

Lay of the Land: Using American Land Records in Your Family History Research

Strategies for Using Land Records

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Overview

Land records include many pieces of information of value to the Family Historian. Such as names of the Grantor (seller) and Grantee (buyer), residences of Grantor and Grantee, location of the property, witnesses, neighbors and dates. These tidbits can supply the researcher with important biographical information about ancestors. At the very least, it places the ancestor at a place and time. Or perhaps the witnesses and abutters could be family members or associates.

Placing an Ancestor

Fixing an ancestor to a time and place is important for several reasons. First, the place and time give clues as to where to look for other records for your ancestor. Second, locating an ancestor at a place and time gives clues for answering questions such as arrival in the region and life events such as births, marriages and deaths.

Confirming Kinship

Land records can confirm kinship through mention of relationships between grantors and grantees or of relationships between the grantor and the previous owners of the property. The dower release at the end of a sale, where the wife attests that she is freely giving up her dower interest (1/3rd) in the property, confirms the relationship between grantor and his wife.

Sometimes the land transaction implies kinship. This occurs when the grantor states they are selling to the grantee for a consideration (sale price) of “love and affection,” or perhaps “\$1.” This language usually means the grantor is a parent and the grantee is a child but may be used between siblings as well.

Identity Clues

Land records also provide myriad other clues about your ancestor. The land transaction may refer to your ancestor’s occupation, such a “weaver,” which helps confirm that you have found the correct land record.

Land records supply a residence of the grantee and grantor and in cases where one of the parties is from a different county or even a different state, the designation in the deed becomes an important clue regarding identity. You may trace the migration path of your ancestor through land records.

If your ancestor was married more than once, the name of the wife on the dower release may help narrow the time window for a previous wife’s death.

Cluster Research

Land records are a key piece of a cluster research strategy. Cluster research involves tracking the family and friends (F), associates (A) and neighbors (N) of your ancestor, also known as your ancestor's FAN club. A member of your ancestor's FAN club may have left a record with your ancestor's name.

In a land record, pay attention to the names, especially the abutters to the piece of land and to the witnesses of the record. The abutters represent neighbors and may be relatives. Witnesses to a record are, at a minimum, associates, but may also be relatives.

Resources

Patricia Law Hatcher, *Locating Your Roots: Discover Your Ancestors Using Land Records* (Cincinnati, Betterway Books, 2003).

E. Wade Hone, *Land & Property Research in the United States* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry Inc., 1997).

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Carol Mehr Schiffman, "Geographic Tools: Maps, Atlases, and Gazetteers" and Wendy B. Elliott and Karen Clifford, "Printed Land Records," in *Printed Sources: A Guide to Published Genealogical Records* (Salt Lake City: Ancestry Inc., c1998), 95–144, 388–435.

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James C. Barsi, *The Basic Researcher's Guide to Homesteads & Other Federal Land Records* (Colorado Springs: Nuthatch Grove Press, c1994).

Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789-1837* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1968).