

Researching Kansas Ancestors

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Whether your ancestors came to Kansas to stay, they spent a generation or two, or were just passing through, their footprints can be found in Kansas records. Our ancestors came for many reasons including the issue of slavery, the trails west, the Homestead Act, and the railroads. They came from states to the east and multiple foreign countries. Learn the nuances of researching in the Sunflower State.

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Kansas Geography

Kansas is the geographic center of the 48 states. It is bordered by four states – Colorado, Missouri, Nebraska and, Oklahoma. Five of the ten largest cities in Kansas are located in the Kansas City metropolitan area. The ten largest cities are Kansas City, Lawrence, Lenexa, Manhattan, Olathe, Overland Park, Topeka, Salina, Shawnee, and Wichita.¹ If you have Kansas City ancestors, look in both Kansas and Missouri records.

Kansas History

Over the centuries, different tribes have moved into and out of Kansas. Kansas has four nationally recognized tribes with reservations. There are many more tribes that called/call Kansas home. A list is found on Kansapedia. When researching Indian ancestors, use the keywords “Native Americans” and “American Indians.”

The first non-Indians to this area were the Spanish explorer. They claimed what is now Kansas for Spain. Next came the French trappers and traders. They claimed this land for France.

As part of the Louisiana Purchase, Kansas became American in 1803. Government officials and Christian missionaries came to present day Kansas between 1803 and 1854. Squatters came too. Prior to statehood, this land has been part of Missouri Territory, Indian Territory, and Kansas Territory.

Throughout the 19th century, Kansas was the center point of westward migration and a transportation hub. The first major trail to pass thru was the Santa Fe Trail connecting western Missouri to Santa Fe, New Mexico. This trail was used for commerce and by the military. The California and Oregon Trails came next. They carried thousands of immigrants and easterners

¹ *World Atlas* (<http://www.worldatlas.com> : accessed 4 Apr 2023), “10 Largest Cities in Kansas.”

out west. The Pony Express transported mail through Kansas to California. The Overland Trail also known as the Overland Stage Line carried passengers and mail from Atchison, Kansas to Salt Lake City, Utah. The Chisholm Trail was used to move cattle from Texas to Kansas. Eventually the railroads replaced the trails.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 created Kansas Territory. The government opted to let Kansas Territory decide whether it would allow slavery or not. With settlement legal, both sides of this issue attempted to flood the ballot box by sending people. The large influx of people with differing opinions led to two territorial capitals, violent conflict, and bloodshed. Atrocities were committed by both sides. This time is referred to as Bleeding Kansas.

The New England Emigrant Aid Company was founded in Boston to transport anti-slavery immigrants to the territory. If an immigrant ancestor came during the territorial period check for company records especially if they settled in Lawrence, Manhattan, Osawatomie, or Topeka. Other such companies were created. By the 1860 census, 107,206 individuals resided in Kansas including 179 Indians and 2 slaves.²

Kansas became a state on 29 Jan 1861 as a free state. Kansas was part of the Union during the Civil War. Many veterans returned to or settled in Kansas. The Kansas State Censuses asked if an individual served in the Civil War and includes their unit of service. Kansas had active chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic.

Both Americans and immigrants came to Kansas. The largest two immigrant groups were the Scandinavians and the Germans from Russia. Other ethnicities include Czechs, French, Greeks, Italians, Mexicans, and Yugoslavians. The immigrants tended to segregate into their own communities. During the homesteading period, African Americans settled mainly in Cherokee County and Kansas City.

Kansas Records

Kansas records are open unless closed by statute. Unfortunately, state vital records and state divorce records are closed and not available to the public.

VITAL RECORDS - State registration began in the early 1910s for births, marriages, and deaths. State divorce certificates begin in 1951. Pre-1940 records must be requested by a close family member. Post-1940 records can only be requested by immediate family members. Identification and proof of relationship are required.

Prior to state registration births and deaths may have been recorded at the county or city level. Marriages are one of the earliest records recorded.

CENSUS RECORDS – A handful of territorial censuses were taken during the 1850s. The first federal census for Kansas was the 1860 for Kansas Territory. Kansas is one of the best states for

² ["Population of the United States in 1860: Kansas,"](#) United Census Bureau

state census records. A state census was taken every 10 years on years ending in five from 1865 to 1925. Kansas also took multiple city and county censuses during the 1900s. Not all of these 20th century records are available online. Those that are can be found on Ancestry. Those that are not are at the Kansas Historical Society.

LAND RECORDS – Kansas is a federal land state. Rural legal land descriptions include the section, township and range. Land in town is described by lot, block, and original/addition. If your ancestor received their land from the government as either a homestead or a purchase, check the [General Land Office records](#) of the Bureau of Land Management.

Kansas has a unique land record index called a numerical index or township book. Instead of land transactions being indexed by last name, it is indexed by the township number. All transactions for that township are listed by section number. Some indexes have each page divided into quadrants like the sections are divided. This index works best when used with newspaper listings of land sales and other records that include a legal land description.

NEWSPAPERS – The [Kansas State Digital Newspapers program](#) of the Kansas State Historical Society is making historic Kansas newspapers available online. Some of these papers are available on [Chronicling America](#). The majority are available through Newspapers.com. Free access to the Kansas papers on Newspapers.com is available from the program page. Newspapers after 1923 are typically available on microfilm at the Kansas Historical Society, local libraries, and/or local societies.

Tips for newspaper research:

- Use map view under browse for newspapers just across the county line
- Families visited - check newspapers where their family lived
- Legal notices were published at the county seat
- Business charters, college graduations, and other statewide information may include your ancestor – check newspapers at the state capital

Repositories

[FAMILY SEARCH CATALOG](#) - Always start with the FamilySearch catalog to see which records are available online and for what years. Over the last 10 years its coverage has dramatically increased.

COUNTY COURTHOUSE – The Register of Deeds handles all land transactions for that county. The Clerk of Court handles court records and documents from the various courts including civil, criminal, probate, and divorce. Court records may include journals, docket books, and case files.

Early birth and death record information, when it was kept, was at the county or city level. Registration is usually incomplete and kept in registers. Pre-1911 marriages were recorded at the county level. Applications, licenses, returns and register may exist. The county treasurer is responsible for tax records. Unfortunately, they rarely have survived.

LOCAL ARCHIVES, MUSEUMS, AND SOCIETIES – Do not ignore them. They know what records were kept and where they are located. They create(d) the indexes and publish(ed) them. They know the history. They are the local experts. They are often the repositories for early courthouse records.

[EISENHOWER PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY](#) is located in Abilene. If your ancestor may have been in the right place at the right time to be included within the manuscript collections, it only takes a minute for a [finding aid search](#).

[KANSAS HISTORICAL SOCIETY](#) maintains the State Archives, the Museum of History, and historic sites throughout the state. The State Archive and Museum is located in Topeka. This location houses original and microfilmed records from around the state including official state documents, county courthouse records, newspapers, photographs, artifacts, and manuscript collections. Its [Kansapedia](#) is a wonderful online resource for genealogists.

[NATIONAL ARCHIVES at KANSAS CITY](#) is home to federal records for Kansas. It is home to all bankruptcy records and the majority of alien files. It also houses federal naturalization records for Kansas. Kansas has one federal penitentiary in Leavenworth and NARA-KC has their archived documents. NARA-KC's records are well indexed and a good bit are digital.

[NATIONAL FRONTIER TRAILS MUSEUM](#) is located in Independence, Missouri. It is home to the Merrill J. Mattes Research Library. Its focus is on the Oregon, California, and Santa Fe Trails. Its collection includes trail diaries, maps, and other books.

[World Cat](#) can be used to identify county histories, county indexes, and other books relevant to your ancestors' time in Kansas.

Kansas may have ethnic and occupational archives, museums, and societies relevant to your ancestor. The Old Mill & Swedish Heritage Museum is located in Lindsborg.

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