

Research Strategies

Study the Location

Changing county, state, and territorial boundaries affect where records are found today. Even if your ancestor never moved, shifting borders could place their records elsewhere. Record-keeping laws also varied, so use tools like the Atlas of Historical County Boundaries, FamilySearch Research Wiki, and Ancestry's Red Book to learn about boundary changes and record availability.

Cluster Research (FAN Club)

Cluster research means studying your ancestor's "FAN club"—their Family, Associates, and Neighbors. These are people who appear in your ancestor's records, like neighbors in census records or witnesses in marriages. Look for repeated surnames, shared birthplaces, or nearby families, and check the same record types for these connections—they often lead to breakthroughs.

Collateral Research

This strategy focuses on relatives who aren't direct ancestors—siblings, cousins, in-laws, aunts, and uncles. Sometimes you need to go sideways to go backward, using their records to uncover clues. You can also trace forward to later generations, where newer records often reveal details about earlier family members.

Consider Different Types of Evidence

Direct evidence answers a question outright—like finding a birth date on a marriage license. Indirect evidence requires piecing clues together, such as names and land records that suggest a family link. Negative evidence comes from what's missing—if someone disappears from tax lists, it may indicate their death.

Create a Timeline

A timeline lays out events in order—your ancestor's life events, family milestones, major historical events, and changes in record-keeping laws. Seeing everything together can reveal gaps, inconsistencies, and new leads. Plus, every event might point to a record, so keep an eye out for clues.

Why Pre-1850?

Researching ancestors in the U.S. before 1850 is challenging because records were limited and less detailed. Federal censuses from 1790–1840 only listed heads of household, and vital records like births and deaths were scarce. Many grave markers have been lost, and women's rights were restricted under coverture laws, meaning married women couldn't own property or create wills. These gaps make early research complex and require creative strategies to uncover your family history.

What was happening before 1850?

Before 1850, the U.S. underwent major changes—colonization, wars, and westward expansion. European powers began settling in the late 1500s, followed by colonial wars and the American Revolution (1775–1783). The early 1800s brought the Louisiana Purchase, the War of 1812, and migration driven by Manifest Destiny. By 1840, nearly half the population lived west of the Appalachians, and events like the Oregon Trail migration, Texas and Oregon joining the Union, and the Mexican-American War added vast new territories. Research where your ancestors lived to understand their world—were they settlers, soldiers, or pioneers moving west?

A Mindset for Success

Researching early time periods is challenging, so your mindset matters. Stay flexible—ask the right questions and rephrase when needed. Check your assumptions and expectations; make sure you have proof, or treat assumptions as temporary leads. Follow every clue, including collateral and cluster research. Sometimes only general information is possible if records are missing or destroyed. Revisit a question later if new records or clues surface.

Key Record Types for Pre-1850 Research

Census Records

Early U.S. censuses (1790–1840) list only the head of household by name; others are tallied by age, sex, and race.

- Check state censuses—many exist.
- Expect spelling variations and indexing errors.
- Compare tallies with expected family members; work backward from later censuses.
- Scan nearby pages for relatives or maiden names.
- Households may include boarders, laborers, or enslaved persons.
- Use cluster (FAN) and collateral research—families often moved together.

Vital Records

Birth and death records are rare before 1850; marriage records are more common.

- Look for marriage licenses, bonds, banns, and intentions.
- Check church records, tombstones, family bibles, letters, and diaries.
- Availability varies by region—New England towns often kept early records.

Probate Records

Court records after death can reveal family ties.

- Wills, inventories, administrations, estate sales.
- Guardianship and orphan's court records for minors.
- Practices vary by location; check local courthouses and indexes.

Land & Property | glorerecords.blm.gov/search/

Land records track movement and relationships.

- Deeds, federal land patents, bounty land grants; check General Land Office records.
- Look for dower releases and widows' rights.
- Migration clues: residence of buyer/seller, inheritance notes.

Military Records

- Service and pension files can be rich sources.
- Enlistment, discharge, rank, and unit info.
- Pension applications often include supporting documents.
- Bounty land records for service compensation.

Taxes

Tax records can confirm residence and suggest relationships or death dates.

- Lists may include name, property, occupation, and household details.
- Typically cover white males of legal age; exemptions varied.
- Check local and state archives for early tax lists.

Voting Records

Poll books can place your ancestor in a specific location and provide citizenship details.

- Usually include name, birthplace, address, and years in the area.
- Most records are local or state-level; some digitized in genealogy databases.

Indentured Servants | tiny.ppld.org/indentured

Many early immigrants were indentured servants, and contracts were well-documented.

- Records often kept by local courts.
- Immigration Servants Database is a good starting point.

Newspapers

Don't expect detailed obituaries before 1850, but newspapers can still help.

- Look for marriage and birth announcements, estate sales, and legal notices.
- Local news items can confirm residence and provide context.

County Histories

Local histories often include maps, biographies, and genealogies.

- Many written around 1876 for the U.S. Centennial.
- Search libraries, Google Books, Internet Archive, and Periodical Source Index (PERSI).

Additional Research Resources

RH&G Website | ppld.org/regional-history-genealogy
Access PPLD provided databases.

Chronicling America | tiny.ppld.org/chronicling
LOC newspaper database.

Interlibrary Loan | ppld.org/ill
View items at other libraries.