

“Went West to Parts Unknown:” Research in the Upper Midwest

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Which Way Did They Go?

For clues on where your ancestors might have come from before settling in the upper Midwest, try these documents.

Land Records

Images of many Federal land patents for the upper Midwest states are available at the Bureau of Land Management (BLM): www.glorerecords.blm.gov. Some key items to look for:

- **Where was the buyer from?** Land patents give the current or previous residence of the owner, such as “Moses Williams of Fentress Co., Tennessee.” If you find a land patent, order the related documents from the National Archives.
- **Is this a military bounty land warrant?** If so, it will show the soldier’s name, unit, and conflict for which the land was awarded, such as: “Daniel Walker, private, Captain Howe’s Company, Massachusetts Militia, War of 1812.” Is your ancestor the person who served, or are they purchasing the land from the warrant holder? If your ancestor served, look for a bounty land warrant application at the National Archives.
- **Who were their neighbors?** From a land patent image, click the “Related Documents” tab to view the names of others who purchased near your ancestor’s land, and whether they purchased close to the time that your ancestor bought land. View neighbors’ land patent images to see where they lived when they bought their land. You may find relatives or associates who moved together to their new home.
- **Search tips:** If you’re not finding your ancestor’s land record where you expect it, try using wildcards to search for variants of their name. Some records were recorded with only initials or with an alternate spelling. On the BLM web site, a % wildcard replaces multiple letters, while an underscore _ replaces a single letter. Consider searching for just a last name – you may find other family members who settled in the same area.

Probate Records

Wills that name family members in other locations may provide a hint to an ancestor’s place of origin (e.g. “to my brother John Andrews of Dundee, Scotland”). Similarly, wills for family members who remained behind may give a new place of residence for relatives who migrated. Look for probate documents for your direct ancestor, their siblings (if known), and spouse(s).

Military Service Records

Service records sometimes show a place of enlistment, which may have been far from where a soldier eventually settled. Pension records may include a place and date of birth, places of service, and places of residence after the soldier served. Military pension packages and records from U.S. National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (Civil War, Union soldiers) often provide additional information such as the name and residence of relatives and friends, which may provide clues to a place of origin.

Census Records

- **1840:** The second page of this federal census lists the names and ages of military pension recipients, which should prompt a search for the complete pension application.
- **1850–1870:** Birth places of individuals and their likely children provide hints to places of origin and residence.
- **1880–1930:** Birth places of parents offer clues to origins of earlier generations.
- **State censuses:** Vary in availability and coverage, but some (such as the 1884 and 1894 Michigan State Census records) contain information similar to federal census records.

Other Resources

- **Cemetery records:** Grave markers and interment records sometimes list place of origin.
- **Church records:** Particularly useful for congregations representing a particular ethnic group, (German-speaking Catholic or Lutheran congregation) since a specific birth place may be given.
- **Court Records:** For clues to place of origin or migration and names of relatives or associates, search online indexes such as Library of Virginia Chancery Court Records:
www.virginiamemory.com/collections/chancery
- **Immigration and Naturalization records:** Use clues in census records to determine when an immigrant may have filed first papers or been naturalized, then order the related documents.
- **Local or state histories:** Biographical sketches in local, state, or county history books often give details on migration. Family (surname) books may also be helpful. Some sites to check:
 - Ancestry.com: www.ancestry.com (especially “Explore by Location” pages)
 - FamilySearch Books: <https://books.familysearch.org>
 - Google Books: books.google.com
 - HathiTrust Digital Library: www.hathitrust.org
 - Internet Archive: <https://archive.org>
 - State and county archive web sites
- **Maps:** Maps can help you identify county and town boundary changes; learn about the topography of the land where your family settled; show population growth over time; and even show your ancestor’s property. Some selected examples:
 - Thorndale, William, and William Dollarhide. *Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Censuses, 1790-1820*. Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1987.
 - David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com.
 - Census data maps: See the U.S. Census Bureau’s [Data Visualization maps](#) and “Shaping the West” at [Stanford University’s Spatial History Project](#).
 - The [U.S., Indexed County Land Ownership Maps, 1860-1918](#) collection may help you locate your ancestor’s land or home (at [Ancestry.com](#)).
 - The [National Atlas](#) (<http://nationalatlas.gov>), a project of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) contains a range of maps and a map maker tool. **NOTE:** On September 30, 2014, this web site will be replaced by The [National Map](#) website: <http://nationalmap.gov>
- **Newspapers:** Obituaries are often the most useful, but also look for probate notices naming relatives in other locations and social mentions, including travel, moves, visits to relatives, etc.

Selected Midwest Migration Resources

Dollarhide, William. *Map Guide to American Migration Routes, 1735-1815*. Bountiful, Utah: HeritageQuest, 2000.

“Northwest Ordinance: Primary Documents in American History.” Web Guide. *The Library of Congress*. <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/northwest.html> : 2013.

McClure, Rhonda R., “Understanding Midwest Migration Patterns to Further Family History Research.” *BYU Family Historian*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2003). Online archives. *BYU Family Historian*. <https://ojs.lib.byu.edu/spc/index.php/FamHist/issue/view/171> : 2003.

Whitaker, Beverly. “Early American Roads and Trails.” <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~gentutor/trails.html> : 2002.

Major Midwest Research Resources

The online and physical collections of these major repositories include the upper Midwest states:

- **Allen County Public Library – Genealogy Center:** www.genealogycenter.org
- **Chronicling America:** <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov> – This Library of Congress site provides free, searchable newspapers covering many U. S. states, including most of the upper Midwest. The [U.S. Newspaper Directory, 1690 to the Present](#) provides a search of newspaper titles lookup by city and county.
- **Midwest Genealogy Center (Mid-Continent Public Library):** www.mymcpl.org/genealogy
- **The Filson Historical Society:** <http://filsonhistorical.org> – Good resources on the Ohio Valley.
- **The Library of Congress:** <http://www.loc.gov> – The Library’s collections include maps, prints, photographs, manuscripts, and digitized newspapers covering the upper Midwest states. Of particular interest are the portal sites in the [America Memory](#) collections on [The First American West: The Ohio River Valley 1750 to 1820](#) and [Pioneering the Upper Midwest](#) .
- **The National Archives:** Federal records for the upper Midwestern states are held at the Regional Archives at Chicago: www.archives.gov/chicago. Their holdings include land, naturalization, Native American, and federal district court records.

Selected State-specific Research Resources

Illinois

- **Illinois Regional Archives Depository System (IRAD)**
www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/IRAD: This archive of local government documents is housed at seven Illinois universities. Each depository location holds a wide range of documents organized by county, including vital records, court, probate, naturalization, land, military, and more. Documents can be ordered from the appropriate IRAD location, often for a very small fee. To locate records of interest, see the “Local Government Records Listings” document, and search the indexes at the **Illinois State Archives database page:** www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/databases/home.html
- **Illinois GenWeb:** <http://illinoisgenweb.org>

- **Illinois Digital Archives:** www.idaillinois.org – Includes local history collections from several Illinois counties and communities. Some gems include Grand Army of the Republic records from Post #453 at Hampshire; interment records from Oak Ridge Cemetery at Springfield; and the Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society.
- **Chicago Area Research Resources:**
 - **Chicago Genealogical Society:** www.chicagogenealogy.org – Digital collections include an index of vital events mentioned in Chicago and Northern Illinois newspapers from 1833 to about 1850, and a topic-based list of Chicago genealogy information (City directories, cemeteries, newspapers, etc).
 - **Chicago Public Library Digital Collections:** <http://digital.chipublib.org/cdm4/search.php> Includes the searchable text of the *Chicago Examiner* newspaper (1908 – 1918).
 - **Chicago History Museum – Family Research page:** www.chicagohistory.org/research/resources/family
 - **Cook County Vital Records:** Check the Illinois page at FamilySearch for free digital images of many vital records. For official copies of vital records, contact the Cook County Clerk's Office: <http://cookcountygenealogy.com>. They provide an online index to vital records, including births (75 years ago and older), marriages (50 years ago and older), and deaths (20 years ago and older).
 - **The Newberry Library**
 - **Chicago and the Midwest page:** www.newberry.org/chicago-and-midwest
 - **Genealogy and Local History:** www.newberry.org/genealogy-and-local-history
- **Illinois Military research**
 - **Illinois War Veterans:** www.cyberdriveillinois.com/departments/archives/databases
 - **Illinois Civil War 150th Anniversary:** www.illinoiscivilwar150.org
 - **Illinois Civil War page - GebWeb:** <http://civilwar.illinoisgenweb.org>
 - **Black Hawk War of 1832:** <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/blackhawk>
 - **Illinois War of 1812 Bicentennial:** <http://illinoiswarof1812bicentennial.org>
- **Ancestry.com - Illinois Collections:** <http://search.ancestry.com/Places/US/Illinois>
- **FamilySearch Wiki - Illinois:** <https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Illinois>

Indiana

- **Indiana Genealogical Society:** www.indgensoc.org – A rich collection of more than 1100 databases (both free and members-only access) covers a wide range of subjects, including county-specific, military, church, and African-American records.
- **Indiana State Library – Genealogy page:** <http://in.gov/library/genealogy.htm> - A wide range of [databases](#) provide indexes to cemetery records, marriages, biographies, and newspaper articles from several cities, including two Indianapolis newspapers from 1848 to 1891. Be sure to check the list of online resources by county.
- **Indiana Digital Archives:** www.indianadigitalarchives.org - Search for your family in online indexes to Indiana death, institution, military, naturalization, and other records.
- **Indiana Memory:** www.in.gov/memories - Digital collections from a range of Indiana libraries, archives, and educational institutions.
- **Indiana Purdue University Library – Digital Collections page** www.ulib.iupui.edu/digitalscholarship/collections – This digital archive contains plat books, historic maps, and atlases (including a special collection for Sanborn maps and Baist atlases).

- **Indiana Vital Records:** www.in.gov/isdh/20444.htm
- **Indiana Military Research:**
 - **Indiana Commission on Public Records - Civil War page:** www.in.gov/icpr/2521.htm
 - **Indiana Historical Bureau– Civil War 150th:** www.in.gov/history/CivilWar.htm
 - **Society of Civil War Families of Indiana:** www.indgensoc.org/SCWFI.php
 - **Indiana Historical Bureau – War of 1812 200th:** www.in.gov/history/3950.htm
- **Ancestry.com - Indiana Collections:** <http://search.ancestry.com/Places/US/Indiana>
- **FamilySearch Wiki - Indiana:** <https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Indiana>

Michigan

- **Seeking Michigan:** <http://seekingmichigan.org> – Searchable Death record images (1897 – 1920), a rich collection of Civil War records, maps, and the Michigan State census, 1884-1895 are highlights of this valuable research site. Click on “Discover” for a complete list of collections.
- **Michigan County Histories and Atlases:** <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micounty> - more than 400 digitized, searchable books about Michigan, published before 1923.
- **Michigan Vital Records:** Many digital images are available at FamilySearch: https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Michigan_Vital_Records.
- **Michigan Military Research:**
 - **Michigan Civil War Sesquicentennial:** <http://seekingmichigan.org/civil-war>
 - **Michigan Civil War Sesquicentennial History Partners:** www.micw150.us
- **Ancestry.com - Michigan Collections:** <http://search.ancestry.com/Places/US/Michigan>
- **FamilySearch - Michigan Wiki:** <https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Michigan>

Minnesota

- **Minnesota Historical Society:** www.mnhs.org/genealogy - Indexes to births, deaths, and marriages (order records directly from the Society), Minnesota State Censuses, maps, newspapers, and veteran grave sites, among others.
- **Minnesota Digital Library:** www.mndigital.org/projects/collections.php
- **Minnesota Discovery Center – Iron Range Research Center:** www.mndiscoverycenter.com/research-center/genealogy - A searchable index to cemetery, naturalization, mining and selected vital records for Minnesota’s Iron Range area.
- **Minnesota Vital Records:** www.health.state.mn.us/divs/chs/osr/index.html
- **Minnesota Civil War 150:** <http://mncivilwar150.com>
- **Ancestry.com - Minnesota Collections:** <http://search.ancestry.com/Places/US/Minnesota>
- **FamilySearch Wiki - Minnesota:** <https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Minnesota>

Ohio

- **Ohio Genealogical Society:** www.ogs.org
- **Ohio Historical Society :** www.ohiohistory.org
- **Ohio GenWeb:** www.ohgenweb.org
- **State Library of Ohio - Digitized Collections from Ohio Institutions (organized by county):** http://library.ohio.gov/PCS/digitalcontent/gen_sources/ohio
- **Ohio Vital Records:**
 - Ohio Department of Health – Vital Records: www.odh.ohio.gov/vitalstatistics/vitalmisc/vitalstats.aspx
 - **Ohio Birth Index, 1940 – 1998:** https://www.ogs.org/research/search_ohbirths.php
 - **Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center – Ohio Death Certificates Index:** <http://index.rbhayes.org/hayes/index>
- **Ohio Military Research:**
 - **Ohio Genealogical Society Civil War Center:** www.ogs.org/cwc/index.php
 - **Ohio Civil War Sesquicentennial:** www.ohiocivilwar150.org
 - **Ohio Civil War Roster search:** www.ogs.org/research/search_ohcwss.php
 - **Ohio War of 1812 Bicentennial Commission:** <http://warof1812.ohio.gov>
- **Ancestry.com - Ohio Collections:** <http://search.ancestry.com/Places/US/Ohio>
- **FamilySearch Wiki - Ohio:** <https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Ohio>

Wisconsin

- **Wisconsin Historical Society – Genealogy page:** www.wisconsinhistory.org/genealogy - More than 16,000 indexed biographical and local news articles and indexes to vital records which can be ordered from the Society make this a good starting place for your Wisconsin research.
- **Wisconsin Vital Records:** Useful sources include the [Wisconsin Department of Health](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org), the Wisconsin Historical Society, and the Wisconsin Vital Records on FamilySearch: http://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Wisconsin_Vital_Records
- **Wisconsin Military Research:**
 - **Wisconsin Civil War Sesquicentennial:** www.civilwarwisconsin.com
 - **Wisconsin in the War of 1812:** www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-010
 - **Black Hawk War:** www.wisconsinhistory.org/turningpoints/tp-012
- **Ancestry.com - Wisconsin Collections:** <http://search.ancestry.com/Places/US/Wisconsin>
- **FamilySearch Wiki - Wisconsin:** <https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Wisconsin>
 - www.wisconsinhistory.org/genealogy