

Technical Tools for Land Research

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INTRODUCTION

This session explores technical and online tools for land research, including platting programs and overlays on Google Earth. Online land records are explored, including FamilySearch, the Library of Virginia, the BLM General Land Office, and others.

ONLINE LAND RECORDS – COLONIAL & STATE LANDS

Using early land records in state land states is complex. Because foreign governments such as England, Spain, or France may have granted the land to the first purchaser before the United States existed, or the commonwealth or state may have transferred the land later, researchers must usually access colonial grants from the state of origin. You must determine where the original grants are for the area of research. Some state land states have helpful websites with digitized land records. Below are a few examples.

GROTON, MASSACHUSETTS LAND GRANTS (<https://archive.org/details/earlyrecordsgro00masgoog>)

Sometimes, digitized books detail colonial land grants, such as *The Early Records of Groton, Massachusetts, 1662-1707*, by Samuel A. Green, published in 1880 and now available online at Archive.org. An appendix in the book documents original land grants in this town.

LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA LAND OFFICE GRANTS

(lva1.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/F/?func=file&file_name=find-b-clas30&local_base=CLAS30)

This site includes digitized images of early patents and grants from the English monarchs and later the Commonwealth of Virginia to the first purchasers of land.

NORTH CAROLINA LAND GRANTS (www.nclandgrants.com)

Search for 216,000 land grants, including some in what is now Tennessee. Digital images are included.

TEXAS GENERAL LAND OFFICE (www.glo.texas.gov/history/archives/land-grants/index.cfm)

This database of more than 666,000 records allows a search that results in an abstract of the land, plus a digitized PDF file of supporting documentation.

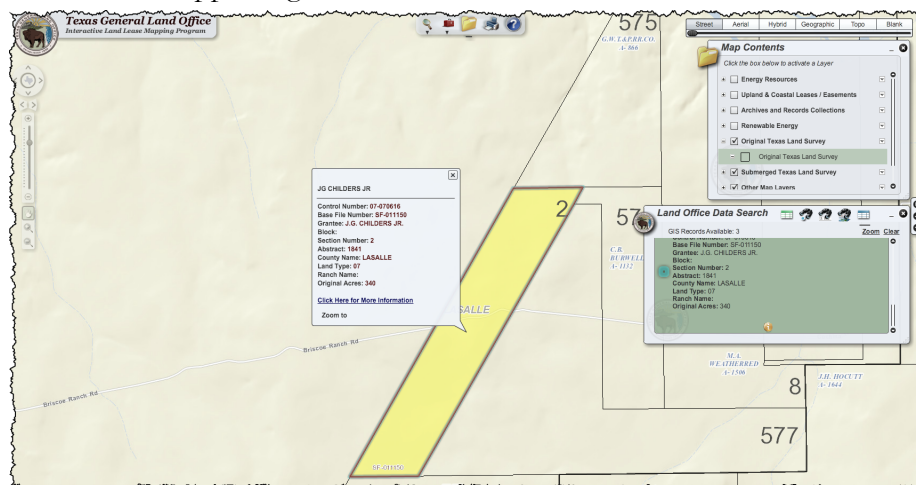


Figure 1: Texas General Land Office GISWEB Viewer showing Original Texas Land Survey

OTHER STATE LAND STATES

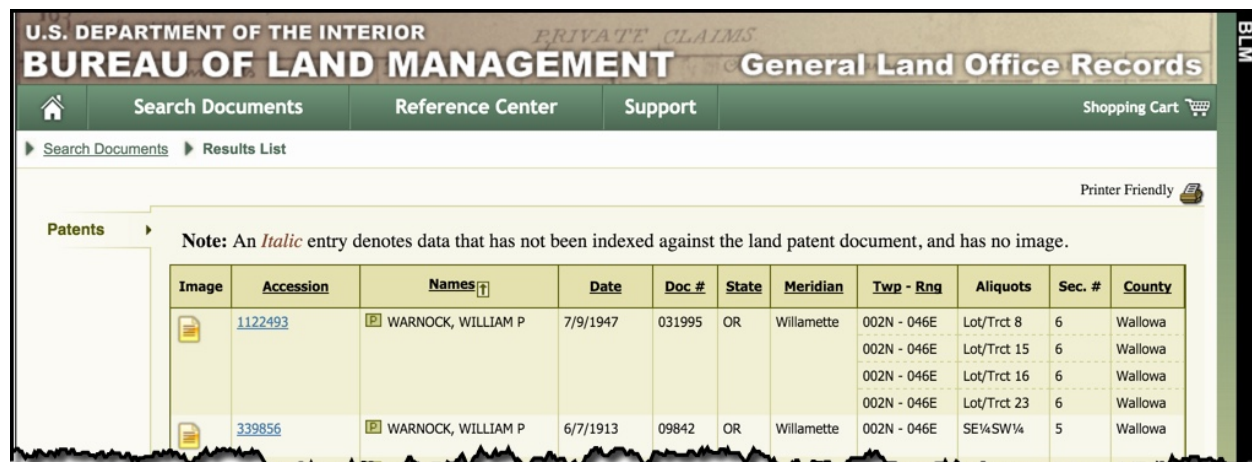
To find colonial or state land state original grants, research the locality. For example, use the FamilySearch Wiki to learn about land distribution in a particular state; or Google for a phrase similar to “Connecticut colonial land grants.”

ONLINE LAND RECORDS – FEDERAL

Federal lands were sold to the first purchaser by the U.S. Government. The tools available to discover genealogical information in federal land records are now very robust and should be understood by genealogists regardless of where your ancestors lived. The core records are the land entry files. Very few are online, but the collections are growing. Fold3 has scanned the perfected homestead files for Nebraska. FamilySearch continues to post case files for cancelled land entries. The tools below have their own genealogical value and are essential for locating other land records.

GENERAL LAND OFFICE RECORDS (www.glorerecords.blm.gov)

The official site, General Land Office (GLO) Records, documents the first transfer of federal land to a private individual or another entity. Some six million records of transfer are recorded on this site. Though still incomplete, the vast majority of records of first transfer can be found here. Genealogical gems are accessible on this website that are available only online or by accessing the repository of record. The site also serves as an index to the land entry papers held by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), and it provides access to many township plat maps. Two related online records, tract books and cancelled case files, are described in the following sections.



The screenshot shows the BLM General Land Office Records website. The header includes the BLM logo and navigation links. The main content area displays a search results table for patents. A note indicates that italicized entries are not indexed. The table lists two patent entries for William P. Warnock in Oregon, with details on accessions, dates, and land parcels.

Image	Accession	Names	Date	Doc #	State	Meridian	Twp - Rng	Aliquots	Sec. #	County
	1122493	WARNOCK, WILLIAM P	7/9/1947	031995	OR	Willamette	002N - 046E	Lot/Trct 8	6	Wallowa
							002N - 046E	Lot/Trct 15	6	Wallowa
							002N - 046E	Lot/Trct 16	6	Wallowa
							002N - 046E	Lot/Trct 23	6	Wallowa
	339856	WARNOCK, WILLIAM P	6/7/1913	09842	OR	Willamette	002N - 046E	SE¼SW¼	5	Wallowa

Figure 2: Patent Search on the GLO Website for William P. Warnock in Oregon

UNITED STATES BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT TRACT BOOKS, 1820-1908

(<https://familysearch.org/search/collection/2074276>)

For public land states, tract books provide a ledger of all land transactions in a section. They are useful for many reasons, but the most important is the location of cancelled entries that are not recorded on the GLO website. The digitized records placed online by FamilySearch cover the period from 1800 to approximately 1954 (the title is erroneous).

UNITED STATES, CANCELLED, RELINQUISHED, OR REJECTED LAND ENTRY CASE FILES (FAMILYSEARCH HISTORICAL RECORDS) (<http://tinyurl.com/p7s492q>)

This collection of records held by National Archives regional facilities around the United States is being digitized and made available online at FamilySearch. Currently FamilySearch provides the cancelled, relinquished, or rejected serialized case files (files created after 31 June 1908) for some of the land offices in Nebraska and Kansas. The case files are scans of the original files arranged by application number. The files are browsable, but the tract books can serve as an index. These case files may contain a wealth of genealogical information.

HISTORYGEO (www.historygeo.com)

The “First Landowners Project” on the HistoryGeo website is an interactive map application that links back to the GLO source data and provides an easier interface to navigate some of the data found in the GLO database.

ONLINE LAND RECORDS – SUBSEQUENT PURCHASERS

Once a piece of land was distributed by a foreign, state, or federal entity to an individual, the sale of that land and subsequent purchases were handled at the local level, usually the county. Most have not been digitized and must be viewed on microfilm at a state archive or in original form at the county courthouse. To locate local land records, try a website like Cyndi’s List (www.cyndislist.com/land). The website Land Records and Deeds Resources (<http://publicrecords.onlinesearches.com/Land-Records-and-Deeds.htm>) contains links to every state and county with contact information for the agency holding the land records. Some deeds and land transactions can be located online, as seen in the examples below. Try a Google search for a phrase similar to “Wayne County Missouri deeds” to find online digitized images.

FAMILYSEARCH HISTORICAL RECORDS (<https://familysearch.org/search/>)

FamilySearch has added many scanned records of the deeds and other land records created by individual counties located in the 30 public land states. To look for land records in a locality, access the FamilySearch Research by Location page at <https://familysearch.org/search> and choose a state. As of 1 December 2015, records were available for the following counties within public land states: California (San Mateo), Idaho (Bonneville, Butte, Cassia, Clark, Elmore, Gem, Gooding, Lemhi, Lincoln, Minidoka, Teton, Twin Falls), Illinois (DeKalb), Iowa (Powersheik), Minnesota (Clay, Itasca, Roseau), Mississippi (Tippah), Montana (Beaverhead, Big Horn, Cascade, Chouteau, Flathead, Granite, Judith Basin, Lake, Meagher, Pondera, Rosebud, Sanders, Sweet Grass, Teton, Toole, Yellowstone), Nebraska (Broken Bow), Ohio (Jefferson, Geauga, Hamilton, Scioto, Trumbull), Oregon (Baker, Benton, Columbia, Deschute, Douglas, Grant, Harney, Marion, Polk, Tillamook, Wasco, Yamill), Utah (Box Elder, Cache, Davis, Juab, Tooele, Uintah, Utah)

MASSACHUSETTS LAND RECORDS (www.masslandrecords.com)

This website links to the 21 registry districts within Massachusetts and allows a search for recent land records (late twentieth-century and current).

GUILFORD COUNTY, NC (www.myguilford.com/rod)

Click the Search Real Estate Records link to access a search tool. Indexes from 1771-1981 enable retrieval of digitized deeds dating to the colonial era. This same website links to digitized slave deeds prior to the Civil War.

PLATTING PROGRAMS

DEEDMAPPER VERSION 4.2 (www.directlinesoftware.com)

A Windows-only software program, DeedMapper allows entry of single or multiple tracts of land, both metes and bounds or rectangular grid survey. It allows rotation of plat, printing of single or multiple tracts on a printer, or export as a graphics file. A file can also be exported as a KML file and opened on Google Earth. Topographic map overlays area available at an additional cost, or users can download USGS maps and install them in DeedMapper. The website includes a Research Directory of DeedMapper users who are conducting deed research in various counties and a Deed Data Pool of deeds already platted by users, which can be downloaded for personal use. The program costs \$99.00.

METES AND BOUNDS (tabberer.com/sandyknoll)

This software program for Mac, Windows, Linux, iOS, and Android turns deed data into plat maps, and comes in three versions: desktop free, desktop basic, and desktop pro. Background pictures (maps) can be used, and multiple deeds on a single drawing are accomplished via layers. Metes and Bounds files can be exported as KML, CSV, and other format files. The basic desktop version is \$39.95, and the pro version is \$69.95. Basic and Pro versions are also available for iPhone, iPad, and Android.

PLAT PLOTTER (platplotter.appspot.com)

Quoting from the developer, “Plat Plotter is a free, cloud-based application that uses real estate deed metes-and-bounds to plot the property boundary on a digital map. Plat Plotter converts deed 'metes-and-bounds' into a Plat of Survey that can be viewed in Google Maps, imported into a mapping program like Google Earth, loaded into a GPS device, sent to a printing service or shared with others.” This cloud-based application frees users from using a specific operating system.

GOOGLE EARTH (<https://earth.google.com>) & **GOOGLE MAPS** (<https://maps.google.com>)

Download the Google Earth application at earth.google.com. Google Earth is a very powerful GIS application. Historical GIS applications can be viewed by using the Google Earth built-in layers such as a sample of historic maps from DavidRumsey.com. Users may also add applications to Google Earth such as Earth Point (www.earthpoint.us/townships.aspx). This application displays the Public Land Survey System (PLSS) grid on Google Earth imagery. Users may also upload their own maps to Google Earth and use the tools in Google Earth to rectify the map to its proper position on the Google Earth terrain.

Google Maps uses the same imagery database as Google Earth but has some different features. The Google My Maps tool allows users to create a map, draw on the map, import geographical data, and create layers to show different content. For example users could create a map that shows on Google Maps all of the towns of origin that have been discovered for the researcher's ancestors.

NEWBERRY LIBRARY'S ATLAS OF COUNTY HISTORICAL BOUNDARIES (<http://publications.newberry.org/ahcbp>)

For every U.S. state, this GIS provides a demo of changing state and county boundaries over time. Users can also download KMZ files showing U.S. historical counties from 1629-2000 and states and territories from 1783-2000. Functionality of an interactive map at the website was disabled in mid-2015, but it is expected to be restored by spring 2016.