

HOW TO "DO" LAND RECORDS RESEARCH? By Neal Otto Hively

OK, so you think you want to try land records research. Good choice. But, where do you start and what options do you have?

First, respond to *why* you want land records data? Is it to find the homestead of an early ancestor? Is it to locate the closest church to search its records on your family? Or, are you more *generally* oriented - and you want to start the search for the sake of discovery and doing something no one else has done before.

If your answer deals with a single family or just a few families - your FOCUS will be different from those who opt for a broader research project.

A. SPECIFIC SEARCH FOCUS

Step 1: DEFINE THE SEARCH

Who do you want to find? What do you want to know about that person? Do you know what TOWNSHIP that person came from (that makes the job a lot easier, if you know. If not, it's not impossible, just more difficult.) Do you know from what state your ancestor came?

Step 2: GATHER YOUR RESEARCH SOURCES

What's available? For Pennsylvania Land Records, there are very good sources available. Depending on what counties you are looking at, the sources can be excellent.

Check on-line web links for PA data. Searchable data bases are best. Others, (like this one) have the data, but you have to find it yourself. A ton of material is out there, you just have to find it.

STEP 3: DO YOUR WORK

There is no better satisfaction than doing a first-class job and seeing the desired results (that's why you define your search in STEP 1). Yes, there are always unanswered questions. Some answers raise new questions. Super! But, success is knowing when you have finished the task. Celebrate!

For single family searches, the County Court House is the first stop. Or, check the on-line data bases for much of that transcribed material, for free!

Another good, early stop is the local County Historical Society. Most have full indexes on cards or on data base to assist your search.

Know the distinction in land sales between a "Grantor" (that's the party who sells the land), and a "Grantee" (the party who purchases the property.)

Deeds usually give the following detail: "grantor" sells to "grantee" so many acres of land in a certain township, on a certain date, described by the following survey courses and distances - (that's how the land is laid out.)

The surveyor part is usually the most confusing part for most folks. My books give some insight into how to decipher such language. Some on-line web sites sell land surveyor drawing software. Check out several sites before you buy any. The best deals are those who give you a 30 or 60 day trial period, during which you can return the product if you are dissatisfied. My book on ["How to Plot Land Records"](#) is one I wish was available when I began long ago.

The good news is that land records are excellent sources of early settler data. Husband and wife are usually listed together! In fact, this may be one of the only times they are so clearly linked.

The bad news is that not all land transactions were registered with the county, or registered at all? Why? Money, of course. There were the court fees; taxes on the sale, clerk of court fees, blah, blah, blah. Need I say more. Especially after the 1810's up to the 1850's, many Pennsylvania land sales went unregistered. Sometimes auctions will turn up private agreements of sale, but other than that, you may have to go to PLAN B.

PLAN B: Registered outside of the normal course of land transactions were the disbursements of property through one's LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT. These "deeds of assignment" were transferred by the courts, and totally outside of other land sales. If father willed the land to son, there will be no deed of sale. The first you might hear of it, is when it is sold much later after 1864, when the laws changed.

So, check out early WILLS and ESTATE PAPERS when they exist (they do for York County, PA). Most often the surviving spouse is listed, as are all of the children and their spouses. Disbursement of land is clearly delineated.

STEP 4: TRACK IT DOWN

So you've found who owned what, when and generally where it was. Good. Now, how do you find it.

You might think that you can do a full deed transfer history from the original warrant grant from the Proprietors of Pennsylvania [the first owner], the first survey, the Patent [granting of full, clear title by the Colony or Commonwealth] (that's the research I do - but, I stop there), on through all of the successive owners down to the present day. Sometimes you can. Theoretically you should be able to do so for them all. Deed abstract offices are supposed to be able to do deed searches to arrive at just that conclusion. Most often, however, they take you back twenty-one consecutive years, or one owner - whichever is longer. Why? Because, that's all the law requires to establish "adverse or true possession" of land in Pennsylvania.

Is it possible? Yes.

Have I been able to do it? Yes.

Frequently? No, if fact rarely.

But, if you can trace all of the owners, then it's easy. Take the most recent name on the list - go to the county tax office, and ask to see the card/file/listing for Deed such-and-such, in the name of thus-and-so. It's all public information. Realtors do it all the time. Usually it's free.

What do you get? Name, address, phone, deed index, date of purchase, etc. - all you need. Pick up the phone, write a letter - explain the search, and they might even help you.

I did a search years ago, and called the current owner-family to explain myself. It turned out that they had bought the old surveys and land records at the farm sale when it was sold and they purchased the farm. They had all the unregistered deeds for that property I was missing! Amazing. Miracles do happen.

STEP 5: WHAT TO DO IF YOU STRIKE OUT

Check published county histories. Your family surname may be mentioned with some fact that will assist in your search.

If there were published maps of townships, pour over them for similar sounding names. Families generally cluster together. Beginning in the 1830's and onward a whole host of map makers did quite well with selling township sized maps, with all of the farms, churches, roads, and FAMILY SURNAMES!! Oh, Yes. Many of those maps are now in reprint editions. They are worth the cost, especially for Historical societies.

Check Church registers. Baptisms, Communion records, Elders, some early financial records - all may shed light on where your family lived.

You can hire a private researcher. Ouch! Expensive. Even I don't do this research much any more. Most people just can't afford the cost of the countless hours it takes to find the one missing link. As The South Central PA Genealogical Society says, "An unsuccessful search takes the same amount of time as a successful one." And sometimes, you don't find it at all even when you know where to look.

You can hire a local Abstract Office to do the research, with the clear understanding of them being paid for clearly defined detail. Without the results, no money, or limited fees.

You can submit a search to the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission, Harrisburg, PA, for an official certification of warrant, survey and patent, with source data for a particular name, in a certain township and county. Their fee schedules change often enough, that I'm not aware of current fees. This is the "official" repository of all land records for the whole state. If they don't have it, it possibly doesn't exist.

B. GENERAL FOCUS RESEARCH

The significant difference between a specific search (one or two families) and *general* searches is how you go about beginning your work.

The focus of a specific search is narrow; the focus of a general search is broad.

How do I "do" land records research on a whole *township* scale? (I actually find it easier, and more rewarding - but that's beside the point).

I simply look up *every* listing in the official Warrant Registry for that township, or its predecessor township. It entails four or five hundred listings, but once you have them, it's a relative "piece of cake". Here's the link to the online warrant registers. Copy it into your browser and hit "enter." <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/rg/di/r17-88WarrantRegisters/YorkPages/r17-88YorkPageInterface.htm>

I have made full copies of every warrant registry from the available microfilm versions at the Pennsylvania Archives, so I own my own personal copies. For fanatics - there are several of us, it's the most convenient way to do this research. Thus, when I go up to Harrisburg, I already know what surveys I want to look up, and have my work *organized* in advance.

This distinction is significant. How much time is usually wasted by efforts that bear no fruit? Most those of you who've been in this a while - most of our work is just finding where to look, and how it's organized.

I already *know* how it's organized, and where all the records are located. Thus, a general focus is, in my opinion, much easier.

I wish you good fortune in your research endeavors!