

North Dakota State Research Guide



Family History Sources in the Peace Garden State

North Dakota History

The first Europeans in the area arrived the last part of the eighteenth century and were fur traders employed by the Missouri Fur Company. The peopling of the area quickly followed the first exploration with settlements in Selkirk Colony, on the Red and Assiniboine rivers, and the Pembina settlement. Both were established in 1812, but conditions were so difficult that by 1823 Selkirk had become part of the Hudson Bay Company settlement and Pembina had been abandoned.



The indigenous tribes of the Dakotas were the Mandans and Arikaras. Eastern tribes that were moved into the area included Hidatsas, Crows, Cheyennes, Creeks, Assiniboines, Yanktonai Dakotas, Teton Dakotas, and Chippewas. The smallpox epidemics in 1782 and 1786 wiped out three-fourths of the Mandans and half of the Hidatsas. The epidemic of 1837, probably introduced by the white fur traders, also had a devastating effect on the native population.

Composing the largest settlement at the Red River were the "half-breeds" (called métis) who were the offspring of European fathers (French, Canadian, Scottish, and English) and Native American mothers (Chippewa, Creek, Assiniboine). Many area residents claimed French-Chippewa ancestry. By 1850 more than half of the five to six thousand people living at Fort Garry were métis, with a large percentage being Canadian-born.

Settlers began moving into the region in 1849 with the organization of Minnesota Territory and the settlement of Iowa and Minnesota. This immigration brought a number of settlers to southeastern Dakota. Dakota Territory was created by an act of Congress on 2 March 1861 from the area that had previously been Nebraska and Minnesota territories. Overland migration to Montana brought settlers in conflict with the Native Americans, and several wagon trains were attacked. The government reacted by constructing a number of additional forts including Rice, Buford, Stevenson, Totten, and Ransom. Fort Pembina was established in 1870.

Steamboats improved transportation after 1871, but it was the railroads that truly opened North Dakota to the outside world. With the treaties signed by the Sioux in 1867 and 1868, the population of North Dakota increased from 16,000 people to 191,000 during the Dakota Boom years from 1879 to 1886.

Land could be purchased from either the Northern Pacific Railroad or directly from the federal government land offices under the Homestead or Timber Culture acts. The Pembina land office was opened in 1871; by 1890, under the 1841 pre-emption law 19,500 settlers had purchased three million acres. The speculation frenzy during the boom period was followed by retrenchment and abandonment. Those who stayed faced economic problems, drought, and low farm prices.

Major efforts encouraged immigration to North Dakota after statehood was obtained on 2 November 1889, creating a second population boom period. Articles describing mineral resources, timber, land, climate,

livestock, and religious denominations were widely published. Of the approximately forty-five million acres of land, three-fourths were advertised as still susceptible to profitable tillage, and thirty million acres were still idle in 1892. Beginning in 1898 and ending with World War I, some 250,000 immigrants moved to the state, many of these foreign-born. Most of this settlement occurred along the Great Northern Railroad, the Missouri Plateau, and the Drift Prairie. Again, more people immigrated to the area than could be sustained, and later years brought more outward migration from the state.

The above section is from *History of North Dakota* 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 Beth H. Bauman and Marsha Hoffman Rising.

North Dakota Census Records

North Dakota first appears in the federal census in 1850 as Pembina County, Minnesota Territory. In 1860, it is included as unorganized Dakota and in 1870 as the Dakota Territory. There was a special federal census of the area in 1885. There were also state censuses in 1915 and 1925.

The following census collections are available on Ancestry:

- [North Dakota, State Censuses, 1885, 1915, 1925](#)
- [1890 Veterans Schedules](#)
- [U.S., Schedules of Special Census of Indians, 1880](#)
- [U.S., Indian Census Rolls, 1885-1940](#)
- [U.S. Enumeration District Maps and Descriptions, 1940](#)

North Dakota Vital Records

North Dakota passed a law in 1893 requiring the registration of birth and death records with township clerks. This law was repealed in 1895 and reenacted in 1899. When the State Department of Vital records was created in 1923, copies of birth and death records prior to that date were supposed to be forwarded to them.

Marriage records date back to the creation of each county. Beginning in 1925, copies were also sent to the state Division of Vital Records. Divorce records are maintained by the clerk of the district court in each county. North Dakota was a popular site for quickie divorces between 1886-1899, when parties needed to be residents of the state for only 90 days.

- [North Dakota Department of Health, Division of Vital Records](#): Has an index of deaths that occurred more than one year from the date of the search.

<i>Population</i>	
1870	2,405
1880	36,909
1890	190,983
1900	319,146
1910	577,056
1920	646,872
1930	680,845
1940	641,938
1950	619,636

North Dakota State Research Guide



Family History Sources in the Peace Garden State

North Dakota Collections on Ancestry

- [North Dakota and Washington, Chinese Passenger Arrivals, 1903-1944](#)
- [North Dakota Military Men, 1917-1918](#)
- [History of Dakota Territory](#)
- [Roster of Men and Women Who Service in the Naval Service \(Including the Marine Corps\) of the United States or Its Allies From the State of North Dakota in the World War, 1917-1918, vols. 1-4](#)
- [U.S., Northern Pacific Railway Company Personnel Files, 1890-1960](#)
- [U.S., Union Soldiers Compiled Service Records, 1861-1865](#)
- [U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918](#)
- [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.)
- [U.S. School Yearbooks, 1880-2012](#) (Search by name or use the browse box on the right-hand side of the page to look for yearbooks from your ancestor's school.)

[View all North Dakota collections on Ancestry](#)

Other State Resources

The organizations listed below provide information about North Dakota 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 local resources when researching.

- [North Dakota State Genealogical Society](#)
- [State Historical Society of North Dakota](#)
 - [State Archives](#)
 - [Genealogy](#)
- [North Dakota GenWeb](#)
- [North Dakota State Library](#)
- [The National Archives at Denver](#): This facility maintains records from Federal agencies and courts in North Dakota, including census, military, court, naturalization, and immigration records.

Local and Regional Research

- [Red River Valley Genealogical Society](#)

Help and Advice

- [Map of North Dakota](#)
- [North Dakota Family History Research](#)
- [North Dakota County Resources](#)

Significant Dates (through 1930)

Native American tribes that have inhabited present-day North Dakota include the Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Yantonia, Sisseton, Wahpeton, Hunkpapa, Dakota/Lakota Sioux, Pembina Chippewa, and Cree.

1610 – Henry Hudson's claim of the Hudson Bay watershed for England included eastern North Dakota.

1682 – Cavalier deLaSalle claimed the Mississippi River watershed for France; this included North Dakota.

1738 – Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de La Vérendrye became the first European to visit Mandan villages along the Missouri River.

1762 – France ceded its claim on the area to Spain.

1763 – The Treaty of Paris gave England more of the state.

1781 – A fur trading post was established near the Souris River; it was soon abandoned.

1792 – Jacques D'Englise began trade between the Mandan and Hidatsa villages and Spanish traders in St. Louis.

1800 – A fur post was established at Park River; it moved to Pembina in 1801 and became the first white settlement in North Dakota.

1803 – Spain returned the Missouri watershed to France.

1804 and 1806 – The Lewis & Clark expeditions entered North Dakota.

1812 – Canadians established a settlement near Pembina.

1818 – North Dakota became part of the Missouri Territory.

1823 – The boundary between the United States and Canada was fixed north of Pembina.

1829 – The American Fur Company established a post near Williston.

1832 – The first steamboat on the upper Missouri River reached Fort Union.

1834 – Land east of the Missouri River became part of the Michigan Territory.

1836 – Land east of the Missouri River became part of the Wisconsin Territory.

1837 – Mandan Indians died in a smallpox epidemic near Fort Clark.

1838 – Land east of the Missouri River became part of the Iowa Territory.

1848 – Catholic and Protestant missions were established near Pembina.

1849 – Land east of the Missouri River became part of the Minnesota Territory.

1854 – Land east of the Missouri River became part of the Nebraska Territory.

1860 – Regular steamboat service on the Missouri River started.

1861 – Dakota Territory was organized.

1863 – Homesteading began in the Dakota Territory.

1864 – The Frontier Scout, the first newspaper in northern Dakota, began publication at Fort Union.

1867 – The Sisseton and Wahpeton Sioux ceded their lands to the federal government. The Fort Totten Indian Reservation was established.

1868 – The Fort Rice peace council led to the Laramie Treaty, which set the boundaries of Sioux land as west of the Missouri River.

1870 – The Sioux and Chippewa ceded most of their claims in eastern North Dakota.

1872 – Northern Pacific Railway established a line between the Red River and Jamestown. First commercial telegraph line established between Fargo and Winnepeg.

1878 – Ranching began in the Dakota Territory.

North Dakota State Research Guide



Family History Sources in the Peace Garden State

- 1882 – Fire destroyed much of Grand Forks.
- 1883 – The territorial capital moved from Yankton to Bismarck.
- 1889 – North Dakota was admitted as the 39th state.
- 1897 – North Dakota's first free public library opened at Grafton.
- 1898 – Fire destroyed the business section of Bismarck.
- 1907 – Gas was discovered south of Westhope.
- 1930 – A severe windstorm damaged thousands of buildings.



Empty barns and idle trucks are found throughout the drought area. Beach, North Dakota; 1936.
From Library of Congress Photo Collection, 1840-2000