

Pennsylvania Research: Four Centuries of History and Genealogy

Class 1: 17th Century, Colonial Beginnings

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Settlement of Pennsylvania

Before it was part of the United States, Pennsylvania was governed by three different European powers: Sweden, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. The Swedish settled along the Delaware River in about 1638, after trading in the area for more than a decade. The territory claimed as the colony of New Sweden contained parts of what are now the states of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. The first permanent settlement in the Delaware Valley was at Fort Christina, now Wilmington, Delaware. Ships brought over about 600 settlers between 1638 and 1655, when New Sweden was absorbed by the Dutch colony of New Netherland. Under Dutch rule, the Swedish settlers retained autonomy. The Dutch, who controlled much of the mid-Atlantic region at the time, lost control of their North American territories to the British in 1664.

The Delaware River settlements then fell under British rule and its colonial government centered in what is now New York. In 1681, King Charles II granted a royal charter to William Penn to establish a new colony of which he would be proprietor. Though Penn was granted permission to sell land and control commerce and justice within the colony, the king would have the final say over colonial laws. Additionally, Penn still had to negotiate land purchases from the established Native American tribes.

William Penn laid out a plan for his new colony and began selling land and recruiting settlers. Many settlers were Quakers, but he also recruited non-Quakers from Britain and the Continent. The earliest sales were made up of a group that came to be called the “First Purchasers,” who purchased about 300,000 acres within the first four months. This included three large tracts, sold to Welsh Quakers, the Free Society of Traders, and the Frankfort Land Company. Though himself a Quaker, there was no official religion within Penn’s colony (and the king required the appointment of an Anglican minister to the colony) and Quakers did not make up the majority of settlers. However, Quakers did hold substantial political influence.

There were three original counties organized in Pennsylvania in 1682: Bucks, Chester, and Philadelphia. Delaware also had three original counties: Kent, New Castle, and Sussex. These counties were governed as part of the Province of Pennsylvania from 1682 to 1701.

Researching New Sweden and New Netherland

Few sources exist from the Swedish and Dutch periods. Many records were lost when the Swedish royal palace burned in 1697, and many potentially useful early Dutch records were divided and sold at public auction in the early 19th century. Therefore, most genealogical research even from the periods of Dutch and Swedish rule is done using contemporary British sources or secondary sources. Recommended resources are listed below under “New Sweden and New Netherland Resources.”

Researching 17th Century Pennsylvania

Many of the records utilized heavily by genealogists were not created in the 17th century—vital records were not kept in colonial Pennsylvania, nor were any census enumerations taken. Therefore, the number of resources available is limited. Land records, court records, church records, and passenger lists are all valuable sources. Recommended resources appear in the lists on the following pages, arranged by subject.

Land records can help determine an individual’s earliest date of settlement in an area, determine their movements, place them on a particular parcel of land, and build a network of neighbors and associates. Land records during this period typically consist of royal grants or sales from William Penn. Typically, surviving records include surveys (descriptions or assessments of a designated area) and patents (documents finalizing the sale of a particular parcel of land). Before Penn’s proprietorship, grants were made by the Duke of York or the governor of New York. Records from the Penn era (beginning in 1682) can be found at the state level. Any subsequent sales of the land would have been recorded at the county level. Though originally part of Pennsylvania, all land records relating to what would become the state of Delaware transferred to Delaware in 1801.

Court records can be useful in determining whether an individual was personally involved in any legal actions and for determining who they associated with (by finding mention of them in a court case related to someone else). Court records for Philadelphia County are scanty for the 17th century, but more records exist from Bucks and Chester counties. Though there were technically three courts within each county, each overseeing a different type of case, the same judges presided over all three courts and the same clerk was responsible for the records of all three courts. Therefore, the 17th century court records are typically “combined records,” that is, there is only one collection of court records for the early years of each county rather than three.

Church records act as vital record substitutes for the pre-vital record era. They can also provide clues to origins in Europe, as many congregations were established around a shared ethnic origin, and help build a network of associates. Church records vary widely in terms of appearance, scope, and contents, depending upon the congregation and/or denomination. Some early Lutheran and Quaker records exist from 17th-century Pennsylvania.

While few 17th century passenger lists exist, they can be useful resources for determining origins and dates of arrival. Most lists from the 17th century are in fact compiled or “reconstituted” lists, recreated by historians at a later date based on a variety of sources.

Pennsylvania Genealogy Guides

Ann Lawthers, “Pennsylvania Genealogy: Go-To Published Resources,” *AmericanAncestors*,
<https://www.americanancestors.org/video-library/pennsylvania-genealogy-go-published-resources>

Donna Bingham Munger, *Pennsylvania Land Records: A History and Guide for Research*, (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1991)

“Genealogical Map of the Counties,” *Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission*, <https://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Documents/Pennsylvania-Genealogical-Map-Counties.pdf>

John T. Humphrey, *Pennsylvania Research: County and Township Records*, (Washington, DC: PA Genealogy Books, 2006)

Pennsylvania Colonial Records, *FamilySearch Wiki*,
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Pennsylvania_Colonial_Records

Pennsylvania History

Albert Cook Myers, *Immigration of Irish Quakers to Pennsylvania* (Swarthmore, PA: Myers, 1902)
[Available in the FamilySearch.org Digital Books Library]

John P. Garber, *The Settlements on the Delaware Prior to the Coming of William Penn*, (Philadelphia: City History Society of Philadelphia, 1909) [Available in the FamilySearch.org Digital Books Library]

Randall M. Miller and William Pencak eds., *Pennsylvania: A History of the Commonwealth* (Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002) [Available as a digital loan from Archive.org]

Pennsylvania History, *FamilySearch Wiki*, https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Pennsylvania_History

Philip Klein and Ari A. Hoogenboom, *A History of Pennsylvania* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980) [Available as a digital loan from Archive.org]

The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia, <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/>

New Sweden and New Netherland Resources

B. Fernow, *Documents relating to the history of the Dutch and Swedish settlements on the Delaware River*, vol. 12 of *Documents relative to the colonial history of the state of New York*, (Albany: The Argus Company, 1877) [Available on Archive.org]

“Names in the 1671 Census of the Delaware,” *New Castle, Delaware Community History and Archaeology Program*, <http://nc-chap.org/cranehook/names1671.php>

“Names in the 1693 Census of Swedes on the Delaware,” *New Castle, Delaware Community History and Archaeology Program*, <http://nc-chap.org/cranehook/names1693.php> [Contains link to PDF of introductory chapter to Peter Craig’s book along with names of heads of households]

“Names in the 1693 Census of Swedes on the Delaware,” *New Sweden Inhabitants Project, Geni.com*, <https://www.geni.com/projects/New-Sweden-Inhabitants-in-1693/9039> [Contains links to PDFs of several chapters of Peter Craig’s book]

“New Sweden Genealogy,” *FamilySearch Wiki*, https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/New_Sweden_Genealogy

“New Sweden, Settlers 1638-1664,” *New Sweden Settlers Project, Geni.com*, <https://www.geni.com/projects/New-Sweden-Settlers-1638-1664/9040>

Peter S. Craig, *The 1693 census of the Swedes on the Delaware: family histories of the Swedish Lutheran Church members residing in Pennsylvania, Delaware, west New Jersey and Cecil County, Md., 1638-1693*, (Winter Park, Fla.: SAG Publications, 1993)

Peter S. Craig, *1671 Census of the Delaware*, (Philadelphia: Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania, 1999) [Part 1 available online at http://nc-chap.org/cranehook/pdfs/census_1671.pdf]

Swedish American Genealogist journal archives, *Swenson Center at Augustana College*, https://collections.carli.illinois.edu/digital/collection/aug_sag [New Sweden Settlers data published in 16(1996), p. 63-86 & 219-248; 17(1997), p. 1-22 & 113-132; 18(1998), p. 1-23 & 129-150; 19(1999), p. 1-14 & 299-316.]

The Swedish Colonial Society, <https://colonialswedes.net/>

Pennsylvania Colonial Resources: Land Records

Albert Cook Myers, *Walter Wharton’s Land Survey Register, 1675-1679*, (Wilmington, Del., 1955) [Available in the FamilySearch.org Digital Books Library]

Index to old rights in Bucks and Chester Counties, 1682-1761, Pennsylvania Surveyor General, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/106269>



Index to old rights in Philadelphia County, 1682-1748, Pennsylvania Surveyor General,

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/106785>

“Land Records Indices,” Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission,

<https://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/Land-Records-Indices.aspx>

Original surveys, 1682-1920, Pennsylvania Surveyor General,

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/43569> [Available at Family History Center affiliates and libraries]

Patent books, 1676-1960, Pennsylvania Bureau of Land Records,

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/44185>

Patents by the Governor of New York 1667-1681, Philadelphia County Recorder of Deeds, Exemplification

Books, FHL Film 21872 Item 2, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/614109> [See also <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/Bah/dam/rg/sd/r17sda.htm#17.1>]

“Records of the Land Office: Records of Pre-Penn Settlement,” *Pennsylvania State Archives*,

<http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/sd/r17sda.htm>

The Duke of York Record: Original Land Titles of Delaware, 1646-1679, (Wilmington, Del.: Sunday Star Print, 1903) [Available on Archive.org]

Pennsylvania Colonial Resources: Court Records

Edward B. Bronner, “Philadelphia County Court of Quarter Sessions and Common Pleas, 1695,”

Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography,

<https://journals.psu.edu/pmhb/article/view/31134>

Marylynn Salmon, “The Court Records of Philadelphia, Bucks, and Berks Counties in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*,

<https://journals.psu.edu/pmhb/article/view/43901>

Record of the courts of Chester County, Pennsylvania, 1681-1697, (Philadelphia: Patterson & White, 1910)

[Available on Archive.org]

Records of the Courts of Quarter Sessions and Common Pleas of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, 1684-1700,

(Meadville, Pa.: Colonial Society of Pennsylvania, 1943) [Available in the FamilySearch.org Digital Books Library]



Pennsylvania Colonial Resources: Church Records

Church records, 1636-1967 [Gloria Dei, Episcopal],

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/189407> [Available at Family History Center affiliates and libraries]

Horace Burr, trans., *The records of Holy Trinity (Old Swedes) Church, Wilmington, Del., from 1697 to 1773*, (Wilmington, Del.: Historical Society of Delaware, 1980) [Available in the FamilySearch.org Digital Books Library]

U.S., *Quaker Meeting Records, 1681-1935*, database, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2189/>

William Wade Hinshaw, *Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy*, 7 vols., reprint (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1993) [Vol. 1-6 available as a database on Ancestry.com]

Pennsylvania Colonial Resources: Passenger Lists

The Welcome Society of Pennsylvania, <https://www.welcomesociety.org/>

U.S. and Canada, *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index, 1500s-1900s*, database, <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/3021188:7486>

Walter Lee Sheppard Jr., *Passengers and Ships Prior to 1684*, (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1970) [Available on Ancestry.com]

Pennsylvania Colonial Resources: Additional Published Resources

Archive.org/The Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/>

FamilySearch Digital Book Library, <https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/>

John T. Humphrey, *Pennsylvania Births Series*, [for various counties] More information at <https://genpa.org/member-collections/john-t-humphrey-pennsylvania-births-books/>

John W. Jordan, ed., *Colonial and Revolutionary families of Pennsylvania: genealogical and personal memoirs*, 3 vols., (New York: Lewis Publishing Co., 1911) [Available as a database on Ancestry.com]

Pennsylvania Genealogical Magazine, database,

<https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databasesearch/412/pennsylvania-genealogical-magazine>

Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, [1907-2017] <https://journals.psu.edu/pmhb/index>

WorldCat, <https://worldcat.org/> [Library catalog search aggregator]