

# Finding and Using Pennsylvania Land Records to Solve Tough Genealogical Cases

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No one record, or even category of records, will likely answer a difficult research question. Particularly tough cases require correlating information from a variety of sources. Land records are positioned to provide an array of information over a period of time, across a variety of locations, and with a network of identifiable people.

## Use Land Records To:

- Distinguish Between Same-Named People
- Identify Relationships
- Identify other Friends & Associates
- Establish Residence
- Trace Migration
- Reconstruct Neighborhoods
- Put People in Specific Time and Place
- Point to other Legal and Land Records
- Add Context to your Research

To best utilize land records, in each locality, understand:

1. the land acquisition process and the associated records;
2. where to find those records today;
3. how to extract and correlate the information the records provide.

## Research Strategies for Tough Cases: Cast a Wide Net

- Trace a tract of land from its initial record through the disposition from subject of interest.
  - Determine any boundary or jurisdiction changes.
- Expand scope of research to all known family members.
  - Your subject may be hidden in an *et al* or *et ux*.
- Expand scope of research to parent, subsequent, or adjacent counties.
- Expand scope of research to time periods earlier and later than you may expect.
  - Often recorded long after the date of instrument.
- Read the few pages before and after the deed of interest.
  - Deeds often recorded by a representative at one time.
- Repeat the process in each locality of interest.

## Pennsylvania Land Acquisition Process and Key Resources for Records:

**1. Application:** Request for land, usually in a particular place.

- FamilySearch.org, [“Applications for warrants, 1734–1865”](#)
- FamilySearch.org, [“Applications for warrants not issued, 1786–1909”](#)

Note: Collections not indexed or searchable. Arranged chronologically. Find warrant first (step 2 below), and then search a few weeks before date of warrant. Early applications are very limited.

**2. Warrant to Survey:** Written order to survey, usually restates the amount and location requested in the application.

- Ancestry.com, [“Pennsylvania, U.S., Land Warrants and Applications, 1733–1952”](#)

Note: Searchable database with images. Index goes to the cover page, so be sure to advance to the next image.

- Pennsylvania State Archives, [“Warrant Registers, 1733–1957”](#)

Note: This Warrant Register covers 70% of the land transferred to private owners in Pennsylvania. These registers are **arranged by county at the time of warrant**, then by surname, then by date. Includes information on warrant, survey and patent. Other registers, depending on the time and location of the warrant, are linked on the Pennsylvania State Archives website.

**3. Survey:** Process of measuring and marking the courses and distances; drawing a tract diagram.

**4. Return of Survey:** Written restatement combining the warrant and survey. Signifies that the purchase price and all fees have been paid.

- Family History Centers or Affiliate Library, [“Original surveys, 1682–1920”](#)

Note: Get the location of the recorded survey from the Warrant Register. See also,

- Pennsylvania State Archives, [“Copied Survey Books”](#)

Note: “Faithfully reproduced copies of the original surveys.”

- Pennsylvania State Archives, [“Warrantee Township Maps”](#) and [“Connected Draft Maps”](#)

Note: **Arranged by current county and township.** Not available for all locations.

**5. Patent:** Official deed from the proprietor or the state passing ownership of the particular tract of land to its initial purchaser.

- FamilySearch.org, [“Patent Books, 1676–1960”](#)

Note: Not indexed or searchable, but you can get the location of the patent from the Warrant Register or from the [Patent Indexes](#) (useful if you know the name of the patentee, but not the warrantee) or the [Patent Tract Name Indexes](#) (helpful in you know the name of the tract from a deed, but not the name of the patentee).

### County Deed Books —More than just deeds

- Deeds (Indenture, Quit Claim, General Warranty, Gift)
- Lease and Release
- Assignment
- Mortgages/Deeds of Trust
- Deeds of Partition or Estate Settlements
- Power of Attorney
- Contracts (Indentured Servants or Apprentice); Articles of Agreement

Most of Pennsylvania’s historical county deed books are available on FamilySearch.org. Use the [Family Search Research Wiki](#) to search for the county, and quickly get to the county land records collections.

Deed Books use a variety of indexes.

- Russell Indexes (one key letter, two key letter or the two key letter variant) are common in Pennsylvania.
- Many indexes include several subpages (ex: there may be 18 pages of pg. 420).

Determine the type of index and be sure you understand how to use it.

Check the grantor (direct) and grantee (indirect/adsectum) indexes for your subject and all known relatives and associates.

*et ux* = the deed will include the name of the grantor’s wife.

*et al* = others will be named in the record, but not necessarily included in the index.

Details to extract from a land record:

Location of land [then and now]	Price
Tract size (acres, rods and perches)	Release of Dower
Grantor	Adjoining Property Owners
Grantee	Chain of Title
Type of Instrument	Name of Tract or Parcel #
Date of Instrument	Where Recorded
Date Recorded	Digital Copy Location
Names of Witnesses	

### Organize Your Information

- Land in/out table
- Database or spreadsheet to track details from multiple people/locations. You can sort records in a variety of ways (by location, but adjoining property owners, by date).
- Maps
- Timelines
- Flowchart/Family Tree
- Written Narrative

## *Using Pennsylvania Land Records to Solve Tough Genealogical Cases*

It may take organizing and reviewing your information in several different formats to allow patterns to emerge. Patterns, such as network and migration, can be correlated to solve your tough genealogical case.

### **For Further Reading**

Munger, Donna B. *Pennsylvania Land Records: A History and Guide for Research*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2000.

“Land Records Overview.” *Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission*.

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

Powell, Kimberly T. “Navigate Courthouse Indexes like a Pro.” *NGS Magazine* 44, no. 1 (Mar. 2018): 38.

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<https://www.thoughtco.com/digging-for-deeds-1420630>.

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<https://www.thoughtco.com/common-land-and-property-terms-glossary-1422112>.

Rose, Christine. *Courthouse Indexes Illustrated*. San Jose, Calif: CR Publications, 2006.

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### **Free Resources:**

[Ancestry Pennsylvania](#) Free to Pennsylvania residents. Enter zip code to register for free account to view Pennsylvania Archives records hosted by Ancestry.com. Note: If you already have an Ancestry subscription, these collections are already included.

[Pennsylvania Archives](#) at Fold3.com. Free registration required. 138-volume set of published Pennsylvania records. Indexed and searchable (though not complete). See Second Series, Vol. 19 and Third Series, Vol. 1 for early land records.

[FamilySearch.org Research Wikis](#) Search by county to quickly learn what land records are available.

<https://www.familysearch.org> Free registration required.

[Genealogical Map of the Counties](#) Free PDF. Purchase an 11 ¾ x 17 copy for \$2.00 [here](#)

[An historical map of Pennsylvania . . .](#) county formation, land purchases, villages, paths, etc.