



Genealogy

Genealogy and Homestead Records

The paperwork required of homesteaders before they could obtain a *patent*, or title, to part of the public domain resulted in exceptionally detailed land records. Called *land-entry case files*, these records describe improvements made to the property, including houses constructed, wells dug, crops planted, trees cleared, and fences built. Some case files mention family members who lived on the land. If the claimant died and a widow or heirs completed the homesteading process, a date of death is given and relationships are explained. Because military service could reduce the residency period, information regarding such service is sometimes included. Resident aliens who had declared their intention to become citizens provided information about their naturalization process and occasionally even mentioned place of origin. In other words, the land-entry case files of homesteaders are an important source of genealogical information.

Location of Land-Entry Case Files

All land-entry case files are held by the National Archives in downtown Washington, D.C. www.archives.gov. There is no general name index to these files, they have not been reformatted in microform or digital form, and they are not available in any other repository. (A name index to the pre-July 1908 case files does exist at the Archives on file cards for Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, Nevada, and Utah.)

Importance of the Legal Land Description

Almost all homestead entries were made on land surveyed in the rectangular system that was first mandated by Congress in 1785. Employees of the General Land Office, which supervised the distribution of public land during the Homestead period, were more interested in which tracts of public land had been claimed than in the name of the individuals who had claimed them. Therefore, a researcher must often discover the legal description of his ancestor's land by numbered section, township, and range in the rectangular survey system.

Tract Books

The legal land description of a homestead may be found in the General Land Office tract books. When a settler discovered an appropriate homestead site, he filed a claim with the local land office or the General Land Office in Washington by paying the necessary fees. Until 1908, these entries were recorded in *tract books* grouped by state, land office, and legal land description. (Patents filed after July 1, 1908 - called serial patents - were assigned consecutive numbers and filed numerically.) All the tract books (except Alaska's) have survived, and all the surviving tract books (except Missouri's) have been reproduced on 1265 rolls of microfilm available from the National Archives and the History Library of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City, Utah. Often state archives hold microfilm copies of their own state's tract books. At minimum, tract books include the name of claimant and the legal description of public land claimed. But if the researcher does not know the legal description of the property he is seeking, the tract books can be difficult and time consuming to use. A researcher can often obtain a legal description of the land from the country recorder of deeds where the land was located. For detailed information about how to identify an ancestor's geographical location and discover the legal description of his land from the tract books, see E. Wade Hone, *Land & Property Research in the United States* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1997), which includes two helpful appendices: "Tract Book and Township Plat Map Guide to Federal Land States" and "Land Office Boundary Maps for All Federal Land States." This book is available from the park bookstore.

Bureau of Land Management-General Land Office Records

A fortunate researcher will already have a copy of the homesteader's patent or otherwise know the legal description of his land by township, range and section. If not, the researcher should check indexed records made available online by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). www.gloreCORDS.blm.gov As the successor of the General Land Office, the BLM

inherited more than nine million land documents. Not only were these records difficult to research, they were beginning to deteriorate. The BLM optically scanned the patents and carefully entered the information that they contained into a massive database. More than 2.5 million records have been brought on line, and more than a thousand more are added each workday. Visitors to the Bureau of Land Management website can download both a legal land description of a homestead and an image of the patent. Of course, once the researcher has a legal land description, he can order a copy of the land-entry case file from the National Archives. The BLM website provides a remarkable amount of information, but its General Land Office records are by no means a complete index to the case files of homesteaders. First, the electronic index does not cover the pre-July 1908 patents for the public land states of Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. (Currently the BLM is adding post-July 1908 patents to its database, and these cover all thirty of the public land states.) Then, too, the electronic index covers land patents, not land entries. There are more cancelled entries-unsuccesful attempts at homesteading-in the General Land Office case files than patents, and a land-entry case file for a cancelled entry may provide as much genealogical information as a completed one.

Ordering a Land-Entry Case File from the National Archives

Pre-1908 homestead in one of the seven states with name indexes

To request a case file for a pre-July 1908 homestead claim in one of the seven states for which name indexes exist (Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, Nevada and Utah), the researcher must know the name of the homesteader, the state in which the land is located, and the approximate date of entry.

Pre-1908 homestead in a Western public domain state without a name index

There are no pre-1908 name indexes for the western public domain states of California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Washington, and Wyoming. To request a case file for a pre-July 1908 homestead claim in these Western public domain states, the researcher must provide the National Archives with the name of the homesteader, the state in which the land is located, the approximate date of entry, and either a legal description of the land or the name of the land office and the land entry file number. Except for homesteads in Kansas, Nebraska, and Oklahoma, this information may be obtained from the General Land Office Records posted at the Bureau of Land Management website www.glorerecords.blm.gov.

Pre-1908 homestead in an Eastern public domain state without a name index

To request a case file for a pre-July 1908 homestead claim in an Eastern public domain state without a name index, the researcher must provide the National Archives with the name of the homesteader, the state in which the land is located, the approximate date of entry, the file number, and the name of the land office that issued the file. Except for homesteads in Iowa, this information may be obtained from General Land Office records posted at the Bureau of Land Management website www.glorerecords.blm.gov.

Post-1908 homestead

Post-1908 homestead records are arranged numerically by patent number, and name indexes exist for all the public domain states. To request a case file for a post-July 1908 homestead claim, the researcher must provide the National Archives with the name of the homesteader, the state in which the land is located, and the approximate date of entry.

Post-1908 homesteads in Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming may be obtained from General Land Office records posted at the Bureau of Land Management website www.glorerecords.blm.gov. Post-1908 homesteads for Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Ohio, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin are currently being added to the website.

Requests for land-entry case files at the National Archives must be submitted on NATF Form 84, a four-part carbonized form. Forms may be ordered online from the National Archives website inquire@arch2.nara.gov or from

Textual Reference Branch-Land (NWDT1)
National Archives and Records Administration
7th and Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20408

The researcher should allow several months between ordering the applications forms and receiving reproductions of the case files.