – to 1923
- Historic Pittsburgh:
  - [City Directories](#) – 1815-1962, nearly every year 1900-1945
  - [G. M. Hopkins Company Maps, 1872-1940](#)

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Newspapers
During the 20th Century, Pennsylvanian newspapers were widespread and included a variety of articles and notices that could have mentioned ancestors of any background. Look for birth, marriage, and death notices, obituaries, marriage license lists, probate notices, and real estate listings for dates for which to search for vital, probate, and land records. Search society, organizational, and sporting news for biographical tidbits about your ancestors.

Digitized:
- [Chronicling America](#)
- [Pennsylvania Newspaper Archive](#)
- [Newspapers.com](#)
- [GenealogyBank.com](#)
- [NewspaperArchive.com](#)

Decline: Industry and Military

Due to declining industries and national turbulent times during the 20th Century, Pennsylvania's population dropped from second-largest in the U.S. to sixth. Between 1930 and 2000, at least eight cities (Pittsburgh, Altoona, Johnstown, McKeesport, New Castle, Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, and Harrisburg) lost over a third of their populations while at least six others (Nanticoke, Shamokin, Monessen, Duquesne, Ambridge, and Homestead) lost over half.

Pennsylvania's major industries all declined leaving it part of the "rust belt." Coal mine disasters and poor working conditions resulted in numerous mining strikes throughout the century. Massive layoffs following steelworker strikes and poor quality-control opened the steel industry to international rivals. Textile manufacturers moved south for cheaper labor. Railroads merged and went bankrupt.

In the wake of this, Pennsylvania led with innovations in electrical manufacturing, nuclear generation of electric power, computers, agriculture, and tourism.

Pennsylvania's 20th-Century experiences were tied to national and international events like both world wars, the flu pandemic of 1918-1919, the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Korean War of the early 1950s, and the Vietnam War. Through its shipyards, mills, and factories, Pennsylvania played a vital part during the world wars, but its citizens sacrificed their lives and afterwards often lost their livelihoods.

Key Records:

Vital Records
Some cities – like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh – kept vital records earlier than the commonwealth mandated. The Clerk of Orphans Court for each county kept marriage records beginning in 1885. Between 1893 and 1906, each county's Clerk of Orphans Court was tasked with recording births and deaths. In 1906, Pennsylvania established the Department of Health to issue birth and death certificates, and compliance was reached by 1915.

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Digitized:
- Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission (PHMC):
  - [Birth Indices](#) – 1906-1917
  - [Death Indices](#) – 1906-1972
- Ancestry.com:
  - [*Pennsylvania and New Jersey, U.S., Church and Town Records, 1669-2013*](#) – especially for funeral home records
  - [*Pennsylvania, U.S., Birth Certificates, 1906-1913*](#)
  - [*Pennsylvania, U.S., Death Certificates, 1906-1969*](#)
  - [*Pennsylvania, U.S., Marriages, 1852-1968*](#)
  - [*Pennsylvania, U.S., County Marriage Records, 1845-1963*](#) – including Adams, Allegheny, Clarion, Clearfield, Fulton, Montgomery, Potter, and Snyder Counties
- FamilySearch.org:
  - [*Pennsylvania Births and Christenings, 1709-1950*](#)
  - [*Pennsylvania Delayed Birth Records, 1941-1976*](#) – for 35 counties
  - [*Pennsylvania Deaths and Burials, 1720-1999*](#)
  - [*Pennsylvania Civil Marriages, 1677-1950*](#) – including Allegheny, Bucks, Lancaster, Lehigh, Luzerne, Montgomery, and Philadelphia Counties
  - [*Pennsylvania Marriages, 1709-1940*](#)
  - [*Pennsylvania, County Marriages, 1885-1950*](#) – all 67 counties

Repositories:
- [Department of Health](#) – births and deaths since 1906, only certified copies post-1972; adoptions
- [Pennsylvania State Archives](#) – birth certificates 1906-1917, death certificates 1906-1972
- Clerk of Orphans Court – each county recorded marriages post-1885; births and deaths 1893-1906

Military

The U.S. participated in major conflicts throughout the 20th Century, and Pennsylvanians participated in high numbers. PHMC has [research guides](#) for many military records.

Digitized:
- Ancestry.com:
  - [*Pennsylvania, U.S., Spanish War Compensation, 1898-1934*](#)
  - [*Pennsylvania, U.S., World War I Veterans Service and Compensation Files, 1917-1919, 1934-1948*](#)
  - [*Pennsylvania, U.S., Veteran Compensation Application Files, WWII, 1950-1966*](#)
  - [*Pennsylvania, U.S., Veteran Burial Cards, 1777-2012*](#)
  - [*Pennsylvania, U.S., Veteran Card Files, 1775-1916*](#)
- Power Library for Military and Veterans Affairs:
  - [Applicant Files of the Pennsylvania Soldiers and Sailors Home, 1886-1949](#)
  - 8 collections for the PA Soldiers' and Sailors' Home in Erie (PA)
  - [Military Commission Books, 1800-1944](#)
  - [Korean War Compensation Application Batch Sheets and Serial Number Indexes, 1955-1967](#)

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Industry

With Pennsylvania's deep ties to industry, industrial records could provide information and context about your ancestors' experiences. Exemplifying the kinds of records that may exist for a specific industry, see the following resources concerning mines and mining.

Digitized:
- Power Library for Mines and Mineral Industries:
    - Anthracite and Bituminous Fatal Mining Accident Reports, 1936-1974
    - Registers of Mine Accidents (PA) for the Anthracite Districts, 1899-1972
    - Registers of Mine Accidents (PA) for the Bituminous Districts, 1899-1972
    - Anthracite Mine Certification Records for Foremen and Assistant Foremen, 1886-1968
    - 6 Bituminous Mine collections with 20th-Century records
    - Index Stubs and Cards to Miners' Certificates, 1937-1988
- Registers of mine accidents, 1899-1972, PDF transcriptions by Jerry Sherard, donated to PHMC
- FindMyPast.com:
    - Pennsylvania, Register of Mine Accidents
- Ancestry.com:
    - *Pennsylvania, U.S., Coal Employment Records, 1900-1954* – for Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company

Challenge: Record Accessibility

Fortunately, a variety of 20th-century record sets are readily available to research, but due to privacy laws, many are not accessible online. Understanding who keeps the records will aid our continued research.

Strategies for overcoming accessibility issues:
1. Search substitutes with similar data
    a. like city directories in place of census or land records
    b. like church records in place of vital records
    c. like veterans records in place of service records

2. Obtain records directly from Pennsylvanian repositories
    a. Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission (PHMC) – Pennsylvania Archives
    b. Historical Society of Pennsylvania
    c. Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania
    d. regional/county/local archives, libraries, courthouses, etc.

       ✓ Tip: See Stephanie Hoover's "Directory of Pennsylvania Genealogical & Historical Societies," at pennsylvaniaresearch.com

3. Cluster research

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Additional Resources

Randall M. Miller and William Pencak, eds., *Pennsylvania: A History of the Commonwealth* (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, c2002); F149 P366 2002.

Website ExplorePAhistory.com, by WITF (Harrisburg's PBS and NPR affiliate).

"Immigration and Ethnicity in Pennsylvania History" issue of *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 140.3 (Oct. 2016); digitized at JSTOR.

Russell A. Kazal, "The Lost World of Pennsylvania Pluralism: Immigrants, Regions, and the Early Origins of Pluralist Ideologies in America," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 27.3 (2008):7–42; digitized at JSTOR.

Philip Scranton, "Large Firms and Industrial Restructuring: The Philadelphia Region, 1900-1980," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 116.4 (Oct. 1992):419-465; digitized at JSTOR.

Joe William Trotter and Eric Ledell Smith, eds., *African Americans in Pennsylvania: Shifting Historical Perspectives* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1997).

Historic Pittsburgh Book Collection – 1,316 items published during 20th Century

PhilaPlace.org, by Pennsylvania Historical Society

Catholic Heritage Archive by FindMyPast – pre-1919 records of Archdiocese of Philadelphia

Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission (PHMC):
- Pennsylvania History, an archived website
- 1927 Triennial Agriculture Census

Power Library: Pennsylvania's Electronic Library – has many collections like:
- Supreme Court of Pennsylvania:
  - Appeal Dockets, 1795-2014
  - Appearance Dockets, 1795-1977
  - Appearance Dockets, 1956-1977
  - Minute Books, 1834-1838, 1854-1857, 1859-1990 – Supreme Court of Pennsylvania in the Middle District
  - Miscellaneous Supreme and Superior Court Dockets, 1743-1749, 1876-1943

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