

# Montana State Research Guide



## Family History Sources in Big Sky Country

### Montana History

The first wave of migration and settlement into Montana began when gold was discovered in Bannack (1862) and Alder Gulch (1863), south of Butte. Montana became a fusion of frontiers that included settlers who had originally gone to California and Oregon in the 1850s. Settlers from the east, southern-born Civil War veterans, and foreign-born immigrants, including those from Europe and China, all arrived in the same time period.



*Bands of sheep on the Gravelly Range at the foot of Black Butte, Madison County, Montana*

Montana was created as a territory in 1864. The area was formed from Washington Territory west of the Continental Divide and Nebraska Territory east of the Continental Divide. Statehood was granted in 1889.

After 1865, cargo and people destined for the gold camps arrived in Montana by steamboat up the Missouri River. Steamers usually left St. Louis or Sioux City in late March or early April and arrived at Fort Benton, Montana, between May and July. The Mullan Road began in Fort Benton and continued to the mines some 100 to 200 miles away. In 1867 the total number of people entering and leaving Montana by way of the Missouri River and Mullan Road routes was about 5,000.

Beginning in 1869 Montana territorial officials began advertising for settlers. An agent in New York was contracted to print pamphlets on the territory for distribution in Germany and Scandinavian countries. According to the 1870 U.S. census, Montana's population consisted of 18,306 whites, 1,949 Chinese, and 183 African Americans. The estimated Native American population was 19,300. By 1872 the Montana Immigration Society was established in Helena, and by 1875 another immigration society was holding meetings in Bozeman. The agent for Bozeman was commissioned to bring immigrants into Big Horn and Yellowstone counties.

By 1883 the Northern Pacific Railroad was completed. From 1882 to 1883 the railroad sent out 2.5 million pieces of literature advertising land for sale. Immigrants from northern Europe were sought as they could adapt to the climate and conditions of Montana, though only a few came. An English colony was established in Helena and the Yellowstone Valley in 1882; a few French came to Missoula County; and a few Dutch families settled in the Gallatin Valley in 1893. The most notable settlement was that of Finnish lumbermen east of Missoula in 1892. Italians and Germans settled in Fergus and Park counties, and many Germans came from North Dakota and Canada.

The cattlemen of Montana were primarily English and Scottish, although they drove cattle owned by the Germans. The sheepmen were also from the British Isles.

American migrations included 506 individuals from Ripon, Wisconsin. This group of 115 families settled near Billings in 1882. Many southerners came to the state and settled in the Bitterroot Valley. Settlers arriving from Oregon drove cattle.

The smelters and mills of the Anaconda Copper Mining Company in Anaconda and Great Falls at first drew Scandinavian and Irish workers to the area. After 1900 a heavy influx of workers from the Balkan countries arrived. The Montana coal mines of Cascade, Carbon, and Musselshell counties were worked by the Irish, Poles, and Italians.

The above section is from *History of Montana* in the *Ancestry.com Wiki*, and was originally published in *Red Book: American State, County and Town Sources*, ed. by Alice Eichholz, CG, Ph.D., chapter by Dwight A. Radford.

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### Montana Census Records

Federal censuses for the state of Montana began in 1870; however, some parts of Montana were included other Federal census records. In 1860, people living in the area of Montana east of the Continental Divide were enumerated in the unorganized part of Nebraska Territory. The only exceptions to this were two trading posts, Fort Alexander and Fort Union, which were enumerated with unorganized Dakota. The area of Montana west of the Continental Divide was enumerated as the Bitterroot Valley and the Ponderay Mountains in Spokane County, Washington Territory. Yellowstone National Park was created in 1872, and all residents of the area were enumerated in the Wyoming census for 1880.

A "census" of miners taken during 1862–63 can be found in "List of Early Settlers: A List of All Persons (Except Indians) Who Were in What is Now Montana During the Winter of 1862–63, Which Was the First Winter After the Gold Mines of This Region Had Become Noised Abroad," Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana, vol. 1 (Helena: Rocky Mountain Publishing Co., 1876).

The following census collections are available on Ancestry:

- [Census of the Blackfeet, Montana, 1897-1898](#)
- [Beaverhead County, Montana Census, 1910](#)
- [U.S. Federal Census Mortality Schedules, 1850-1885](#)
- [1890 Veterans Schedules](#)
- [U.S., Indian Census Rolls, 1885-1940](#)
- [U.S. Enumeration District Maps and Descriptions, 1940](#)

<b>Population</b>	
<b>1870</b>	<b>20,595</b>
<b>1880</b>	<b>39,159</b>
<b>1890</b>	<b>142,924</b>
<b>1900</b>	<b>243,329</b>
<b>1910</b>	<b>376,059</b>
<b>1920</b>	<b>548,889</b>
<b>1930</b>	<b>537,606</b>
<b>1940</b>	<b>559,456</b>
<b>1950</b>	<b>591,024</b>

### Montana Vital Records

Although Montana began recording births and deaths in 1907, it was not until about 1915 that mandatory registration of births became more complete. By 1922, compliance was about 90 percent.

- [Montana Department of Health and Human Services](#): Holds records of births and deaths from 1907. Earlier records and marriage records are filed with the clerk of the county where the event was recorded. The Department of Public Health has only indexes to marriages (and only for those after 1945).
- [Western States marriage index \(BYU Idaho\) special collections](#): a searchable index to marriages in several western states, including Montana. See the web site for specific counties and years included in the index.

### State Vital Records on Ancestry

- [Montana, County Marriages, 1865-1950](#)
- [Montana, Death Index, 1868-2011](#)
- [Montana, County Births and Deaths, 1840-2004](#)

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- [Montana, Select Marriages, 1889-1947](#)
- [Inventory of the vital statistics records of churches and religious organizations in Montana, 1942](#)
- [U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1600s-Current](#)
- [Missoula and Ravalli County, Montana Cemeteries](#)

## Other Collections

- [U.S., Northern Pacific Railway Company Personnel Files, 1890-1960](#)
- [A Directory of churches & religious organizations in Montana, 1941](#)
- [Montana, Cascade County Records, 1880-2009](#)
- [Montana, Chouteau County Records, 1876-2011](#)
- [Montana, Yellowstone County Records, 1881-2011](#)
- [Montana, Rosebud County Records](#)
- [Montana, Lake County Records, 1857-2010](#)
- [U.S., Women of the West, 1928](#)
- [Montana, History and Biography](#)
- [Montana Stories, Memories & History Collections on Ancestry](#)
- [U.S., Indexed County Land Ownership Maps, 1860-1918](#)
- [U.S. Map Collection, 1513-1990](#)
- [Historic Land Ownership and Reference Atlases, 1507-2000](#)
- [U.S. IRS Tax Assessment Lists, 1862-1918](#)
- [U.S. School Yearbooks, 1880-2012](#)
- [U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989](#) (Use the browse box in the upper right corner to determine what directories are available for your ancestor's area. If they lived in a rural area, check to see if that area was included with a larger city in the vicinity.)

## Other State Resources

The organizations listed below provide information about Montana history and genealogy. In addition to these state-level resources, many counties and towns maintain important genealogical collections in local libraries, genealogical societies, or historical societies, so check for a local resource when researching.

- [Montana State Library](#)
- [Montana Historical Society and State Archives](#)
- [Montana State Genealogical Society](#)
- [Montana GenWeb](#)
- [National Archives and Records Administration \(NARA\) at Denver](#): This facility maintains records from Federal agencies and courts in Montana, including census, military, court, naturalization, and immigration records. .
- [Bureau of Land Management \(BLM\) General Land Office Records](#): The BLM administers Federal Land for public land states including Montana, and maintains records of land patents which granted land from the Federal Government to individuals. Use the Land Patent Search to locate

land grants by name. Many record images are available on the web site. See the FAQ for more information on how to locate and use land patents.

### Help and Advice

- [Map of Montana](#)
- [Montana Family History Research](#)
- [Counties of Montana](#)

### Significant Dates (through 1914)

Native American tribes who have inhabited present-day Montana include the Arapaho, Arikara, Assinboin, Atsina, Bannock, Cheyenne, Crow, Hidatsa, Kalispel, Kutenai, Mandan, Nez Perce, Salish, Shoshoni, Siksika (Blackfeet), and Sioux.

1742-43 – Two La Vérendrye brothers led an expedition that reached southeastern Montana.

1803 – The United States acquired most of present-day Montana through the Louisiana Purchase. It included all but the northwestern section.

1804 – The areas of Montana that were part of the Louisiana Purchase became part of the District of Louisiana.

1805 – The areas of Montana that were part of the Louisiana Purchase became part of Louisiana Territory. The Lewis and Clark expedition reaches what would become Fort Union.

1807-1812 – The North West Company (Canadian) established several fur trading posts in what would become the state of Montana.

1812 – The areas of Montana that were part of the Louisiana Purchase became part of Missouri Territory, with the exception of a small section of the northeast that was part of "Rupert's Land."

1820 – John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company expanded into Montana.

1822 – The areas of Montana that were part of the Louisiana Purchase became unorganized territory and the northwest section became part of Oregon Country. It remained this way until 1853, when that same northwest section became part of Washington Territory.

1828 – Fort Union was established on the Upper Missouri River and served as a lucrative trading post between Native Americans and European traders.

1830s and 1840s – As the demand for fur declined, traders turned to bison. By the 1880s only about 325 bison remained of the 30 to 60 million that had roamed the country in the 1500s.

1837-1840 – Steamboat arrivals, which began in 1832, brought smallpox to the region. The disease ravaged the Native American tribes in the area who had no resistance to the disease; entire lodges were wiped out.

1841 - Founded by Jesuit priest Fr. Pierre De Smet, St. Mary's Mission became the first permanent white settlement in present-day Montana. It was later renamed Stevensville.

1846 – The Hudson Bay Company established a trading post at Fort Connah.

1854 – The areas of Montana that were part of the Louisiana Purchase became part of Nebraska Territory.

1861 – The areas of Montana that were part of the Louisiana Purchase became part of Dakota Territory.

1861-1865 – The U.S. Civil War was funded in part by gold from the fields of Montana, despite being home to a large number of Confederate sympathizers.

1862 – The discovery of gold on Grasshopper Creek spurred a gold rush at Bannack, Montana.

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- 1862 – The Homestead Act opened up federal lands to the public.
- 1863 – Present-day Montana was split between Dakota Territory and Idaho Territory.
- 1863 – The Bozeman Trail was established, splitting northwards from the Oregon Trail in Wyoming. It brought prospective miners north into what would become Montana Territory the following year.
- 1864 – Montana Territory was formed with the present boundaries of the state; Bannack was the first territorial capital.
- 1860s and 1870s – Cattle ranching began to flourish in the state, as the boom of mining towns increased the demand for beef and the wide availability of land provides ample room for grazing.
- 1860s-1880s – Vigilantism was widespread in the territory due to cattle rustling, theft of horses and gold, and little law enforcement.
- 1866 – Cattle drives began from Texas to Montana.
- 1866-1868 – With miners streaming up the Bozeman Trail, which passed through territory belonging to Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Lakota tribes, emigrants competing with American Indians for food in the Native American's hunting grounds spurs Red Cloud's War. Native Americans won control of the Powder River country for a short time.
- 1870 – The U.S. Army mistakenly killed a band of Piegan Blackfoot Indians who were supposed to be under U.S. protection in the Marias massacre.
- 1872 – Yellowstone National Park, the first national park in the world, was established.
- 1874 – The discovery of a rich silver vein near Butte started a silver boom in Montana.
- 1875 – The territorial capital was moved to Virginia City.
- 1876-1877 - The Great Sioux War was fought between the U.S. and the Lakota Sioux and Northern Cheyenne. Unlike Red Cloud's War, although the Native Americans were victorious in the infamous Battle of Little Bighorn, they eventually lost the war and many ended up on reservations.
- 1877 – The Nez Perce War was fought between the Nez Perce and the U.S. Army. Chief Joseph surrenders to the U.S. in northern Montana.
- 1880 - The Utah and Northern Railroad entered Montana Territory; other railroads soon followed.
- 1880s - A copper boom in Butte was led by William A. Clark, Marcus Daly, and F. Augustus Heinze - the "Copper Kings."
- 1883-1884 - Blackfoot Indians held at the Indian Agency starved at what Native Americans now call Ghost Ridge, as the U.S. government failed to provide them with promised supplies during a difficult winter.
- 1889 – Montana was admitted to the Union as the 41<sup>st</sup> state.
- 1893 – The Panic of 1893 dealt a blow to the silver industry.
- 1894 – Helena was selected as the state capital of Montana.
- 1896 - The Blackfoot Indians ceded a 20-mile strip of land that will become Glacier Park.
- 1899 – Copper King William A. Clark was elected to the U.S. Senate, but was not seated amid a bribery scandal. He was eventually successful in 1901 and served one term.
- 1901 – Butte miners backed by unions won an 8-hour workday.
- 1910 – Glacier National Park was established.
- 1914 – Montana women were granted suffrage.



Cattle in corral waiting to be weighed before being trailed to railroad, Beaverhead County, Montana, c. 1942