

Land Records:

15 Steps to Move beyond the Index

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The Value of Land Records

During their lifetimes, large numbers of our ancestors owned property at one point or another. Farmers and ranchers relied upon the land for their livelihood, and many sought to fulfill the American dream by becoming property owners. Merchants and others potentially bought property for their business locations and/or private residences.

Too often genealogists only glance at an available grantor or grantee index when looking at property records – missing a tremendous amount of information and potentially concluding that an ancestor did not own property just because their name(s) seem to be missing from the available indexes.

Fifteen Steps

Step One: Look again

Individuals who sell property alongside others might be hiding within the index itself. Specifically look for transactions recorded that indicate “et al” (meaning “and others”) or “et ux” (meaning “and wife”) in an index.

Step Two: Check the mortgages (if available)

Some mortgages are included in deed books, though many exist as separate records and indexes. Indexes are usually available for mortgagors (those lending) and mortgagees (those holding).

Step Three: Investigate everyone in the actual deed

When a land record is located, take time to identify each individual listed within the transaction including (but not limited to): witnesses, neighbors, parties, and others mentioned within the actual text. Keep notice of patterns amongst these individuals as you investigate multiple transactions.

Step Four: Trace each piece of property

Even though an ancestor might have purchased property from someone who does not appear related to your ancestor, always trace the property “one step forward,” and “one step back.”

Step Five: Use records collectively

While a single deed might provide the information you are immediately seeking, using land records collectively is often required to develop a comprehensive study and understanding of an individual or family.

Step Six: Account for all property

Tracking each piece of property an ancestor bought or sold is an important aspect of using land records effectively. Use a spreadsheet or table to create a “property list” for each ancestor, carefully tracing when land (or portions of land) was purchased or sold to others.

Sample Land Record Accounting

Grantor	Grantee	Sale Date	Record Date	Acreage	Description	Location	Reference
John Carter	Thomas Allison	23 Feb 1834	26 Feb 1834	30a	Cornwall town, lot 45, SW ¼	Orange County, NY	Orange Deeds (v. 34, pg. 67-70)
Thomas Allison	George Ellis	25 Jun 1840	28 Jun 1841	15a	Cornwall town, lot 45, SW ¼	Orange County, NY	Orange Deeds (v. 78, pg. 300-302)
Thomas Allison	Hannah Allison	25 Jun 1840	28 Jun 1841	5a	Cornwall town, lot 45, SW ¼	Orange County, NY	Orange Deeds (v. 78, pg. 302-304)
Thomas Allison, hrs.	Clarence White	1 Aug 1868	2 Aug 1868	10a	Cornwall town, lot 45, SW ¼	Orange County, NY	Orange Deeds (v. 103, pg. 256-258)

Step Seven: Check surrounding counties

While an ancestor might have lived in one county, they might have also sold land in surrounding counties during their lifetime (especially as borders changed). Ensure you check the records for those areas surrounding where an ancestor lived.

Step Eight: Examine county origins

Always check the records of counties whose land included those of the county you are presently researching at one time. Especially in states with large numbers of county boundary changes over time, knowing the origins of a county is key to a successful examination of land records.

Step Nine: Pull out a map

Maps are **essential** when working in land records. Maps can assist in identifying the exact location of a piece of property, its proximity to other locations, and its status in the present time. Other maps can show buildings, geographic features, and other important information.

Step Ten: Do your homework

Knowing the history of a county or state's land transactions is key (especially for tracing early settlers in a specific region). Some states, such as Ohio and New York have a complicated history of land disbursement that requires researchers to seek records outside of the deed books. It is also important to understand if the majority of individuals within a local region rented property, especially when little evidence of land ownership appear.

Know the exact legal requirements to sell, purchase, inherit, or otherwise acquire and dispose of property. Knowing the exact parameters enables a researcher to evaluate their findings and the information contained in any land records you might come across.

Step Eleven: Check other types of land transactions

Land patents and land companies represent a few of the other processes by which an individual could obtain land. Evidence of these transactions do not often find their way into the deed books, but are instead accessible in separate record sets.

Other records include land distributed by the state or Federal government for various reasons. A land lottery, military service awards, and other events might have led an ancestor to acquire state lands. Each state has its variations, though a general process when obtaining state lands (or land patents) included:

Grants

The first step in awarding land to a party (note that a "grant" does not infer that an individual actually paid for the land).

Warrants

Record of an official survey of land, similar to a receipt (note that warrants do not indicate the final, official sale of state land property).

Patent

A final sale of property for state lands.

When using these records, remember that an individual might not have completed all three steps, and might have withdrawn a grant, or even a warrant, at any time during the process. Some might have gained state land in other counties or states to sell to others.

States and the Federal government also issued bounty lands to soldiers serving in the American Revolution, War of 1812, and other conflicts, which provide an additional source of records to examine.

Step Twelve: Enlist tax and census records

Local tax records can verify property ownership, and even provide details as to its location, size and value. While tax records might not appear to contain detailed genealogical information, collectively they can provide information regarding ages, probate processes, and other sources. Changes in an individual's taxes can indicate land sales, inheritance, or other information.

Step Thirteen: Pay attention to the details

Land transactions might provide information relating to occupations, associates, and relatives. They might also be crucial when telling two individuals who share the same name apart, understanding the economic status of a family, or researching an individual's migration.

Step Fourteen: If necessary, recreate the immediate neighbors

Neighbors of an ancestor might appear to be unrelated, but can leave important clues. Consider the value of understanding the individuals and families with whom your ancestor would have frequently interacted with – what other records might they have left behind?

Step Fifteen: Synthesize your findings

Even negative results in land record research can inform you about an ancestor or family you might be tracing. Consider the cumulative value of your findings when examining land records and be sure to write-up your findings.

For Further Reading...

1. Hone, E. Wade. *Land and Property Research in the United States*. Ancestry Publishing: Provo, UT, 1997.
2. Kashuba, Melinda, *Walking with Your Ancestors: A Genealogist's Guide to Using Maps and Geography*, Cincinnati, OH: Family Tree Books, 2005.
3. Mathews, Lois Kimball. *The Expansion of New England: the Spread of New England Settlement and Institutions to the Mississippi River, 1620-1865*. New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1962.
4. Paullin, Charles O., *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States*, New York: Carnegie Institution of Washington and American Geographical Society of New York, 1932.