



# Using the Law & Court Records for Family History

*Joseph Tritchler, M.S.*

URL: <http://ancestrytracking.com>  
Email: [ancestry.tracker@gmail.com](mailto:ancestry.tracker@gmail.com)

## Finding Historic Laws/Statutes

### General Resources for State Laws/Statutes/Legislative Acts

1. Debbie Mieszala, CG®, "Law Library Index," *The Advancing Genealogist* (<https://bit.ly/legalgen0753>).
2. Cyndi's List (<https://www.cyndislist.com/us/>)
  - a. Select the State
  - b. Select Laws & Statutes
3. Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School - *CURRENT* laws and regulations for all 50 states: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/regulations>
4. Search internet book sites for books that include the words: [state] "Laws" or "Statutes" or "Legislature Acts" or "Legislature Resolutions" in the title
  - Internet Archive ([archive.org/](http://archive.org/))
  - HathiTrust ([hathitrust.org/](http://hathitrust.org/))
  - Google Books ([books.google.com/](http://books.google.com/))
5. Perform a Google Search: [state] historic laws or statutes

**United States Statutes at Large**, 64 volumes, 1789-1950 (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/united-states-statutes-at-large/about-this-collection/>)

Thorpe, Francis Newton, ed., *The Federal and State Constitutions, Colonial Charters, and other Organic Laws of the States*, ... 7 volumes (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1909).

- *HathiTrust* (<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001140815>)
- *Online Library of Liberty* (<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/thorpe-the-federal-and-state-constitutions-7-vols>)

## Types of Court Cases

Civil cases	Debts, property disputes, and personal injury claims
Criminal cases	Offenses from theft to assault
Probate & estate proceedings	Wills, inventories and guardianships
Chancery (equity) records	Family and inheritance disputes
Divorce and family cases	Marital separations and child custody
Naturalization petitions	Immigration, arrival, country of origin
Land and property suits	Settlements, foreclosures and partition suits
Bankruptcy	Debts, asset liquidation

## Court Records

- **Minute Books:** Official record kept by the court clerk detailing proceedings, rulings and decisions made by the court. Includes basic facts, motions, orders and verdicts.
- **Order Books:** Record of official judicial decisions.
- **Dockets:** A chronological summary of all proceedings, filings, and events in a specific court case.
- **Loose Papers:** Original, individual, unbound documents from a court case.
- **Published Opinions:** Formal higher court decisions that become binding precedent for lower courts.

## Court records of particular value

- Heirship Lists
- Probate inventories
- Jury lists
- Witness lists
- Divorce filings

## Finding Court Records

**Federal Courts: National Archives**  
[archives.gov/research/court-records](https://www.archives.gov/research/court-records)

### **County/State Courts:**

- Original records: Courthouse or Archives
- Copies/microfilm: Historical Societies
- Abstracts: Libraries
- Digital/Online:
  - FamilySearch
    1. Search Catalog by location of the court (County, State)
    2. Full-Text Search

## **Online Newspaper Resources**

- Purdue University, "Free Historic U.S. Newspapers by State":  
<https://guides.lib.purdue.edu/c.php?g=893882&p=6428209>
- Chronicling America (FREE)
- Library of Congress Digital Collections (FREE)
- Internet Archive (FREE)
- Genealogy Bank (Ancestry) (available at FamilySearch Centers)
- Newspapers.com (Ancestry) (available at FamilySearch Centers)
- NewspaperArchive.com (available through National Genealogical Society membership)
- ProQuest Historical Newspapers  
 Accessible through NCLive with library card  
<https://www.nclive.org/login/select-your-library>

Ancestry.com

1. Court, Land, Wills & Financial Collection (<https://www.ancestry.com/search/categories/36/>)
  2. Catalog:  
Keywords - Court records, Wills, Probate, Land  
Filter - Location
- Published Opinions - search online digital books (Google Books, Internet Archive, HathiTrust)

**Prisons Records**

- Federal cases: National Archives (<https://www.archives.gov/research/prisons>)
- State cases:
  - State Archives/Libraries
  - Ancestry.com > Card Catalog > Keyword "Prison" > filter by location
  - FamilySearch Catalog > search by topic (Prison or Penitentiary) and/or by location

**Resources:**

**1. Bouvier's Law Dictionary**

- John Bouvier, "A law dictionary, adapted to the constitution and laws of the United States ..." Volume 1, (Philadelphia: T. & J.W. Johnson, 1839); PDF, *Internet Archive*.
- John Bouvier, "A law dictionary, adapted to the constitution and laws of the United States ..." Volume 2 (Philadelphia: Childs & Peterson, 1856); PDF, *Internet Archive*.

**2. Black's Law Dictionary**

- Henry Campbell Black, *A Dictionary of Law*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (St. Paul, Minn.: West Publishing Co., 1891); PDF, *Internet Archive*.
- Henry Campbell Black, *A Law Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (St. Paul, Minn.: West Publishing Co., 1910); PDF, *Internet Archive*.

**3. FamilySearch Wiki, "United States Court Records,"** *FamilySearch*

([https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Court\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Court_Records)).

**4. "National Archives Court Records,"** *National Archives* (<https://www.archives.gov/research/court-records>).

**5. FamilySearch, "Order in the Court: Finding Family in Legal Records,"** *YouTube* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wSQ6yjepHPc>)

**Finding Pertinent Laws: Additional State-by-State Resources** (URLs verified 10 January 2026)

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Alabama: <https://archive.org/details/alabama-acts?&sort=date>

Arizona: <https://azmemory.azlibrary.gov/nodes/view/68>

California: <https://clerk.assembly.ca.gov/archive-list>

Colorado: <https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/colorado-session-laws/>

Connecticut: <https://ctdigitalarchive.org/node/3867375>

Delaware: <https://delaware.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15323coll1/search>

Florida: <https://edocs.dlis.state.fl.us/fldocs/leg/actterritory/index.htm>

Georgia: [https://dlg.usg.edu/collection/dlg\\_zlgl](https://dlg.usg.edu/collection/dlg_zlgl) and [https://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/ga\\_code/](https://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/ga_code/)

Hawaii: <https://law-hawaii.libguides.com/hawaii-law-online>

Idaho:

1890-1912: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008584402>

1890-1895, 1903-1977: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/010134283>

1945-2024: <https://legislature.idaho.gov/statutesrules/sessionlaws/>

Illinois: [http://www.wiu.edu/libraries/govpubs/illinois\\_laws/](http://www.wiu.edu/libraries/govpubs/illinois_laws/)

Indiana (1817-1852):

<https://cdm16066.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15078coll21/search/searchterm/Indiana%20Acts/field/title/mode/exact/conn/and/order/date>

Iowa: <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/archives/code>

Kentucky: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100143504>

Maine: <https://legislature.maine.gov/legis/lawlib/lldl/open.htm>

Maryland:

Codes: <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/html/codes.html>

Session Laws: <https://msa.maryland.gov/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/html/laws.html>

Massachusetts:

Acts & Resolved: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massachusetts-acts-and-resolves>

Historic Laws: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massachusetts-historical-laws-and-legal-documents>

Michigan

Territory: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/002018817>

State: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000060523>

Minnesota:

Constitution: <https://www.lrl.mn.gov/docs/2005/other/050565.pdf>

Statutes: <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/archive>

Mississippi: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100790220>

Missouri: <https://cdm16795.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/molaws/search>

Nevada: <https://www.leg.state.nv.us/law1.html>

New Hampshire: <https://scholars.unh.edu/lawsnh/>

New Jersey: <https://dspace.njstatelib.org/collections/59b6612d-fd84-46b5-b45f-7856bc9ce544>

New Mexico: <https://www.nmonesource.com/nmos/en/nav.do>

New York: <https://advancinggenealogist.com/historic-new-york-statutes/>

North Carolina: <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/documents?returning=true>

North Dakota: <https://www.ndlegis.gov/legislative-histories/session-laws>

Ohio:

1788-1833: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001625675>

1834-1976 (incomplete): <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006728845>

Oklahoma (1890-1925 incomplete): <https://advancinggenealogist.com/historic-oklahoma-statutory-law/>

Oregon: <https://advancinggenealogist.com/historic-oregon-statutory-law/>

Pennsylvania

1682-1809: <https://www.palrb.gov/Preservation/Statutes-at-Large-by-Volume>

1682-1978: <https://advancinggenealogist.com/historic-pennsylvania-statutory-law/>

South Carolina: [https://guides.law.sc.edu/SCLegalResources/superseded\\_statutes](https://guides.law.sc.edu/SCLegalResources/superseded_statutes)

South Dakota: <https://advancinggenealogist.com/historic-south-dakota-statutory-law-external/>

Texas: <https://guides.sll.texas.gov/historical-texas-statutes>

Utah: [https://collections.lib.utah.edu/search?facet\\_setname\\_s=uu\\_law\\_uschs](https://collections.lib.utah.edu/search?facet_setname_s=uu_law_uschs)

Vermont: <https://libguides.vermontlaw.edu/vermontlawguide/vermonthistoriclegislation>

Virginia:

1619-1792: [https://sdsdl-montage.auto-graphics.com/#/customizeListView?listId=CustomizeEntityLists\\_97](https://sdsdl-montage.auto-graphics.com/#/customizeListView?listId=CustomizeEntityLists_97)

1803-1980 (incomplete): <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008885427>

West Virginia: <https://advancinggenealogist.com/historic-west-virginia-statutory-law/>

Wisconsin: <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/archive/law>

Wyoming: <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/100671034>