

Native American Research: Things You May Not Know

**A Legacy Family Tree Webinar sponsored by
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November is Native American Heritage Month and what better time to begin delving into Native American research? Learn about records, libraries, archives, websites, databases, and analyzing what you find. Be prepared for some surprises on where you might find more about this amazing heritage. As with any genealogical research, there is no one record or set of records that supplies all the details, solves relationship mysteries, or is the one and only suggestion for you to research. If you have already been researching your own family history or for clients, quiz yourself and ask if you have overlooked some records that could hold answers.

The variety of records and accessibility will vary by time period and location of your Native American ancestral families. Whether they were in what became the United States (including Hawaii and Alaska), Canada, Mexico, and South America, there will be differences. Before going too far seeking records, learn the Native history of your probable locations, the governmental entities that had control, and what is being done today as far as educating researchers. The tribal office is not the starting place for your journey. This session focuses on records in the continental United States.

1. **You've checked all these records?** Federal and state censuses, land, probate, obituaries, birth, marriage, and death records, church, divorce, and others online and in courthouses, libraries, historical societies, and archives need to be researched. These need to be checked no matter your family's ethnic background. Unsure about how to find and research in all these records? Read genealogy research guidebooks, look at other Legacy Family Tree webinars, and attend classes on the subject. Then on to Native American records, determine the tribe with which your ancestor was affiliated, check online for enrollment guidelines, and only then contact the tribe directly in regard to membership requirements once you are able to show your ancestral link. It's still a proud heritage if you don't qualify for enrollment in a tribe.

2. **Terminology and abbreviations.** Individual groups of Native Americans use different labels to describe, politically or historically, their specific groups: tribe, nation, clan, pueblo, village, community, band, indigenous, etc. To avoid repeating the list of labels throughout the handout and presentation, the terms tribe, Indian, and Native American will be used. The terminology used in a specific record historically will be used in discussion and the handout. We can't change the terminology that was written at the time.
3. **Genealogical Proof Standard (GPS).** These common-sense and useful standards were developed under the auspices of the [Board for Certification of Genealogists](#). *Genealogy Standards* (Second edition, Washington, DC: Board for Certification of Genealogists, 2019) provides extensive guidance. These principles are perfect for use in evaluating Native American related records, finding families, and then presenting our research results in written form. In brief, the GPS:
 1. Reasonably exhaustive research.
 2. Complete and accurate source citations.
 3. Thorough analysis and correlation.
 4. Resolution of conflicting evidence.
 5. Soundly written conclusion based on the strongest evidence.
4. **Judging the records.** As you seek and then analyze a record think about these:
 - a. Who compiled the record and why was it compiled?
 - b. If it was a continuing type of record, were the parameters changed over time?
 - c. Is it an original record, on microfilm, or a digital image?
 - d. Was the record keeper a government official or employee?
 - e. Did the compiler understand the Native language?
 - f. Did the compiler really know the history of the individual and families?
 - g. Is the tribe federally recognized, state recognized, both, and was it ever under a government at some point?
 - h. Did the person live in or near a reservation?
 - i. Did the person/family live as white and was not involved in BIA records?
5. **Kinship Determination.** A person denoted as uncle, brother, sister, or father may not be a blood relative. Cultural differences existed. Learn whether the tribe of interest was mainly a matrilineal or patrilineal entity. For example, if matrilineal, the children are usually found with their mother on records of tribes.
6. **Check the base rolls. Check the Dawes.** This is the advice often given on social media and in other place as responses to inquiries about Native American ancestry. In many cases, the suggested roll doesn't even have a connection to the probable or known tribe of the inquirer. A tribe may state that for enrollment you must have lineal descendency from a person on the tribe's base roll. That roll is generally a list of members as of a given time.
7. **Food for Thought.** An 1889 BIA Indian census shows that your great grandmother was enumerated with her children as part of the _____ reservation and earlier on the 1888 Indian census for the same reservation, she was with her parents and siblings. The federal

censuses of 1900, 1910, and 1930 show that she had Indian blood. You work the paper trail research back to prove she is your great grandmother. Is it thorough research?. Look at #8 to see if there are other records you have not researched. Content in these might dispute some details. These may help determine actual family relationships, show “adoptions,” disputed parentage, provide a better picture of the blood quantum, and show other places you family may have resided. Indian custom marriages and divorces may appear. Polygamist relationships may be discussed. Reasons for family splits, moves, and other details may surface. Put your family member in a specific place at a specific time. Testimony in an heirship case or correspondence sent to the BIA might tell more of the family story.

8. **Did you check for all these records?** These are not in alphabetical order so hopefully you will read through the entire list. Some are at the National Archives (NARA), others at local and state historical societies, state archives, and university libraries. Few are digitized.

Lists of chiefs, headmen	Allotment rolls, lists, & related correspondence	Annuity rolls, lists, & related correspondence
Trading licenses	Hospitals	Guardianships
Military pensions	Scholarly dissertations	Removal records
Special files	Trading house records	Treaties
Pony claims	Probates/heirships	Family registers
Indian asylums	Land transactions	Tribal meeting minutes
Student records & censuses	State, county, town histories	Indentured students
Supplemental rolls of b, m, d	General store records	Sanitorium
Farm loan applications	Relief requests	Burial cost requests
Birth registers/certificates	Death registers/certificates	Marriage register
Oil and mineral leases and payments	Individual Indian money accounts	Legislative Petitions (state and federal)
Forestry permits/fees	Indian language newspapers	School newspapers
Half Breed Tracts	Draper Manuscripts	Civilian Conservation Corps
Fur company records	Grazing permits/fees	Homestead records
Special Files	Claims Commission	Photographs
Indian scouts	Employee contracts & lists	Cemetery records
Lists of students at non-reservation schools	Wild West shows and circuses	Newspaper local news columns
Half breed claims	Lists of agency personnel	Removal rolls
Competency records	Indian wills	Scrapbooks
Oral histories	Petitions to the BIA	Historical periodicals
Tribal histories	Letters of private citizens	Spanish mission records

9. **Genealogy of the Agencies.** Put yourself in the mindset of a government official. Each one has a better idea or is difficult to deal with. Political pressures come about. For Native American research in records at NARA, this means a need to be sure of the jurisdictions that exerted power over the tribe of interest year by year. That is the entity under which most records are filed. One tribe may be under one BIA agency for two years along with five

other tribes. The next year, that same agency might be over two of those tribes and the other three tribes are under two other agencies. Edward Hill's book #32 is helpful with this.

- 10. More Jurisdiction and changing names.** Many Indians were forcibly removed to another state/territory and then moved again. An Ohio Native American connection might be found in Kansas and/or Oklahoma. Was the tribal connection you were told or suspect ever in the same location as your ancestor? The tribe you "think" is correct might be different due to intermarriage. Do you know the name under which your ancestor is listed in a record? Some have both an Indian name and the English name, some never had an English name, and others had special name changes due to bravery, reaching a specific age, or in admiration of another person. Tribal intermarriage occurred and that affects affiliation.
- 11. Other NARA Records.** Record Group (RG) 75, Bureau of Indian Affairs, is the best known and largest body of records related to Native Americans connected to federally recognized tribes. Don't neglect other record groups at NARA. For example:

 - RG 15 Records of the Veterans Administration
 - RG 92, Records of the Quartermaster General
 - RG 56 Records of the Department of the Treasury
 - RG 60 Records of the Department of Justice
 - RG 205 Records of the Court of Claims
 - RG 279 Records of the Indian Claims Commission
- 12. RG 75, Indian Censuses "1885-1940."** A 4 July 1884 Congressional Act (23 Stat. L., 98) stated that Superintendents in charge of Indian reservations prepare and submit an annual census of all Indians under their charge. Censuses helped determine levels of aid, budget, property rights, and who was to inherit property and mineral rights. The Examiner of Inheritance (heirships/probates) used these census rolls in determining heirs. Some Indian heirships quote page after page of Indian census entries for descendants. Some of these quoted censuses no longer exist! Earlier censuses do exist for some places. The main body of BIA censuses are found on both free and subscription websites. Not all agencies or Superintendencies actually did annual enumerations of the tribes they covered.
- 13. Allotment Records.** In 1887, Congress passed the Dawes Act which authorized dividing of tribal land into individual parcels for tribal members. The plan was to have Indians who accepted land to live separately, gain U. S. citizenship, and have ownership of the land after 25 years. The allotted land was inheritable and that created the need for heirship (probate) records, correspondence, and affidavits. Censuses, other rolls, and family registries are among the records used to confirm heirs. Not all tribes participated, including the Five Civilized Tribes.
- 14. Annuity Rolls.** Annuity payments are the result of treaty stipulations. Early payments were generally paid to the chief or headman for distribution to the tribe or to members of his clan. Later rolls are more detailed as they sought to be sure each person was eligible for the payment. Some of these created controversy and correspondence was created along with other records that can be quite interesting. Many of these rolls remain in original format at

NARA locations, some are on microfilm, and a few are digitized.

15. **Family Registers.** In order to ascertain the family heirs and link families to each other for allotment and other inheritance procedures, family registers were created circa 1900-1905. While not as easily found (or even still in existence) as BIA censuses, these are great for research because parents names are listed.

16. **BIA correspondence files.** Various BIA officials in Washington, D.C. were quite fond of sending directives, asking questions, demanding records, reports, and more from the Agents, Superintendents, and others. Correspondence in RG 75 alone is found in thousands of archival files and boxes at NARA in Washington, DC, and NARA locations around the country. You might be viewing an original letter, a direct carbon copy, or someone's letter-press volume. The terms used for most years were "Letters Sent" and "Letters Received."

A rough timeline and arrangement discussion for RG 75 related correspondence

1824-1881: Most of the Letters Sent and Letters Received have been microfilmed and are available in a variety of repositories. Some subject indexes but no overall name index.

1881-1907: These years are not generally microfilmed or digitized. Access is sometimes via a complicated register system that requires extra steps but is quite worthwhile. Subjects are roughly indexed plus some names are indexed.

1907-1939: Correspondence was filed according to a decimal code system. Some are filed as general correspondence that didn't (supposedly) necessarily cover a specific tribe, others were file by the decimal code and for a specific agency or tribe. For a specific agency, the code 350 signifies probate, code 312 is related to land. A list of codes is found in many places including in #34, Volume 2. A rough index to some is at NARA D. C. and finding aids for some of those at the locations around the country do exist. Your best research will be done by viewing all the files for a specific agency or tribe.

17. **BIA and other Special Files, Miscellaneous Records.** These are a conglomeration of records, correspondence, lists, and more that defy total description. Content includes trader information, claims, accounts, affidavits, complaints about agents, issues with specific Indians, and just about anything you can imagine. Search the *Guide to Federal Records* #32 to find details on most of these.

18. **Military Service.** Native Americans served in various military capacities even in colonial times. Militia lists, service records, pensions, draft registrations, correspondence, memorials and other types of records were kept. RG 75 has some military information but other federal and state records need to be searched just as you would search for anyone else. Many Native American served as scouts for the military and separate records and lists exist. [Check NARA](#) for a brief discussion and links to some records.

19. **Missionary records.** Missionaries were sent all over the U.S., Alaska, Hawaii, Mexico and other places. It's common to find a family interacting with the Catholic missionaries, next the Methodist, Presbyterian, or other denomination. Check historical publications to learn

which were in your ancestral area. Correspondence, sacramental records, diaries, journals, and other items are found in denominational archives. One extensive collection is the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. The main collection is [Houghton Library, Harvard University](#) and parts are microfilmed and available elsewhere. The ABCFM began with Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and German Reformed churches circa 1810 and at least by 1870 was only Congregationalists. Among the ABCFM foreign missions to Indians were Hawaii, Minnesota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Michigan, and New York.

20. Other Personal Papers. The papers of Indian agents and others who worked with Native Americans often carry names of area Native Americans. Diaries, journals, ledgers, and other records of doctors, teachers, clerks, agents, superintendents, traders, governors, mayors, military men, blacksmiths, area farmers, shopkeepers, and others should be checked. These may include births, marriages, deaths, burials, purchases of coffins, personal comments, and notes on people moving away. Names, relationships, issues, bravery, and other details are mentioned. These are invaluable for individuals not associated with tribes and for years before government records exist.

21. School records. Native Americans attended school in the general community, Indian boarding and day schools, and religious schools. The latter were generally established by missionaries. Check denominational archives for these records. [Marquette University](#) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin has an extensive collection of Catholic Mission Schools records. Federal boarding schools had students from near and far. An Indian child in South Dakota might be sent to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. A child in Washington might be sent to the Stewart Indian school in Carson City, Nevada. Children were forcibly removed from parents and sent to boarding schools; it was not always a pleasant experience as the children were forced to dress and act as if white. There are instances in which a parent chose to send a child away to school. They may have had too many children to feed and clothe or the child was unruly. Boarding school records include correspondence, school censuses, individual student files, newspapers, grades, and indentured students. The federal school records in existence are under the auspices of NARA. Check the appropriate NARA region that serves the state where the school was located.

22. State level records. Some states took their own censuses of Native Americans. New York and California are two examples. Various state agencies may have interacted with the tribes in that state. Papers from territorial days, governors, Adjutant Generals, and other agencies should be checked.

Locating other records

23. [National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections](#). [NUCMC] Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress (LOC), 1962-present. Manuscript cataloguing via LOC. Published volumes (1962-1994), annual indexes, and combined indexes list collections in 1,400 + repositories that reported descriptions of hundreds of years of material. Additions since the mid-1980s are via [WorldCat.org](#) but I prefer the LOC NUCMC page. Not as many places

contribute to NUCMC today because they do their own manuscript cataloging and online descriptions.

24. [ArchiveGrid.org](#): Another way to search for specific records and locations with over one million collection descriptions from repositories all over the world, including much of NUCMC, and much not in NUCMC. ArchiveGrid is in beta format with a WorldCat.org search. I prefer to search via the direct ArchiveGrid page. FREE on your own computer.
25. [ArchivesUSA](#), Publisher Chadwyck-Healey (Now ProQuest) has “all” NUCMC cataloging from 1959 -2009 (and maybe later) in its electronic publication for libraries. It is part of Archive Finder, an expensive database marketed to libraries, historical societies, and archives. Individual subscriptions are not offered.
26. [Worldcat.org](#) is free online and may be accessed from home. This offers access to catalog holding of thousands of libraries worldwide. Searches on WorldCat can be limited in several ways by the user, including the category of “Archival material” which includes manuscript collections.
27. [JSTOR](#) A finding aid for complete historical articles from many disciplines. One of the great uses is the footnotes or endnotes of the articles. It’s a great way to pick up manuscript resources not always found in other ways. JSTOR stand for Journal Storage and includes scholarly journals in a variety of fields. Checking for a few articles is free. Home subscriptions are available or an area library may offer access.
28. **Newspapers.** Many missionaries, schools, individuals, and tribes published newspapers and newsletters dating back to the 1800s and continue today. Several early ones are on the free [Chronicling America](#). More are showing up on newspaper subscription sites. 18th and early 19th century papers are in a Native language but may have some sections written in English. World, state, tribal and personal news is covered. Many include family history details.

29. Helpful online information and finding aids

- NARA discussion on the background on the Indian Census Rolls 1885-1940.
<https://www.archives.gov/research/census/native-americans/1885-1940.html>
- Resources on Native Americans at the Library of Virginia.
<https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/ResourcesOnNativeAmericans.pdf>
- [Records of Alaska Natives in Religious Archives](#) Multi-page list.
- [Minnesota Historical Society](#) Many resources for researching tribes in Minnesota and other states. Online guides to Ojibwe and Dakota research.
- [Newberry Library, Chicago](#) Library holds extensive Native American records, photographs, correspondence, and other items.
- [New England Historic Genealogical Society](#) Among other collections are the manuscripts of Rudi Ottery that were gathered in preparation for the 1999 book *A Man Called Sampson: The Ancestry and Progeny of Sampson, a Mashantucket Pequot Indian . . .* His descendants lived in Connecticut, New York, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Montana, Kansas, Nebraska, Oregon, and elsewhere.
- [Oklahoma Historical Society](#) OHS houses records of many tribes and is affiliated with NARA.

- [Native American Heritage Project](#) Discussions on combining records and DNA.
- [New Mexico State Library](#) Holdings overview of records of Southwest Tribes.
- [Presbyterian Historical Society](#) Guide to the American Indian Correspondence: the Presbyterian Historical Society Collection of Missionaries' Letters 1833-1893; 1949-1950.
- [Kansas Historical Society](#) Indian Mission Schools Collection, 1837-1879, from other sources.
- [FamilySearch Wiki](#) Search by name of tribe, type of record, and other categories for background information, links to records on FamilySearch, and to other sites.
- [CyndisList](#) Check the category of Native American for extensive links.
- [Access Genealogy](#) has extensive indexes, transcripts, and images of Indian records and history.
- Check Facebook pages, other websites, query and discussion groups that deal with Native American research in general and for specific states and tribes.

Publications

30. Bantin Philip C. with Mark G. Thiel. *Guide to Catholic Indian Mission and School Records in Midwest Repositories*. Milwaukee: Marquette Univ., 1984. [IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OK, SD, WI. www.marquette.edu/library/collections/archives]
31. Byers, Paula K. ed. *Native American Genealogical Sourcebook*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1995. [The most complete guide for Indian research; coverage of some sources, such as church and missionary records, is minimal. Despite its shortcomings, this book is recommended.]
32. *The Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States*. 3 vols. Washington, DC: NARA, 1996. [BIA records are in RG75 but other record groups also pertain to Native Americans. The guide is now online and updated at www.archives.gov. View it at a library first to be more comfortable with how it is arranged.]
33. Hill, Edward E. *Guide to Records in the National Archives of the United States Relating to American Indians*. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Service, 1981. [Discussion of record availability by record group, by topic and by tribe or area.]
34. Hill, Edward E. *Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs*. P.I. Number 163. 2 vols. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Service, 1965. [Describes records from RG 75, BIA. Both volumes are found online and one location is HathiTrust.org.]
35. Johnson, Steven L. *Guide to American Indian Documents in the Congressional Serial Sets. 1817-1899*. New York: Clearwater Publishing, 1977.
36. Lennon, Rachal Mills. *Tracing Ancestors Among the Five Civilized Tribes: Southeastern Indians Prior to Removal*. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2002.
37. Prucha, Francis Paul. *The Churches and the Indian Schools 1888-1912*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979. [Good background reading, and the sources which follow are excellent guides to further research. Prucha has authored other books on NA subject..]
38. Rafert, Stewart. "American-Indian Genealogical Research in the Midwest: Resources and Perspectives." *National Genealogical Society Quarterly* 76 (September 1988): 212-224. [Good overview. Midwest refers to OH, IN, IL, MI, and WI, but the focus is directed more to Ohio. However, the discussion is helpful for all Indian research.]