

OPERATION GRANNY FILES

Land Records Quick-Start Guide

Your Beginner's Reference to Deeds, Patents, and the Dirt Your Ancestors Stood On

Field Guide & Quick-Reference

Mission 15: Staking Your Claim

Clearance Level: Beginner

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QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

Land records place your ancestor in a specific location at a specific time — often earlier than any other record type. Two land systems exist in the U.S.: State Land States (original colonies + a few others) use metes and bounds descriptions with natural landmarks; Public Land States (30 states) use the township-and-range grid system. Start with free federal patent searches at glorerecords.blm.gov for public land states, and the FamilySearch Catalog for county deed books in any state. Always search both grantor and grantee indexes, and don't skip tax records — they fill the ten-year gaps between censuses.

Which System Applies to Your Ancestor?

State Land States	Public Land States
CT, DE, GA, HI, KY, MA, MD, ME, NC, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, SC, TN, TX, VA, VT, WV	AL, AK, AZ, AR, CA, CO, FL, ID, IL, IN, IA, KS, LA, MI, MN, MS, MO, MT, NE, NV, NM, ND, OH, OK, OR, SD, UT, WA, WI, WY
Land granted/sold by colonial or state government	Land surveyed and sold by federal government (GLO)
Metes and bounds descriptions (landmarks, bearings, distances)	Township and range descriptions (grid: township, range, section)
Records at county courthouses and state archives	Federal patents at glorerecords.blm.gov ; subsequent deeds at county level

GRANNY PRO TIP

Ohio is a hybrid — parts use federal survey, parts use metes and bounds (Virginia Military District, Connecticut Western Reserve). If your ancestor was in Ohio, determine which land district they were in before searching.

Record Types at a Glance

- **Federal Land Patents** — First transfer of public land from government to individual. Types: cash entry, homestead, bounty land warrant, preemption, mineral entry. Search free at glorerecords.blm.gov. Order the case file from the National Archives for genealogical detail.
- **Homestead Files** — Under the 1862 Homestead Act, settlers claimed 160 acres by living on the land for 5 years. Files contain: application, proof of citizenship, neighbor testimony, description of improvements. Especially valuable for immigrants.
- **Bounty Land Warrants** — Military service rewarded with land (Revolutionary War through Mexican War). Applications may contain proof of service, age, and residence. Many warrants were sold — trace the ownership chain.
- **Deeds** — Private land transfers, recorded at the county courthouse. Name buyer, seller, witnesses, property description, purchase price, and often the wife (dower release). Search BOTH grantor and grantee indexes.
- **Tax Records** — Annual county property assessments. Place your ancestor in a specific county year by year. Fill 10-year census gaps. Found at county courthouses and on FamilySearch.

Where to Search

Repository	What It Holds	Access	Cost
BLM GLO Records (glorerecords.blm.gov)	Federal land patents, 1788–1960s	Search by name or legal description	Free

National Archives	Homestead case files, bounty land warrant apps	Order by mail; some on Fold3	Varies
FamilySearch Catalog	County deed books, tax records	familysearch.org → Catalog	Free
County Courthouse	Original deed books, plat maps, tax records	In-person or by mail	Varies
Ancestry.com	Land record indexes	ancestry.com (or library)	Subscription
State Archives	Colonial/state land grants, early surveys	Varies by state	Varies

How to Read a Metes and Bounds Description

Example: "Beginning at the large white oak stump on the south bank of Elk Creek, thence North 40° East 120 poles to a pile of stones on the line of James Parker's land..."

- **"Beginning at..."** — The starting point. Usually a natural landmark or monument.
- **"Thence North 40° East"** — Compass direction from the starting point.
- **"120 poles"** — Distance. 1 pole = 16.5 feet. (Chain = 66 ft, rod = 16.5 ft, perch = 16.5 ft.)
- **"on the line of James Parker's land"** — Neighboring landowner named. This is cluster research gold.

The description traces a path around the property and returns to the starting point.

How to Read a Township/Range/Section Description

Example: "NW 1/4 of Section 14, Township 3 North, Range 2 East, 5th Principal Meridian"

- **Township 3 North** — 3 townships north of the baseline.
- **Range 2 East** — 2 ranges east of the principal meridian.
- **Section 14** — One of 36 sections in the township (each 1 sq. mi. / 640 acres).
- **NW 1/4** — The northwest quarter of that section (160 acres).
- **5th Principal Meridian** — The reference survey line. Each state uses one or more meridians.

BONUS INSIGHT

In metes and bounds descriptions, pay attention to every named neighbor. If the deed says "along the line of Thomas Reed's tract," Thomas Reed is your ancestor's neighbor — and potentially a witness, a business partner, or a relative. Land records are cluster research in geographic form.

Step-by-Step Search Workflow

1. Identify the state type — State Land or Public Land? (Use the table above.)
2. For Public Land States: Search glorerecords.blm.gov — Enter ancestor's name. Note legal description of any patents found.
3. For all states: Search FamilySearch Catalog — Type the county and state. Browse "Land and Property" for deed books and tax records.
4. Search BOTH grantor AND grantee indexes — Grantor = seller. Grantee = buyer. Your ancestor may appear in both.
5. Check tax records — Annual lists that track your ancestor year by year, filling census gaps.

6. Read property descriptions carefully — Note every named neighbor (metes and bounds) or plot the location (township/range).
7. Connect to other missions — Military bounty warrants (M13), estate land distribution (M14), immigration proof in homestead files (M12).

GRANNY SAYS

"People move. Families scatter. But the land stays right where it was — and so do the records. If you want to know where your people stood, start with the dirt under their feet."

Notes

Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.