

# California or Bust! Researching Your Western Pioneers

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## Clues for Identifying a Pioneer in the Family

- Check census records for the birthplace of the head of the family and their children. You may notice a move after 1849 out west.
- Check census records for the occupation of the head of household. Look for farmers, miners, and railroad workers.
  - The 1850 U.S. census was the first federal census that would include the 49ers who went to California for the Gold Rush.
  - Don't discount other occupations like hoteliers, merchants, and schoolteachers.
- Review agriculture schedules to identify how much land they had.
  - If the family had 160 acres (full portion) or 80 acres (half portion), they may have been homesteading. You can then consult the Bureau of Land Management web site to research more details.

## The Homestead Act (1862)

- Signed in 1862, this law allowed any American (or immigrant pursuing the citizenship process) to purchase up to 160 acres of federal land.
- The law was not fully repealed until 1986, when it expired in Alaska. All previous states had repealed the law by 1976.
- Buyer was required to live on the land for five years and perform necessary upkeep and additions.
  - Civil War Union veterans could use time served in military towards the residency requirement.
  - Settlers could also acquire the land title if they lived on the land for 6 months and paid the government \$1.25 per acre.

## Online Resources

- AM Explorer (\$)
  - Available through a paid AmericanAncestors.org membership.

- Access through the External Databases page - [americanancestors.org/search/external-databases](http://americanancestors.org/search/external-databases)
  - Collections>American West
- Ancestry (\$)
  - California, Pioneer Index, 1769-1848 - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1040>
  - California, U.S. Pioneer and Immigrant Files, 1790-1950 - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2161/>
  - California, U.S., Railroad Employment Records, 1862-1950 - [ancestry.com/search/collections/2046](http://ancestry.com/search/collections/2046)
  - U.S. Homestead Records, 1863-1908 - [ancestry.com/search/collections/60593](http://ancestry.com/search/collections/60593)
  - Utah, U.S., Select Union Pacific Railroad Personnel Records, 1890-1965 - [ancestry.com/search/collections/9204](http://ancestry.com/search/collections/9204)
- Bureau of Land Management General Land Office (GLO) Database - [gloreCORDS.blm.gov](http://gloreCORDS.blm.gov)
  - Click Search Documents.
  - Search by first and last name and include location if known.
- FamilySearch
  - California, Pioneer Migration Index, Compiled 1906-1935 - [familysearch.org/search/collection/2137266](http://familysearch.org/search/collection/2137266)
  - Cancelled, Relinquished, or Rejected Land Entry Case Files, 1861-1932 - [familysearch.org/search/collection/2170637](http://familysearch.org/search/collection/2170637)
- Genealogical Forum of Oregon (\$)
  - Oregon Donation Land Claims Files - [gfo.org/resources/indexes/pioneer/donation-land-claims.html](http://gfo.org/resources/indexes/pioneer/donation-land-claims.html)
- Library of Congress
  - California As I Saw It: First-Person Narratives of California's Early Years, 1849 to 1900 - [loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/](http://loc.gov/collections/california-first-person-narratives/)
- The Society of California Pioneers Collection of Autobiographies and Reminiscences of Early Pioneers - [calisphere.org/collections/20607/](http://calisphere.org/collections/20607/)

## Requesting Land Entry Case Files from the National Archives:

- For pre-1908 files, provide the following:
  - State
  - Land Office

- Type of Patent Under Law (“Authority” field on BLM GLO web site)
- Patent # (“Document Nr.” field on BLM GLO web site)
- For post-1908 files, provide the serial patent # (“Accession Nr” field on GLO website)
- NATF Form 84 - [archives.gov/files/dc-metro/washington/natf-84.pdf](https://www.archives.gov/files/dc-metro/washington/natf-84.pdf)
- Order online - [eservices.archives.gov/orderonline](https://eservices.archives.gov/orderonline)

## Archival Collections

- American Ancestors (Boston, Massachusetts)
  - Charles Newton Kimball Papers (Mss 184) - [library.nehgs.org/record=b1022283](https://library.nehgs.org/record=b1022283)
    - Researched the Lunney family that went from County Fermanagh to Leadville, Colorado
  - Louise Redfern Pells Papers (Mss 436) - [library.nehgs.org/record=b1039217](https://library.nehgs.org/record=b1039217)
    - Researched the death of Bernard McDonald, a miner, who died on the job in Butte, Montana.
- California State Library
  - Foreign Miners Tax Documents, 1850-1867 - [oac.cdlib.org/search?style=oac4;titlesAZ=f;idT=001482545](https://oac.cdlib.org/search?style=oac4;titlesAZ=f;idT=001482545)
- California State Museum Library and Archives
  - Central Pacific Railway Records (MS 79)- [oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf2h4n98jc/](https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf2h4n98jc/)
  - Union Pacific Railway Records (MS 54)- [oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8639q9j/](https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/c8639q9j/)
- Phillips Library (Peabody Essex Museum – Rowley, Massachusetts)
  - Society of California Pioneers of New England - <https://pem.as.atlas-sys.com/repositories/2/resources/244>
    - The collection contains letters, bills, receipts, membership applications, monthly and yearly reports (1891-1919), record and account books, scrapbooks, photograph albums, and miscellaneous printed material about the Society

## Published Sources

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