

Bluegrass State Research: Finding Family in Kentucky

By: Dana Palmer, CG[®], CGL[®]

dana@treasuredlineage.com

www.treasuredlineage.com

In 1772, a Virginia land speculation company surveyed land along the Ohio and Kentucky Rivers resulting in the creation of Fincastle County, Virginia from Botetourt County. Fincastle County contained all of present-day Kentucky plus small sections of land in current Virginia and West Virginia. Harrodsburg was established in 1774 as the first settlement in Kentucky. Daniel Boone's migration along the Wilderness Road through the Cumberland Gap in 1775 began settlement in what would become Fayette, Jefferson, and Lincoln counties. Kentucky County, Virginia was created from Fincastle County in 1776 and included present-day eastern Kentucky. In 1780, Virginia divided Kentucky County into three counties: Fayette, Jefferson, and Lincoln. By 1783, most of the residents came from North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. Many men who served in the French and Indian War received land grants for their service in what became Kentucky. These early settlements were targets of frequent attacks from the Native Americans. As more settlers moved to the area, the Commonwealth of Kentucky sought to separate from Virginia and form a separate state, resulting in the creation of Territory of Kentucky in July 1790. Census records taken in August 1790 for Kentucky were completed and sent to Washington D.C. but were destroyed during the War of 1812. On 1 June 1792, Kentucky became the 15th state with nine counties (Fayette, Jefferson, Lincoln, Nelson, Bourbon, Mercer, Madison, Mason, and Woodford) with the capital located in Frankfort. Additional counties were created as the population increased with the idea that all residents would be within a day's ride to the courthouse so they could more easily pay their taxes. The last county was created in 1912. Kentucky currently has 120 counties.

For more details on the early history of Kentucky go to the FamilySearch Research Wiki page:

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Kentucky_History

Boundary Changes

Determining when the county was created and what is the parent county can be the key to finding the records needed. Use census records to help determine your ancestor's residence at that specific time, then circular search the area, ignoring state and county borders. If you don't find them, expand the size of your circular search. Below are some free websites that have excellent interactive maps to show what the boundaries in Kentucky looked like over time.

- Newberry Library's Atlas of Hist. County Boundaries: <https://publications.newberry.org/ahcb/ky/>
- Map of US: <https://www.mapofus.org/kentucky/>
- Also check out: <https://www.kyatlas.com/+historic-counties/>

Record Loss

Many counties in Kentucky suffered significant record loss from the Civil War casualties (courthouse fires) or lack of record keeping due to changing laws. If your ancestor lived in a county with record loss, look for alternate sources such as church records, bible records, newspapers, etc.

The Family Search Research Wiki is immensely helpful in determining what records exist for each specific county. Click on the specific county in the map or in the alphabetical table of counties for more information: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Kentucky,_United_States_Genealogy

Best Sources for Kentucky Records

- Kentucky Department for Libraries & Archives (KDLA)
- Kentucky Historical Society
- Filson Club (Louisville, Kentucky)
- Local County Records
- King Library at the University of Kentucky
- Other local and University libraries
- Department of Health

Vital Records

Kentucky's Changing Vital Record Laws

- 1852 – Kentucky required all counties to record birth, marriages, and deaths
- 1862 – Law repealed requiring all counties to record births, marriages, and deaths
- 1870s – Tried to get counties to record vital records again
- **1911** – Kentucky again required registration of all births and deaths

**Very few vital records in Kentucky were recorded between 1878-1911.

Birth records began in 1852, stopped in 1862, and were recorded sporadically until 1910. From 1882 to 1907 vital records were filed in the local county court with microfilm copies at the Kentucky Historical Society. Starting in 1911, births were filed at the Office of Vital Statistics. Make sure to also check for delayed and / or corrected birth records before 1911.

- Kentucky, Births Records, 1847-1911, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1213/?redirectFor=db.aspx>
- Kentucky, Birth Index, 1911-1999, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8788/>
- Kentucky Birth Records, 1911-2007, <https://search.findmypast.com/search-world-records/kentucky-birth-records>
- Kentucky Birth Records Index, 1911-2007, <https://www.archives.com/genealogy/records-kentucky-birth-index.html>
- Kentucky, Births and Christenings, 1839-1960, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1674843>

Images of the original Kentucky birth records from 1852-1910 can be examined from the FamilySearch catalog microfilms 1,533,971-1,533,979 and 174,932-174,943; at the Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives in Frankfort, films 994,027-994,058; at the Filson Club in Louisville film 929.3 K37v, 32 reels); or at other local Kentucky repositories.

Birth records from 1911 to the present can be ordered from the Office of Vital Statistics at: <https://www.chfs.ky.gov/agencies/dph/dehp/vsb/Pages/birth-certificates.aspx>

Adoptions in Kentucky are filed in the Clerk of the Circuit Court where the adoption occurred. Make sure to also check for probate records and guardianships, Catholic Church Records, and Maternity Home Records. For more details: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Kentucky_Adoption_Research

Death records began in 1852, stopped in 1862, and were recorded sporadically until 1910 at the local county court with microfilm copies at the Kentucky Historical Society. Starting in 1911, deaths were filed at the Office of Vital Statistics.

- Kentucky Death Records, 1852-1965, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1222/?redirectFor=db.aspx>
- Kentucky, Deaths and Burials, 1843-1970, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1674848>
- Kentucky, Deaths, 1911-1967, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1417491>
- Kentucky Death Records, 1911-2007, <https://search.findmypast.com/search-world-records/kentucky-death-records>
- Kentucky, Death Index, 1911-2000, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3077/?redirectFor=db.aspx>
- US Department of Veteran Affairs Death File <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2441/>

Death records from 1911 to the present can be ordered from the Office of Vital Statistics at: <https://www.chfs.ky.gov/agencies/dph/dehp/vsb/Pages/death-certificates.aspx>

Images of the original Kentucky death records from 1852-1910 can be examined from the FamilySearch catalog microfilms 1,533,971-1,533,979; 174,938-174,939; and 175003.

Images of the original Kentucky death records from 1911 to 1947 can be examined from the FamilySearch catalog microfilms starting with 1,904,664 (357 microfilms).

Four Kentucky cities kept their own vital registration records

- Covington (births 1896-1910, deaths 1881-1910)
- Lexington (births 1906-1910, deaths 1894-1910)
- Louisville (births 1898-1910, deaths 1866-1910)
- Newport (births 1907-1911, deaths 1884-1928)

Marriage records began before 1816 when the area was still a territory and are often found filed with the deeds. Some marriage records can be found at the Kentucky Historical Society. After statehood (1792), marriages were filed in the county court. The Kentucky General Assembly granted early divorces. Divorces prior to 1850 may be found in the General Assembly Acts.

- Kentucky, Marriage Records, 1852-1914, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1117/>
- Kentucky, County Marriage Records, 1783-1965, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61372/>
- Kentucky, County Marriages, 1786-1965, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1804888>
- Kentucky, Marriage Index, 1973-1999, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8787/>
- Kentucky, Marriages, 1785-1979, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1674849>
- Northern Kentucky Marriages, 1795-1850, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3455/?redirectFor=db.aspx>
- Kentucky, Compiled Marriages, 1802-1850, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2089/?redirectFor=db.aspx>
- Kentucky, Compiled Marriages, 1851-1900, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/4428/?redirectFor=db.aspx>

Marriage and divorce records from June 1958 to the present can be ordered from the Office of Vital Statistics at: <https://www.chfs.ky.gov/agencies/dph/dehp/vsb/Pages/marriage-divorce.aspx>

Census

Federal census records are available at FamilySearch, Ancestry.com, and Find My Past

- 1790 & 1800 (lost), see books below that reconstructed these census records based on tax records
- 1810 –1870, 1900-1950, all counties exist
- 1880 – part of Crittenden missing
- 1890 – lost

Special census records

- Veterans / Pensioners – 1840 Pensioners census (for all), 1890 Veterans (partial - 65 eastern counties, 54 counties are lost)
- Mortality, agricultural –1850-1880, schedules exist for all counties
- Industrial / Manufacturers –1820, 1850-1880, schedules exist for all counties
- Defective, Dependent, Delinquents census –1880, schedules exist for all counties
- Slave owners – 1850-1860, schedules exist for all counties
- Indian – 1900-1910, schedules exist for all counties

Helpful Kentucky Census & Census Substitute books

William Dollarhide. *The Census Book: A Genealogists Guide to Federal Census Facts, Schedules and Indexes*. (Bountiful, Utah: Heritage Quest, 1999), 108-109.

William Thorndale, and William Dollarhide. *Map Guide to the U.S. Federal Censuses, 1790-1920*. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1987), 122-32.

Heinemann, Charles B. *“First Census” of Kentucky, 1790*. (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing, 1993).

Heinemann, Charles B. *1790 Census of Kentucky*. (Greenville, SC: Southern Historical Press, 2013).

Clift, G. Glenn. *Second Census of Kentucky: 1800*. (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing, 2005).

Wells, Charles C. *1890 Special Veterans Census for Eastern Kentucky*. (Paintsville, KY: East Kentucky Press, Inc., 2013).

Draper Manuscript

The Draper Manuscript collection includes manuscripts (interviews, questionnaires, and letters) gathered from his travels about the settlement of the frontier west of the Alleghenys from the 1740s to the 1830s covering New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia / West Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, **Kentucky**, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Michigan, and Wisconsin. It contains 491 volumes divided into 50 series arranged by location, subject, and individuals. The original collection is stored at the Wisconsin Historical Society. The Kentucky Historical Society and Filson Historical Society also have a copy of the Draper collection.

Wisconsin Historical Society: <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS4103>

About the Draper Manuscript: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Draper_Manuscript_Collection

For the coverage table: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Draper_Manuscript_Series_Coverage_Table

The FamilySearch microfilm copies of the collection: <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/218462>

Court records

Most Kentucky court records with genealogical value can be found in the district and county courts for the specific county or state archives. These records start as early as 1780 and go through the present day. Some of these records may be found at FamilySearch. Others will have to be ordered directly from the court or state archives. Transcribed records may be found at the University of Kentucky Library, the Kentucky Historical Society, and the Filson Club Library. Some have been abstracted and published in books or periodicals, but the vast majority are still not copied but found locally in boxes, cabinets, and folders.

Typical records found in the circuit court: probates (wills and estates), guardianships (child and adult), adoptions and name changes, naturalizations, divorces, insolvency, child custody, etc. See the following for more details: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Kentucky_Court_Records

Links to some online Kentucky court records

- Kentucky Wills and Probates, 1774-1989, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9066/?redirectFor=db.aspx>
- Kentucky, Probate Records, 1727-1990, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1875188>
- FamilySearch, Full Text Search, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/full-text>
- Petitions of the early inhabitants of Kentucky to the General Assembly of Virginia, 1769-1792, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/22745/>
- Kentucky Court and Other Records, Vol. I, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/48581/>
- Kentucky Court and Other Records, Vol. II, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/48031/>
- Kentucky pioneer and court records, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/28676/>
- Abstract of early Kentucky wills and inventories, copied from original and recorded wills and inventories, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/85984>
- Kentucky Wills, Deeds, and Marriages, 1700-1909, <https://www.findmypast.com/discover/birth-marriage-death-and-parish-records/wills-and-probate/kentucky-wills-deeds-and-marriages-1700-1909-published-1929>

A Complete Index to the Names of Persons, Places and Subjects Mentioned in Littell's Laws of Kentucky. By W. T. Smith. 1994. Baltimore, Maryland: Clearfield. Online at:

- <https://archive.org/details/statutelawofkent00kent/page/n3/mode/2up>
- <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/48044/>
- <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/646519>

Ireland, Robert M. *The County Courts in Antebellum Kentucky.* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1972). FamilySearch Library <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/85327>

Richardson, William C. *An Administrative History of Kentucky Courts to 1850.* (Frankfort, KY: Kentucky Department for Archives and Libraries, 1983). FamilySearch Library <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/132950>

Land records

Kentucky was a “state-land” meaning the government sold all land within its borders. Warrants were issued for qualified military service (military warrants) or cash payments (treasury warrants). Once the land was transferred from the government to private ownership, further land transactions were recorded in the county courts. Many of these early records are available in the catalog on FamilySearch at the county level. Also check out the FamilySearch Wiki page for more details on Land and Property in Kentucky.

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Kentucky_Land_and_Property

Land Patents / Grants in Kentucky

- Virginia Grants (1773-1792) – mostly military grants for French & Indiana and Rev. War veterans
- Old Kentucky Grants (1793-1856) – misc. types of grants, some from Virginia warrants & surveys
- Warrants for Headrights (1827-1849) – warrants given for bringing people to an area
- Grants South of Green River (1797-1866) – grants given to Virginia Rev. War veterans
- Tellico Land Grants (1802-1853) – grants / treasury warrants for land ceded by Cherokee Indians
- Kentucky Land Warrants (1816-1873) – warrants for land east of the Tennessee River
- Grants West of Tennessee River, Military (1822-1858) – based on treasury warrants
- Grants West of Tennessee River, Non-Military (1825-1923) – based on treasury warrants
- County Court Orders (1836-1955) – counties selling their unowned land

The early settlement of Kentucky resulted in many land disputes with appeals at the state court level. Many of these have been abstracted. Below is a 4 volume book series for these abstracted land dispute court cases.

Cook, Michael L. & Bettie A. *Kentucky Court of Appeals Deed Books*. (Evansville, IN: Cook Publications, 1985). Four volume set of Court of Appeals Deeds & early Kentucky Supreme Court Deeds.

- *Kentucky Court of Appeals Deed Books Vol VI (Deed Books A-G, 1796-1803)*
- *Vol VII (Deed Books H-N, 1803-1811)*
- *Vol VIII (Deed Books O-U, 1811-1821)*
- *Vol IV (Deed Books V-Z, 1821-1835)* includes the District of Kentucky (1783-1789) state supreme court rec.

The following website has a good list of resources for Kentucky land records:

<https://www.sos.ky.gov/land/resources/Documents/Bibliography.pdf>

- Kentucky Land Grants, 1782-1924, <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2073/>
- Kentucky Land Office, Military Registers & Land Records, <https://www.sos.ky.gov/land/military/Pages/default.aspx>
- Kentucky Land Office, Non-Military Registers & Land Records, <https://www.sos.ky.gov/land/non-military/Pages/default.aspx>
- FamilySearch full-text search, <https://www.familysearch.org/search/full-text>

Church records

Many church records in Kentucky exist, but most are not online. These can be excellent substitutes for vital records that were not recorded or no longer exist. Check if the church kept records. If so, make arrangements to view and copy them. Also check with the local genealogical / historical society to see if they know about any such collection. See also: https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Kentucky_Church_Records

For those with Catholic ancestors, you will need to determine the diocese covering the location where they resided. Many of the Catholic churches keep records and copies can often be ordered for a fee. Some might be online at Find My Past.

Tax records

Kentucky has many tax records available. Three copies were kept until about 1936 (county, auditor's file, treasurer's office). These are generally organized by county or district, and many can be found in the catalog for FamilySearch. The following years are available:

- 1782-1875 – microfilmed by the University of Michigan and available at the Kentucky Historical Society
- 1875-1920, microfilmed by FamilySearch from the University of Kentucky, with the originals at the Kentucky State Archives (KDLA)
- 1920-1940 – tax records destroyed, nothing exists
- 1940-present – kept by the revenue department, now the Property Tax Division of the Revenue Department

Some of the major Kentucky Genealogy Repositories

- Repositories
 - Kentucky Digital Library <https://kdl.kyvl.org/?f%5Bformat%5D%5B%5D=archival+material>
 - Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives <https://kdla.access.preservica.com/portal/en-US>
<https://kdla.ky.gov/Archives-and-Reference/Pages/Resources-for-Researchers.aspx>
 - Kentucky Genealogical Society <https://kygs.omeka.net/welcome>
 - Digital Library: <https://kygs.omeka.net>
 - Kentucky Historical Society <https://history.ky.gov>
 - Filson Historical Society Library <https://filsonhistorical.org/collections/library/>
 - Tri-State Genealogical Society <https://tristategenealogicalsociety.weebly.com/>
 - National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) Research Library, (Louisville, Kentucky), <https://library.sar.org>
- Other Resources
 - Use US GenWeb to see if there are records for county you want. <https://www.kygenweb.net/>
 - **Local genealogical and historical societies:** many have indexed vital and other historical collections. Check at state and local level. Many counties have a county historical society as well as specific town societies. They have different collections so check both places.
 - **State and county archives:** many counties have local archives with different records than the state. Content varies but might include early vital records, indexes to court records, soldier discharges, and tax lists.
 - **Local libraries** https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Kentucky_Archives_and_Libraries
 - **Local records:** DAR groups, funeral homes, cemeteries, churches, military groups (VFW)
 - **Special collections:** Murray State University (Murray, KY); Western Kentucky University (Bowling Green, KY); Eastern Kentucky University (Richmond, KY), and University of Kentucky (Lexington, KY)

Other Useful Online Kentucky Resources

https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Kentucky_Online_Genealogy_Records

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/places/usa/kentucky/>

<https://www.myheritage.com/research/catalog?q=Kentucky>

https://www.findmypast.com/search/historical-records?region=world&keywords=Kentucky&page=1&order_direction=desc&order_by=relevance

<https://kentuckykindredgenealogy.com/category/databases/>