

A tip for beginning and intermediate family historians: learn about county formation dates, changing borders, and adjacent counties.

The county that you are searching for information about ancestors has stories of its own. To



enhance your research of census records and to better understand historical events and circumstances that affected your ancestors, become familiar with county stories, some of which have interesting twists and turns!

Take Macon County, Alabama for example. Macon County did not always exist. It was formed in 1832 by an act of the Alabama Legislature. Prior to formation, the land that came to comprise Macon County was first possessed by indigenous peoples from pre-historic times. The Muscogee Creek Nation ceded the land with the signing in 1832 of the Treaty of Cusseta. Historians are careful to explain that the Creeks signed the treaty under duress that stemmed from a long-standing goal to force the Creeks off their ancestral homelands so the United States could expand westward.

Macon County's borders changed twice in 1866 when the Alabama Legislature established Lee and Bullock Counties.

Lee County, which is adjacent to Macon County was formed from a portion of northern Macon County and from portions of Chambers, Russell, and Tallapoosa Counties. Bullock County, also adjacent to Macon County, was formed from a portion of Macon County along its southern border. Pike, Montgomery, and Barbour counties also gave up portions of their original acreage to Bullock County.

How might Macon County's changing boundaries affect your census research? If you are looking for ancestors in Macon County and can't find them, depending on the census year, check census records for the counties that are adjacent to Macon County. If you are looking for the family of origin for a spouse of a known ancestor but can't find them, look for the family of origin in census records for adjacent counties using the spouse's maiden name. If you are using Ancestry.com to search for a particular surname in your DNA matches' trees, enter Macon and adjacent counties as the birth location to broaden your search.

How might county changing boundaries affect your landownership research? Peach County, Georgia offers a good example. Peach County did not always exist. It was formed in 1924 from portions of Houston and Macon counties. This means that a search of landownership records for a particular ancestor prior to 1924 needs to include searches in Houston and Macon counties for property records such as deeds, wills, and property inventories.

Although it is rare, state legislators abolished and then re-established some counties using the same or a different name. This also may affect your census and other research depending on the year or years you are focused on. Colbert, Etowah, and Lamar counties in Alabama are examples. The State of Alabama established Colbert County in early 1867 from a portion of Franklin County, and abolished it in late 1869. The electorate voted to re-establish Colbert County in 1870. In 1866, the Alabama Legislature established Baine County from portions of Cherokee and DeKalb counties, then abolished it. Adhering to Baine County's original boundaries, the Legislature replaced Baine County with Etowah County in 1868. Lamar County originated as Jones County in 1867, taking from portions of Marion and Fayette counties. The Legislature abolished Jones County in 1867, re-established it in 1868 as Sanford County, then renamed it Lamar County in 1877.

The counties you are researching may have complicated histories but taking county history into account may lessen frustrating twists and turns with your family history research and lead to new discoveries!

Resources for Researching County Histories and Changing Borders

County Histories

- Local library genealogy section
- Alabama Heritage Books – many are out of print but can be purchased on sites like Ebay
- Alabama Department of Archives and History
- County Historical Societies
- County Genealogical Societies
- Encyclopedia of Alabama - <https://encyclopediaofalabama.org>

Use the search tool to enter the name of the county you want to read about.

Historical maps (county maps, Sanborn Maps)

- University of Alabama Historical Maps - <https://alabamamaps.ua.edu/historicalmaps/index.html>
- Library of Congress – <https://www.loc.gov>
- Alabama County Maps - Interactive History Complete List by Caleb Pike, <https://www.mapofus.org/alabama>
- Georgia County Maps: Interactive History Complete List by Caleb Pike, <https://www.mapofus.org/georgia>

Land Records

- Bureau of Land Management General Land Office (GLO) Records - <https://glorerecords.blm.gov/default.aspx>

To make the most of this site, first become familiar with the Public Land Survey System's township, range, and section identifiers. For more information about Alabama's Public Land Survey System, visit <https://alabamamaps.ua.edu>