

New York State Resources for Genealogical Research

Key dates in New York history: 1609, discovered by Henry Hudson (sailing for the Dutch); 1624, Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam (became New York City) and soon after, Fort Orange (site of modern Albany); 1664, Dutch surrendered New Holland to the English, who divided it into New York and New Jersey; 1788, ratified US constitution; 1796, capital moved from New York City to Albany; 1825, completion of Erie Canal; 1845, end of manorial system of land ownership.

Patterns of settlement: Coastal areas were settled first, including Long Island, then settlement moved gradually inland along the river valleys. Use J. H. French's *Gazetteer of the State of New York* (1860, available as modern reprint) to determine date of first settlement of your ancestral towns. Early settlers probably came from somewhere downstream along the nearest river, or else they participated in an organized land deal of some kind.

Census: The usual US census records are complete except for 1810. (Cortland and part of Broome Cos. missing). In addition, many state censuses were conducted, usually between the Federal censuses. Many state census returns were lost in a fire at the State Library in 1911, but most counties had retained copies of some returns. Website of New York Genealogical and Biographical Society (NYGBS) has a handy inventory of what's available:

www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org/modules.php?name=Sections&op=viewarticle&artid=17 .

Key items on state censuses include, in some years, the name of the county in which each person was born, and some exact dates for births, marriages, or deaths. Supplement census research by using published directories!

Church records: Many early records have been published, especially for Dutch Reformed congregations. Many English families attended the Dutch Reformed churches, but the English names are often spelled very strangely! Most records before 1800 have probably been published. Many early families show up at churches close to New York City, later baptisms and marriages recorded at churches farther and farther inland. Works Progress Administration (WPA) published a series of inventories of the church archives in New York State.

Military records: Many records exist, mostly available through national sources such as National Archives, DAR, etc. However, look for records published by the Secretary of State, for Civil War service, payments to War of 1812 soldiers, and similar topics. Many manuscript records from the Revolutionary period are in repositories throughout the state.

Probate: A difficult topic for New York, because there have been many different courts with probate jurisdiction. Guidance from Family History Library (FHL), NYGBS, and New York Historical Society (NYHS) does not entirely agree. See recent manual on this subject, Gordon L. Remington, *New York State Probate Records* (2002), published by New England Historic Genealogical Society. From 1830 onward, look for the **probate petition** that was supposed to name heirs-at-law, even if a will also existed. Location of records: Albany (state library), New York City, Utica, county court houses -- depending on period, you may need to check multiple repositories. Some losses due to 1911 fire. Most early wills (up to about 1830) identified and briefly abstracted in published sources, but look at all sources before concluding there is no information! Before 1796, wills were sometimes recorded both at Albany and New York City.

Counties are organized into "towns." There may be separate town-level records or a town

historian and sometimes also a county historian with a separate office. Historians may be unpaid volunteers keeping priceless records in the basement! Best available coverage is in the series of inventories of county repositories prepared by Cornell University (many of these at the Los Angeles Family History Center).

Cemetery records go way, way back -- New York is full of good rocks that make enduring tombstones! Some have been transcribed by town historians or local history groups, check LDS microfilm for major collections in some counties. Many records have been published. NYGBS has an inventory of published collections on their website.

Newspapers have been published in New York for a very long time! An amazing number have survived. The complete inventory of known repositories is on-line at www.nysl.nysed.gov/nysnp/index.html. For New York City, don't stop with one newspaper when others are available! You may be able to find the same event -- such as a sensational death or accident -- in several different papers, and in several languages, each story based on independent reporting. For New York Times index, news stories are not indexed as obituaries and vice versa! Check under subject headings such as suicide, murder, accident, etc., in addition to obituaries!

Land records: Most early land transactions involve the patent system in Colonial times, boundaries of many properties still refer to the original patent descriptions. Some patents created manors, with privileges for governance of tenants, manorial records still exist but may be hard to find. When patents are involved, lot numbers are sometimes key to following families from one generation to the next. Large collections still not finished or published, but significant information has appeared in periodicals. Cornell University has important unpublished records relating to Holland Land Company, among others. If there is a comprehensive map of all the patents, I couldn't find it!

Immigration and related records -- arriving passengers, also newspaper lists of departing passengers, declaration of intention, naturalization, colonial arrivals and naturalizations.

Other **court records** go back to 1600's (Dutch period) and are now in a number of different repositories. Large collections of pre-Revolutionary court records have been published.

Published local and state history -- major histories were being published as early as the middle of the 19th Century, most of the early histories have been reprinted. Major libraries such as Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL), FHL and New York Public Library (NYPL) will have most of this material, as will major university libraries such as UCLA. Indexing varies, may be incomplete, so allow plenty of time to read these sources at length.

Major collections of additional published and unpublished material exist: e.g. New York Genealogical and Biographical Society (need to be a member to consult collections), New York Historical Society, Brooklyn Historical Society (for Long Island records), Cornell University, other universities, New York Public Library, state archives and related collections, etc. County inventories produced by Cornell U (excludes government repositories--WPA published a few inventories of county records).

Finding more: Check Family History Library's New York Research Outline, web sites of NYGBS (www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org), NYHS (www.nyhistory.org), NYPL (www.nypl.org). All of these have useful on-line guides for genealogical research. Significant collections of published materials and microfilms at LAFHC, LAPL (especially fine collection!), UCLA, and of course the FHL itself.