

Tools for Researching Philadelphia Ancestors

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KEY DATES FOR PHILLY GENEALOGISTS

Pre-colonization – The area of what is now Philadelphia is home to the Lenape indigenous people; most had moved or were forcibly removed by white colonists by the early 1860s

1620s-1630s – Small groups of Dutch and Swedish colonists form settlements and forts in the Delaware Valley; both groups ultimately taken over by the British by 1674

1682 – the city of Philadelphia is founded by British colonist William Penn, laid out on a grid and initially modeled on rural English towns

1776 – Philadelphia is the site of key events in the Revolutionary War and early independence movement, including the signing of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution

1780 – Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act is passed, beginning the end of slavery in the state and southeastern Pennsylvania's prominent role in the Underground Railroad

1785 – Philadelphia's first city directory is published

1854 – Act of Consolidation creates the modern city of Philadelphia as we know it today, absorbing orbiting boroughs, districts, and townships such as Passyunk, Roxborough, and Frankford into the city boundaries (rather than just being part of Philadelphia County)

1885 – Philadelphia County begins recording marriages in the city on a systematic basis

1893 – Philadelphia County begins systematically recording births and deaths in the city

1906 – the State of Pennsylvania takes over vital recordkeeping of births and deaths; Philadelphia ceases keeping its own certificates of those events but continues to record marriages

SOME COMMON RECORDS

- **Philadelphia County/City birth records**
 - Birth registers, 1860-1903: online with images at [FamilySearch](#)
- **Philadelphia County/City death records**
 - Death registers, 1860-1903: online with images at [FamilySearch](#)
- **Pennsylvania (state) birth certificates (1906 onward)**
 - 1906-1915: online with images at [Ancestry](#) (\$)
 - 1916 to present: on file at the state Division of Vital Records (restricted to close family members until 105 years have passed)
- **Pennsylvania (state) death certificates (1906 onward)**
 - 1906-1971: online with images at [Ancestry](#) (\$)
 - 1972 to present: on file at the state Division of Vital Records (restricted to close family members until 50 years have passed)
- **City directories**
 - 1861-1950 (some gaps): online at [Ancestry](#) (\$)
 - 1785-1907 (some gaps): Archive.org and HathiTrust (free) (links to all are found via Temple University Library's [handy guide](#))
- **Religious records**
 - Roman Catholic baptisms, marriages, and religious newspapers: online at [FindMyPast](#) (\$)
 - The earliest congregations in the city (various denominations): [Philadelphia Congregations Early Records](#) (free)
 - Various denominations, whole state: [Pennsylvania and New Jersey Church and Town Records, 1669-2013](#) database at Ancestry (\$)
 - Jewish records: see the [Jewish Archives Collection](#) at Temple University (not online)
- **Deeds**
 - 1683-1866: online at [FamilySearch](#) (free)
 - Originals and deeds 1867-1955: held at Philadelphia City Archives
 - City Department of Records' online deeds database, 1683-1974 (\$): <https://www.phila-records.com/historic-records/web/>
 - Deeds 1974-present: held at Philadelphia City Hall
- **Probate (a bit of a mess!)**
 - Approximately 1681-1915: online at [Ancestry](#) (\$)
 - Some wills (approximately 1834-1895) also online at [FamilySearch](#)
 - Wills outside this range + all other probate records: held at Register of Wills at City Hall

- **Newspapers** (*no one single place has all Philly newspapers, and they're not all online! Look around!*)
 - Newspapers.com (\$) ([link](#))
 - NewspaperArchive (\$) ([link](#))
 - GenealogyBank (\$) ([link](#))
 - Pennsylvania Newspaper Archive ([link](#)) (free)
 - Onsite: Free Library of Philadelphia
 - Onsite: Historical Society of Pennsylvania
- **Pennsylvania septennial census** (*state tax eligibility lists for Pennsylvania*)
 - Various years, 1779-1863: online at [Ancestry](#) (\$)
- **1838 census** (*a special census taken of Philadelphia's Black population*)
 - Online at [1838blackmetropolis.com](#) (free)

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- **Philadelphia County FamilySearch Wiki** ([link](#)) – a list of genealogy resources for the county; very detailed but still not comprehensive!
- **Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia** ([link](#)) – a reference for a variety of topics relating to Philadelphia's history, created by the Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities (MARCH) at Rutgers-Camden.
- **West Philadelphia Collaborative History** ([link](#)) – articles and data about West Philadelphia, particularly its twentieth-century Black history and the Civil Rights movement
- **Hidden City Philadelphia** ([link](#)) – as they describe themselves: “exploring Philadelphia's urban landscape”; especially useful for articles about historic buildings and city architecture
- **Greater Philadelphia GeoHistory Network** ([link](#)) – a database of historic maps and atlases
- **PhillyHistory.org** ([link](#)) – a database of historic city photos
- **Philadelphia Historic Streets Index** ([link](#)) – a tool for tracking the changing names of Philadelphia's streets over the last three centuries
- **Historic Philadelphia Burial Places Map** ([link](#)) – an interactive map tool of Philadelphia's historic cemeteries—current and defunct (does not identify individuals buried in those cemeteries)

CITY LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES TO VISIT

- Philadelphia City Archives/Department of Records - <https://www.phila.gov/departments/department-of-records/city-archives/>
- Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP) – <https://hsp.org>
- Free Library of Philadelphia (Parkway Central) - <https://libwww.freelibrary.org/explore/topic/genealogy>
- Catholic Historical Research Center (CHRC) at the Archdiocese of Philadelphia - <https://chrc-philadelphia.org/>
- Grand Army of the Republic Museum and Library - <https://garmuslib.org/>
- Presbyterian Historical Society (PHS) - <https://pcusa.org/about-pcusa/agencies-entities/interim-unified-agency/ministry-areas/historical-society>
- Lutheran Archives Center at Philadelphia (LACAP) - <https://www.lutheranarchives.org/>
- Temple University Special Collections Research Center (SCRC) - <https://library.temple.edu/scrc>
- Historical Medical Library at the College of Physicians - <https://cpp-college.netlify.app/our-work/historical-medical-library>

“JOINABLE” GROUPS, SOCIETIES, AND PAGES

- Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania (GSP) – <https://genpa.org>
- African American Genealogy Group of Philadelphia (AAGG) – <https://aagg.org>
- Jewish Genealogical and Archival Society of Greater Philadelphia (JGASGP) – <https://jgasgp.org>
- “Philadelphia PA Genealogy” Facebook group - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/322575227784091>