

OPERATION GRANNY FILES

Staking Your Claim — Land Records and the Dirt Your Ancestors Stood On

Your step-by-step guide to finding, reading, and mapping the land your ancestors owned.

Field Guide & Quick-Reference

Mission 16: Staking Your Claim

Clearance Level: Biscuit-Tin Operative

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QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

Land records are the earliest, largest, and most complete category of records in the United States — and they point to a place you can actually visit. Two types matter most: federal patents (the original government-to-citizen transfer, searchable free at glorerecords.blm.gov) and county deeds (every sale afterward, recorded at your ancestor's county courthouse and increasingly available on FamilySearch). Always search both the grantor and grantee indexes. Pay attention to the consideration clause — "\$1 and love and affection" almost always means family. And when you find a legal description, map it. The land is still there.

Federal vs. County Records — Know the Difference

Understanding which type of land record you need saves hours of searching in the wrong place.

Federal Land Records (Public Domain)

These document the first transfer of land from the U.S. government to a private citizen. They include homestead patents, cash entry sales, military bounty land warrants, railroad grants, and mineral claims. Federal patents cover land in 30 "public domain" states — essentially everything west of the original thirteen colonies, plus Alabama, Mississippi, Florida, and the states carved from the Northwest Territory.

What they show: Patentee name, date of patent, legal description (township/range/section), patent number, issuing land office.

Bonus material: Application files (called "case files") sometimes contain the applicant's age, country of origin, date of arrival in the U.S., marital status, and names of family members. Homestead files are especially rich.

Where to find them: BLM General Land Office Records at glorerecords.blm.gov (free, searchable by name). For case files with additional genealogical detail, order from the National Archives.

County Deed Records (Subsequent Transfers)

These document every sale, gift, mortgage, or inheritance after the original patent. They are the bread and butter of land research and often span centuries of continuous recording.

What they show: Grantor (seller), grantee (buyer), property description, consideration (price), date, witnesses, spouse names (dower releases), and sometimes the parties' county and state of residence.

Where to find them: County courthouse or Register of Deeds office. Many pre-1900 deed books are digitized on FamilySearch; browse the catalog under your ancestor's county → "Land and Property."

Rule of thumb: Start with BLM GLO for the original patent, then move to county deeds for everything that happened after.

Where to Search — Your Land Records Checklist

Work through these sources in order. Each one builds on the last.

Step	Source	What You'll Find	Cost
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1	BLM GLO Records (glorerecords.blm.gov)	Federal patents, survey plats, field notes	Free
2	FamilySearch Catalog (familysearch.org)	Digitized county deed books and indexes for 1,500+ courthouses	Free
3	Ancestry (ancestry.com)	U.S. General Land Office Records 1776–2015; some state/county deed collections	Subscription
4	USGenWeb (usgenweb.org)	Volunteer-transcribed indexes and digitized records, county by county	Free
5	State Archives	Colonial-era grants, early state records, special collections	Free / small fee
6	County Courthouse (Register of Deeds)	Post-patent deed books, mortgages, plat maps, tax records	Small fee for copies

Search both indexes. County deed books have a grantor index (sellers) and a grantee index (buyers). A purchase tells you when someone arrived in the county. A sale tells you when they left — and sometimes where they went, because the deed may list their new state of residence.

GRANNY PRO TIP

Don't stop at the deed itself. Check the mortgage records filed alongside deeds — they reveal financial relationships and sometimes name family members as co-signers. And look at tax records for the same county: annual property tax lists can track the exact year your ancestor arrived in or departed from a location, even when no deed was recorded.

Anatomy of a Deed — What Each Part Tells You

Every deed follows a standard structure. Once you learn the parts, you can read any deed from any century.

Date. The execution date (when the deed was signed) and the recording date (when it was filed at the courthouse). A gap of months or years between the two is common and may indicate when the family actually moved.

Parties. The grantor (seller) and grantee (buyer), usually with their county and state of residence listed. This is one of the few record types that tells you where someone lived at a specific moment — not just where an event was registered.

Consideration. The price paid. This is a genealogical goldmine:

“\$1 and love and affection” between people with the same surname = almost certainly a family transfer (parent to child, sibling to sibling).

Fair market value to a stranger = the family may be selling off and moving on. Check the grantee index in the destination county for a corresponding purchase.

“\$1 and other good and valuable considerations” = often a gift or inheritance formalized as a deed.

Dower Release. In many states, a wife held a legal claim (dower right) to one-third of her husband’s real property. When land was sold, she had to sign a separate release. Her name appears here — and sometimes this is the only record that names a man’s wife in an era before marriage certificates were common.

Property Description. The legal description of the land (see Section 4 for how to decode it).

Witnesses and Notary. Often neighbors or family members. Worth cross-referencing with census and church records.

Recording Information. The book and page number in county records. Always note this — it’s your citation and your path back to the original document.

Two Survey Systems — A Visual Comparison

Your ancestor’s land was described using one of two systems. Knowing which one your county used is all you need to get started.

Metes and Bounds (Original Colonies + State-Land States)

Used in: Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, and parts of Ohio.

How it works: Describes property boundaries using natural landmarks, compass directions, and measured distances. A description starts at a known point and traces the perimeter: “Beginning at the large white oak on the south bank of the creek, thence north 40 degrees east 20 chains to a stone pile...”

Tip: You don’t need to plat it perfectly. Even an approximate sketch will help you identify the general area on a modern map.

Rectangular (Township and Range) Survey (Federal Land States)

Used in: Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio (western), Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wisconsin, Wyoming.

How it works: A grid system established by the Land Ordinance of 1785. The country is divided into 6-mile-square townships, each containing 36 one-mile-square sections (640 acres each). A typical description reads: “The NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 12, Township 3 North, Range 5 East of the Salt Lake Meridian.”

Feature	Metes and Bounds	Rectangular Survey
Based on	Natural landmarks + compass	Grid coordinates
Precision	Variable — depends on surveyor	High — standardized grid
Mapping difficulty	Moderate to hard	Easy — grid-based

Common errors	Landmarks moved or vanished	Rare — coordinates are fixed
States using it	Original 13 colonies + TX, HI, KY, TN, VT, WV, ME	30 public-domain states
Best mapping tool	Hand-drawn plat or DeedMapper software	County GIS or BLM mapping tool

Map Your Ancestor's Land — Step-by-Step Worksheet

Use this worksheet to take a land record from paper to place.

Step 1: Record the basics.

Ancestor's name: _____

Role in deed: ☐ Grantor (seller) ☐ Grantee (buyer) ☐ Patentee

Date of document: _____

County and state: _____

Source (book/page or BLM patent #): _____

Step 2: Identify the spouse.

Spouse named in deed or dower release: _____

Step 3: Note the consideration.

Amount or phrase: _____

What it suggests: ☐ Family transfer ☐ Market sale ☐ Gift/inheritance ☐ Unclear

Step 4: Copy the legal description.

Survey system: ☐ Metes and Bounds ☐ Rectangular (Township/Range/Section)

Full description: _____

Step 5: Identify the land on a modern map.

Tool used: ☐ County GIS website ☐ BLM mapping tool ☐ Google Earth ☐ Other: _____

Approximate modern location: _____

GPS coordinates (if found): _____

Step 6: Note the witnesses and neighbors.

Witness 1: _____

Witness 2: _____

Adjacent landowners: _____

Step 7: What did you learn?

New family connection discovered: _____

Migration clue (arrival or departure): _____

Next record to search: _____

BONUS INSIGHT

Land records and cluster research go hand in hand. The neighbors listed as witnesses on your ancestor's deed, the adjacent landowners on a plat map, and the families who bought or sold land to your ancestor are the same community network you explored in Mission 9 (The Neighbor Effect). When you map your ancestor's land, map the neighbors' parcels too. Patterns emerge: families migrating together, in-laws settling on adjacent lots, entire congregations relocating as a group. The land tells the story of a community, not just an individual.

GRANNY SAYS

"A deed is just coordinates until you stand on the ground. Then it becomes something else entirely — proof that your people were here, that they worked this soil, that the creek still runs the way it did when they signed their name. Find the deed. Map the land. And if the road still goes there, go stand on it."

Notes

Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.
