



Wisconsin Resources

Family History Sources in the Badger State

Wisconsin History

When the first French explorers arrived in the 1630s and 1640s, the Menominee, Ho-Chunk, and Ojibwe were living in the area that would become Wisconsin. The Iroquois Wars of the 17th century (also known as the Beaver Wars due to the conflict's roots in the fur trade) drove a number of other tribes westward into Wisconsin, where they were stopped to the west by the Sioux. These tribes included Huron, Ottawa, Sauk, Fox, Potawatomi, Mascouten, Kickapoo, Miami, Petun, and the Neutral Confederacy. The tribes competed for land and resources and had to rely on the French more and more for trade goods. The competition led to conflict between the tribes and shifting alliances between the French and British.



Courthouse, Green Bay, Wisconsin, postcard c. 1907-15, from U.S. Historical Postcards

The fur trade dominated the 1600s and 1700s, and trading companies, many based in Canada, sold goods to Wisconsin traders in exchange for beaver pelts that were used to make hats that were sent around the world. The waterproof beaver skins were prized in a world that for the most part still toiled outdoors in the elements. Bustling trading posts evolved into the early cities of Wisconsin, with Native Americans and Europeans settling around them. The Treaty of Ghent following the War of 1812 ended British trading in the area as it allowed only U.S. citizens to trade. By the early decades of the 1820s, overhunting had taken a toll and the fur trade saw a decline in the area.

At the same time, opportunities were opening up in the lead mining industry in southwestern Wisconsin. The miners, many who had moved north from Missouri, dug into the hillside earning the nickname of "badgers" – a nickname that would stick with the state. As the lead mining industry declined, the copper and iron ore mined grew in the 1850s.

With the opening of land offices in 1832 and the establishment of Wisconsin Territory in 1835, the area began seeing an influx of settlers from eastern states and immigrants from Europe. The population of 3,635 in 1830 soared to 30,945 by 1840, and 305,391 in 1850. The expansion of railroads contributed to the state's growth in the 1850s and 1860s as they provided easy transportation into the area and a means for farmers to ship produce to southern and eastern markets. By 1870, there were 1,054,670 residents in the state and by 1900 the population had nearly doubled again to 2,069,042.

Throughout its history, Wisconsin drew farmers, and the growth of the state's dairy and cheese industry is legendary. By 1915, it was the nation's leading producer of butter and cheese.



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Wisconsin Census Records

Pre-statehood censuses of Wisconsin are included with the Michigan Territory Federal censuses of 1820 and 1830. Federal censuses for the state of Wisconsin began in 1840.

Several territorial and state censuses were taken for Wisconsin between 1836 and 1905. With few exceptions, the originals are in the State Archives at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. The [1895 and 1905 Wisconsin State Censuses](#) are available on Ancestry.com.

Related Censuses Available on Ancestry.com:

- [U.S. Federal Census Mortality Schedules, 1850-1885 \(1850-1870 Wisconsin schedules\)](#)
- [1890 Veterans Schedules](#)
- [U.S., Indian Census Rolls, 1885-1940](#)

Wisconsin Vital Records

Wisconsin issued marriage applications as early as the 1820s in some counties, although most jurisdictions began maintaining records when the county was organized. In 1852, the state directed the counties to record births and deaths; this mandate was generally ignored. In 1878 a similar law received more attention and adherence. The State Bureau of Vital Statistics was established in 1907.

- [Wisconsin Vital Records Services](#): Holds records of births, marriages, domestic partnerships, divorces, and deaths. See the "Genealogy Services" page for detailed information on holdings and how to order records.
- [Wisconsin Historical Society – Vital Records page](#): The Society holds records of births and deaths from 1852 to 30 September 1907, and marriage records from 1836 to 30 September 1907. The Society also manages the Wisconsin Genealogy Index, a searchable index of pre-1907 births, marriages, and deaths.
- Local libraries and county genealogical or historical societies may have indexes to vital records, so check for a resource at the county or town level.

Wisconsin Vital Records on Ancestry.com

- [Wisconsin Marriages, 1973-1997](#)
- [Wisconsin Death Index, 1959-1997](#)
- [Wisconsin, Births and Christenings Index, 1826-1908](#)
- [Wisconsin Births, 1820-1907](#)
- [Wisconsin Marriages, pre-1907](#)
- [Wisconsin Deaths, 1820-1907](#)
- [Wisconsin Divorce Index, 1965-1984](#)
- [U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1700s-Current](#)



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Military Collections

- [Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers, War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865](#)
- [History of the Third Regiment of Wisconsin Veteran Volunteer Infantry 1861-1865](#)
- [The Thirty-sixth Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry: 1st Brigade, 2d Division, 2d Army Corps, Army of the Potomac](#)
- [History of the Milwaukee Light Guard](#)

Other Collections

- [Wisconsin, Passenger and Crew Lists, 1922-1963](#)
- [Wisconsin Crew Lists, 1925-1969](#)
- [Wisconsin, Homestead and Cash Entry Patents, Pre-1908](#)
- [U.S., Indexed County Land Ownership Maps, 1860-1918](#)
- [U.S., Indexed Early Land Ownership and Township Plats, 1785-1898](#)
- [U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989](#) (Use the browse box in the upper-right corner to determine what directories are available. For rural areas, check directories of larger cities in the vicinity.)
- [Wisconsin Stories, Memories & Histories](#)

[View all Wisconsin collections on Ancestry.com](#)

Other State Resources

- [Wisconsin Historical Society](#): The Society's Library and Archives in Madison contain a wealth of local and state history information for genealogists. The genealogy page describes some of the available resources. Be sure to review the online collections, which include county histories, photographs, and memoirs.
- [Wisconsin State Genealogical Society](#): The Society holds meetings, sponsors events, and publishes a newsletter.
- [Wisconsin GenWeb](#)
- [University of Wisconsin Digital Collections](#): Some genealogical highlights in this digital archive include "The State of Wisconsin Collection," which contains state, county, and local information, and "Wisconsin Public Land Survey Records: Original Field Notes and Plat Maps."
- [National Archives and Records Administration \(NARA\) at Chicago](#): This facility maintains records from federal agencies and courts in Wisconsin, 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 Wisconsin, and maintains records of land patents that 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 website. See the FAQ for more information on how to locate and use land patents.



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- [Pioneering the Upper Midwest: Books from Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, ca 1820-1910](#): This digital archive from the Library of Congress' American Memory project uses information from first-person accounts, local histories, biographies, and other sources to describe life in the Upper Midwest in the early 19th to early 20th centuries.

Help and Advice

- [Wisconsin Family History Research](#)
- [Wisconsin Town Resources](#)
- [Map of Wisconsin](#)

Significant Dates (through World War II)

1634 – While searching for the Northwest Passage, Jean Nicolet became the first known European to reach Wisconsin. He landed on the shores of Green Bay while in the service of Samuel de Champlain.

1659-1660 – French fur traders Pierre-Espirit Radisson and Medard Chourat, Sieur des Gorsilliers explored the region of what is now Wisconsin.

1673 – Jesuit Catholic priest Jacques Marquette and explorer and fur trader Louis Jolliet explored the water route from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River.

1679 – Daniel Greysolon, Sieur du Luth claimed the region that now includes Wisconsin for France.

1754-1763 – The French and Indian War, also known as the Seven Years War, was won by Britain. France gave up lands east of the Mississippi River except New Orleans.

1763 – The British took control of the Wisconsin area under the Treaty of Paris.

1763 – Fort Edward Augustus, in present-day Green Bay, was abandoned during Pontiac's Wars.

1763-1764 – Due to the British treatment of the Indians who were allies of the French, Ottawa Chief Pontiac led a rebellion of several tribes against the British. British forts in the Midwest were attacked as were many settlers.

1764 – Green Bay established as first permanent settlement of Europeans in Wisconsin.

1774 – Wisconsin became a part of the Province of Quebec.

1775-1783 – As a result of the American Revolution, the United States of America was created.

1781 – Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, was settled.

1783 – Treaty of Paris was signed, giving ownership of Wisconsin to the United States.

Population

1820	1,444
1830	3,635
1840	30,945
1850	305,391
1860	775,881
1870	1,054,670
1880	1,315,457
1890	1,693,330
1900	2,069,042
1910	2,333,860
1920	2,632,067
1930	2,939,006
1940	3,137,587
1950	3,434,575
1960	3,951,777



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1787 – The Northwest Ordinance authorized a provisional government for the Northwest Territory, which included the area that would become Wisconsin, and provided for new governments to be formed within that territory. It also extended the Bill of Rights to residents and prohibited slavery. Surveying of the area was called for so that the land could then be sold to new settlers.

1800 – Wisconsin became part of Indiana Territory.

1804 – The Sauk and Fox Tribes were forced to relinquish lands in southern Wisconsin (as well as parts of Illinois and Missouri) in a disputed treaty. The disputed land would lead to the Black Hawk War in 1832.

1809 – Wisconsin became part of Illinois Territory.

1812 – The War of 1812 between the United States and Great Britain began.

1814 – On 18 July, the British captured Prairie du Chien.

1815 – The War of 1812 ended in a stalemate, with the United States retaining its independence from Great Britain.

1818 – Wisconsin became part of Michigan Territory.

1822 – Lead mining industry began in southeastern Wisconsin.

1825 – Treaty of Prairie du Chien established Indian tribal boundaries. The negotiations would pave the way for future treaties between the U.S. government and individual Wisconsin tribes who would eventually cede most of their land in the state. A list of the various treaties can be found on the [Wisconsin Historical Society website](#).

1832 – The Black Hawk War was an unsuccessful attempt by the Sauk and Fox tribes and led by Chief Black Hawk to take back their homeland. It ended with the Illinois militia killing Sauk Indian men, women and children at the Bad Axe River in Wisconsin. Chief Black Hawk surrendered three weeks later at Fort Crawford.

1832 – Surveying began in Wisconsin and the first land offices in Wisconsin opened two years later, although surveying wasn't completed until 1866.

1836 – On 20 April 1836, the Territory of Wisconsin was established by Congress. Madison became the capital when the territorial government of Wisconsin was established on July 4 of that year. The territory included not only Wisconsin, but also present-day Minnesota, Iowa, and part of the Dakotas.

1837 – Solomon Laurent Juneau, a fur trader who laid out the eastern part of Milwaukee and established a trading center two years earlier, became the first president of the village in 1837. He was elected the city's first mayor in 1846.

1837 – Territorial banks failed in the financial Panic of 1837.

1838 – Iowa Territory was formed from part of Wisconsin Territory, reducing its size to the boundaries of the present state and the northeastern section of Minnesota.

1848 – On 29 May 1848, Wisconsin became the 30th state of the United States of America with its present boundaries.

1851 – The first Wisconsin railroad line opened between Milwaukee and Waukesha.

1854 – Slavery opponents met in Ripon, Wisconsin to call for creation of a new political group, which became the Republican Party. Wisconsin Supreme Court deemed the Fugitive Slave Law unconstitutional.

1856 – The first kindergarten in the United States was opened by Margarethe Meyer Schurz at Watertown, Wisconsin.

1859 – Hiram Smith founded first full-scale cheese factory.

1861-1865 – The Civil War raged on in the United States. Wisconsin is credited with having furnished 91,327 men to the war effort; 12,216 of them died during the course of the war.

1868 – The first commercially successful typewriter was invented in 1868 by Christopher Latham Sholes, Carlos Glidden, and Samuel W. Soule in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



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1871 – Beginning 8 October 1871 the largest firestorm in the nation’s history broke out in and around Peshtigo, Wisconsin, killing 1,500 people. It was largely forgotten because of the Great Chicago Fire that broke out on the same day.

1871 – With William Cameron Coup, P.T. Barnum established “P. T. Barnum’s Grand Traveling Museum, Menagerie, Caravan & Hippodrome” in Delavan, Wisconsin.

1875 – Fire consumed much of Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

1880 – John Stevens of Neenah, Wisconsin was awarded a U.S. patent for his invention of the grain-crushing roll which allowed production of flour to be increased by 70 percent.

1883 – The Hotel Newhouse fire in Milwaukee killed 71 people.

1886 – The University of Wisconsin’s College of Agriculture began offering courses for dairy farmers and cheese makers.

1889 – A ruling of the Wisconsin Supreme Court prohibited reading and prayers from King James Bible in public schools and the Bennett Law demanded all classroom instruction to be in English.

1890-1910 – The lumber industry, especially in northern Wisconsin, led the state’s industrial economy and made the state one of the top lumber producers in the United States.

1891 – The Bennett Law was repealed after protests from German Protestants and Catholics.

1894 – More than 20 people died as a result of the fires that began on 26 July 1894. Over a four-day period, these fires scorched several million acres.

1899 – A tornado that devastated New Richmond killed 117 and injured 125.

1900 – A Census Bureau report indicated that seven of ten Wisconsin residents were born in a foreign country or had foreign-born parents.

1903 – William Harley and the three Davidson brothers, Arthur, Walter and William, formed the Harley-Davidson Motor Company in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

1904 – The Wisconsin State Capitol burned.

1913 – Workmen’s Compensation began.

1917 – United States entered World War I. Wisconsin sent 120,000 of whom nearly 4,000 died.

1919 – Wisconsin became the first state to ratify the 19th amendment granting national suffrage to women.

1919—Green Bay Packers are founded.

1922 – Over 2,800 cheese factories were counted in Wisconsin.

1932 – Wisconsin became the first state to provide unemployment benefits.

1933 – An increasingly violent series of Wisconsin milk strikes during the Great Depression were started by a group of dairy farmers with the intent of raising the price for milk paid to producers.

1941-1945 – United States engaged in World War II. Over 375,000 men and women from Wisconsin served, of whom 7,980 died.



Panoramic view of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, taken from City Hall tower. The Gugler Lithographic Co., c. 1898. From the [Library of Congress Photo Collection](#), 1840-2000.