

# OPERATION GRANNY FILES

## Mission 18 — The Shifting Map

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### **Historical Geography Toolkit**

Boundary Changes, Gazetteers & the Researcher's Atlas

Clearance Level: 201 — Research Methodology

[operationgrannyfiles.com](http://operationgrannyfiles.com)

## Quick-Grab Summary

County boundaries in the United States have changed over 17,600 times since colonial settlement. A family that never moved could end up in three different counties across four decades. If you search the wrong courthouse, you'll come up empty — not because the records don't exist, but because you're looking in the wrong filing cabinet. This toolkit gives you a systematic process for identifying historical county boundaries, tracing where records moved, and verifying historical place names that have disappeared from modern maps.

## Section 1: The Five-Step Jurisdiction Check

When you can't find records where you expect them, work through this checklist in order.

Step	Action	Tool	Done?
1	Confirm the modern county for your ancestor's location	Current map or Google Maps	<input type="checkbox"/>
2	Check historical county boundaries for your research date	Atlas of Historical County Boundaries	<input type="checkbox"/>
3	Search for records in both modern AND historical county	FamilySearch Catalog	<input type="checkbox"/>
4	Check state archives for transferred records	State archives website	<input type="checkbox"/>
5	Verify historical place names if town/township doesn't match	GNIS database or state gazetteer	<input type="checkbox"/>

**GRANNY PRO TIP:** Always do Step 2 before you start searching for records. Five minutes with the *Atlas of Historical County Boundaries* can save you weeks of looking in the wrong courthouse. The interactive version at [digital.newberry.org/ahcb](http://digital.newberry.org/ahcb) lets you enter any date and see the exact county boundaries for that moment in time.

## Section 2: Essential Resources Reference Card

Resource	URL	What It Does
Atlas of Historical County Boundaries	<a href="http://digital.newberry.org/ahcb">digital.newberry.org/ahcb</a>	Every U.S. county boundary change, colonial era–2000, dated to the exact day
Randy Majors Historical Map Overlay	<a href="http://randymajors.org/maps">randymajors.org/maps</a>	Historical counties overlaid on Google Maps — compare old and new boundaries side by side
GNIS (Geographic Names Information System)	<a href="http://geonames.usgs.gov">geonames.usgs.gov</a>	U.S. place names database — current and historical towns, townships, features
FamilySearch Wiki — State Guides	<a href="http://familysearch.org/en/wiki">familysearch.org/en/wiki</a>	State-by-state guides to jurisdictions, record locations, and historical geography

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps	<a href="http://loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps">loc.gov/collections/sanborn-maps</a>	Building-level maps for ~12,000 U.S. towns (1867–2007) — place ancestors in a neighborhood
Library of Congress Map Collections	<a href="http://loc.gov/maps">loc.gov/maps</a>	Historical maps of all types — county maps, railroad maps, township plats
David Rumsey Map Collection	<a href="http://davidrumsey.com">davidrumsey.com</a>	150,000+ digitized historical maps searchable by location and date

## Section 3: Boundary Change Investigation Worksheet

Use this worksheet to document a boundary change affecting your ancestor's location.

Field	Your Research
Ancestor's Name	
Location (town/township)	
Research Date Range	
Modern County	
Historical County (at research date)	
Boundary Change Date	
Type of Change (split, creation, renaming, abolition)	
Parent County (if split)	
Source for Boundary Info	
Where Pre-Change Records Filed	
Where Post-Change Records Filed	
State Archives Holdings?	
FamilySearch Catalog Entry (modern county)	
FamilySearch Catalog Entry (historical county)	
Notes	

## Section 4: Historical Place Name Tracker

When a place name in an old record doesn't match anything on a modern map, use this tracker to investigate.

Field	Details
Place Name from Record	
Record Type & Date	
State/Territory	
GNIS Search Result	
Modern Name (if renamed)	
Modern County	
Historical County (at record date)	
What Happened (renamed, absorbed, abandoned, never existed as town)	
Source for Name Change Info	
Coordinates (if found)	

**BONUS INSIGHT:** Some “place names” in old records aren’t towns at all — they’re post office names, railroad stops, mining camps, or crossroads communities that never appeared on official maps. The GNIS database includes these unofficial and historical place names. If GNIS doesn’t have it, try searching old newspaper archives for the name — local papers often referenced these micro-communities by name.

## Section 5: Common Boundary Change Patterns by Region

Region	Pattern	Key Dates
New England	Stable since 1800s; minor adjustments only	Most counties settled by 1790
Mid-Atlantic	Relatively stable; some splits through 1870s	PA, NY mostly settled by 1820
Southeast	Moderate changes through 1900; county seat fights	VA → WV split 1863; GA/NC active 1800–1870
Midwest	Heavy subdivision 1800–1870 as settlement spread west	OH, IN, IL — dozens of new counties per decade
Plains States	Rapid creation 1860–1910; some counties abolished	KS, NE, Dakotas — constant boundary flux
Mountain West	Created with territories; reorganized at statehood	CO, MT, WY, ID — territory-era records scattered

Pacific West	Large initial counties subdivided as population grew	CA split counties actively through 1907
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**GRANNY SAYS:** *The map isn't as fixed as it looks, love. Your ancestor may have lived in the same house for fifty years and still ended up in three different counties. That's not a research failure — it's a clue. Learn where the lines were drawn, and you'll know exactly where the records landed. The filing cabinet moved. The family didn't.*

## Notes

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