

Chapter 1

Why Bother With Land Records?

Why bother with land records? Before I answer this question, I need to ask you one. What kind of family historian are you? Are you content just to gather names to put on a family group sheet? Or, are you one who wants to know as much as possible about what your ancestor's life was like or wonders why they ended up (or moved to) where they did? Are you one who wishes you could walk where your ancestors walked, find a house where they lived, or the church where they gathered on Sundays? If you are the first type, then land records may well be able to fill in some gaps on your family group sheet. If you are the second type of family historian, you will love land records because of all the old records you examine, they have the most potential to tell you things you did not know before, and lead you to places you would not have thought of going.

Hidden Treasures!

I have been using land records for well over 30+ years now and of all the old records I use, land records are one of my favorite. Over the years they have given me names for my unknown women, and they have led me to old cemeteries where I have found the names of babies who lived and died between census years. I have walked the streets of old towns and looked at many of the same buildings my ancestors did. I have walked on my ancestors' property, stood in their homes, or walked around crumbled foundations. I have found the remains of old chimneys and stood before them picturing the family gathered around the fireplace on a cold night, or one of my great-great-grandmothers cooking a meal

Land records have allowed me to add flesh to the bare bones of names and dates. They have sometimes given me a clue to the personality of my ancestor I could not have found anywhere else. For example, I had to chuckle the day I found a deed where one of my great-grandfathers, reportedly very staid and upstanding, put up a racing surrey and matched team of bay mares as security for a loan at a local store.

A deed citing a homestead patent led me to the homestead file for one of my ancestors. It laid out a drawing of his land, a list of his crops and animals, testimonies to his honesty and his standing in the community, the names of his wife and children, and a glimpse into his life over five years.

An old trust deed told me that my ancestor was a God-fearing man who pledged his own land as security for a loan to build a church.

It was a deed that told me that one of my ancestors used a bounty warrant to pay for his land. The bounty warrant file gave me a physical description, told me where he lived, the war he fought in, and the name of his unit—which in turn led me to that unit's history. I learned of campaigns he fought in and where his unit traveled, and that in turn answered the question, "Why did they move THERE?"

A whisper from a deed sent me to the pension files where I read sworn statements as to where my ancestor was born, when and whom he married (both wives), and the names of all children (living and dead). It listed all the places he and his family had lived over the years, an account of his war service, his injuries, his health, and statements about him from friends and neighbors.

It was a deed that told me my ancestor's land had been taken for unpaid taxes. That in turn led me to stories of drought, crop failures, unpaid loans to a local store, and the death of a wife.

It was the private interview of a wife, found in an ancestor's deed, that let me know he had remarried (and proved she wasn't the mother of his first children.)

It was land records that let me map out all the different places my mother's family had lived, and take her to visit those places.

It is a rare land record that doesn't offer some type of clue, a piece of new information, or a new avenue to explore.

If you are a family historian who is not interested in all of these things, then this book won't interest you much, but if you are a family historian who is now breathing faster and saying, "Oh Yes!" then you will enjoy learning how you can mine the treasures of land records for yourself.