

## Using Land Records: Resources for Genealogists



Land records can offer a wealth of information about your ancestors, including information about kinship, dates of death, and the location of property your ancestor owned. According to FamilySearch, up to 90% of white males owned land before 1850. Land records have been recorded in the colonies and United States long before the civil registration of births, marriages, and deaths. Here are some resources to help you get started searching land records in Maryland.

### Land Grants

A land grant is a tract of land given by the government. The earliest land grants were given by colonial proprietors or governors; in Maryland, these were called “patents.” Some land was granted by the federal government as bounty land warrants, as a reward for military service. The Homestead Act of 1862 gave any adult citizen the opportunity to claim 160 acres of government-surveyed land, mostly in lands in the American West.

### *EPFL Database*

[Heritage Quest. U.S. Revolutionary War Pensions and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files, 1800-1900](#)

Searchable database for bounty land warrants for land granted to military veterans, 1800-1900. Can be used from home with EPFL library card at <https://www.prattlibrary.org/research/databases>

### *Online Resources*

[Maryland State Archives. Land Records.](#) Description of the land patent process and types of land records available through the Maryland State Archives.

<http://guide.msa.maryland.gov/pages/viewer.aspx?page=landrecords>

[National Archives. Land Entry Files and Related Records.](#) Information on accessing federal land grants from 30 public land states. Does not include Maryland.

<https://www.archives.gov/research/land/land-records>

United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management. The Official Federal Land Records Site. Digital access to land conveyance records for the public land states, including images of more than 5 million federal land title records issued between 1788 and the present. Does not include Maryland.  
<https://glorerecords.blm.gov/>

## **Deed Searching**

Deeds can reveal much about your ancestors, including the names of spouses and heirs, the date of death of the landowner, location of the property, and occasionally references to other documents such as wills and powers of attorney. Deeds involve the transfer of real property, which included the sale of slaves before Emancipation.

## ***Online Resources***

Baltimore Heritage. How to Research the Chain of Title For Your Historic Property. Briefly demonstrates how to use deed references to trace a chain of title for a property.  
<https://baltimoreheritage.org/resources/how-to-research-the-chain-of-title-for-your-historic-property/>

Maryland State Department of Assessments and Taxation, Real Property Database. Source for deed references for current property owners in Maryland.  
<https://sdat.dat.maryland.gov/RealProperty/Pages/default.aspx>

Mdlandrec.net: Online Search for Maryland Land Records. Provides access to all verified land record instruments in Maryland, from the 1600s to the present. (Note: some counties have not fully digitized their oldest records).  
<https://mdlandrec.net/main/>

Plats.Net: Digital Image Reference System for Land Survey, Subdivision, and Condominium Plats. Digital images of plat maps for all of Maryland.  
<https://plats.msa.maryland.gov/pages/index.aspx>

Tracing Your Family History Using Maryland Property Research  
A demonstration of tracing the chain of title for two Maryland properties, presented by librarian Julie Saylor on the Enoch Pratt Free Library Facebook page.  
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3476303789055754>

## Legal Resources

Deeds are legal documents, and you may see terms you do not understand. Here are a few good resources you can try if you want to understand legal terminology in land records.

### *Online Resources*

Bouvier, John. *Law Dictionary. Various titles and years from 1856-1914.* A useful law dictionary published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Links to online editions at <https://www.legalgenealogist.com/2012/03/14/another-dictionary-another-geek/>

FamilySearch. *Genealogical Dictionary of Legal Terms.* A list of all kinds of legal terms genealogists may encounter in their research. [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Genealogical Dictionary of Legal Terms](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Genealogical_Dictionary_of_Legal_Terms)

Library of Congress. *United States: Inheritance Laws in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.* Changes in laws regarding inheritance of real property in US history. <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/inheritance-laws/unitedstates.php>

Russell, Judy G. *The Legal Genealogist.* Written by a genealogist with a law degree, this blog discusses many legal aspects of genealogical research, including land records. <https://www.legalgenealogist.com/>

### *Print Resources*

Garner, Bryan A. (ed.) *Black's Law Dictionary.* St. Paul, MN: West, 2009. The most commonly used law dictionary in the United States.

Hill, Gerald N. *Nolo's Plain-English Law Dictionary.* Berkeley, CA: Nolo, 2009. A contemporary law dictionary, written for non-attorneys.

## Maps

Land ownership, also called cadastral, maps show the names of landowners. Many can be found online and through genealogy sites such as Ancestry.com. These can be a helpful starting point in land records research for your ancestors. Your local public library and historical society are good places to begin looking for these maps. Here are some online resources to find cadastral maps.

### ***EPFL Database***

Ancestry Library Edition. U.S., Early Land Ownership and Township Plats, 1785-1898. Collection of maps for lands surveyed under the Land Ordinance Act of 1785, for lands west of the original colonies.

<https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/search/collections/2179/>

Ancestry Library Edition. U.S., Indexed County Land Ownership Maps, 1860-1918. Collection of maps microfilmed by the Library of Congress Geography and Maps Division. Searchable by name; maps can also be browsed by state. Includes historical Maryland maps.

<https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/search/collections/1127/>

### ***Online Resources***

Johns Hopkins University Sheridan Libraries. Maps and Atlases. Collection of several historical maps of Maryland, including land ownership maps.

<https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/32585>

Library of Congress. Maps.

Digitized collection of over 14,000 maps covering the United States. Some of these are county landownership maps.

<https://www.loc.gov/maps/>

### **For Further Assistance**

Contact us in the Maryland Department: [mdx@prattlibrary.org](mailto:mdx@prattlibrary.org)