

# He Had a Brother Who Disappeared: Finding John H. Hickey, Formerly of Rockton, Winnebago County, Illinois

Presented by Debbie Mieszala, CG®

[Debbie@AdvancingGenealogist.com](mailto:Debbie@AdvancingGenealogist.com)

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*Correlated indirect evidence items established a missing man's fate. A patchwork of records from multiple locations allowed a glimpse into the life of a person thought dead.*

## THE MISSING: RESEARCH STRATEGIES

People in family lore who disappeared went *somewhere*. Genealogists who seek them may feel stuck, but with planning, diligence, and a dose of luck, often enjoy success. Modern access to records and repositories online and offline allows the identification of evidence that generations before missed or were unable to access.

People who wanted their identities to remain hidden are a challenge. They might have altered facts after they walked away. Names were changed. A “missing” person may have avoided discussing their past or their family members. Some celebrated new birthdays and boasted fabricated backgrounds. Others quietly slipped away into an anonymity modern life no longer offers. Former identities are sometimes revealed when descendants take DNA tests and analyze the results.

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Every missing person starts with a unique story and profile. Their old profile might evolve after they vanish. A search strategy that works for one case might falter for another. A basic research strategy provides a beginning framework.

- Gather facts about the sought person. Include dates, events, and locations.
- Identify and investigate family members and associates in the person's early life, and suspected associates after they started a new life. An associate's records might contain information about the sought party.
- Organize known information in multiple ways for better analysis of every fact and association. Timelines reveal chronology gaps and are helpful when comparing people with similar names or profiles. Mind maps link multiple connection types. Tables and spreadsheets hold data and allow sorting and comparisons. Write source-cited summaries on the problem, its background, research conducted, and findings. The writing process reveals research holes, evidence conflicts, and assumption issues.
- Make a research plan but keep an open mind. The missing person may have tried to cover their tracks. Not everyone followed rules or laws.
- Formulate hypotheses on items like where, when, and why the person lost contact or removed themselves from a home setting. Don't get attached to these ideas, because the next step is to prove or disprove them. Some questions, like why, can't always be answered.
- Revisit known locations from a person's life. They might have returned and left records.
- Learn about places and the records unique to them. Check maps for every location.
- Research relevant trades and employers.
- Periodically pause to review and evaluate completed work for patterns, conflicts, and omissions.

- Use indexes to find records. Do not misinterpret indexes or rely on their data.

People who walked away felt their reasons were valid. Those left behind might not have agreed. Only part of a “disappearing person” story might have been shared.

Be mindful with found information of a sensitive nature. Revelations can be painful to those left behind.

## LAND

If you find your ancestor’s land entry file, check the land entry files of their witnesses. Your ancestor may have served as a witness for them. A pool of witness names was published in legal notices when a person prepared to submit final proof. Not all were questioned, but if your ancestor is a potential witness in a legal notice, check the related file. Dates and data on indexes and tract books can be misunderstood, so view the land entry file. Don’t ignore cash sales.

The case study used several land records and resources. Related resources follow.

### Ancestry

- “Denver Land Office Records, 1862–1908.” <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3313/>
- “U.S., Homestead Records, 1863–1908.” Dropdown includes AK, AZ, IL, IN, IA, NE, NV, OH, UT, WY. <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60593/>

### Bureau of Land Management

- “General Land Office Records,” online database and images, *Bureau of Land Management*. <https://gloreCORDS.blm.gov/>

### FamilySearch

- “United States Bureau of Land Management Tract Books, 1800–c. 1955.” 3,907 tract books arranged by state then township and range.
  - Catalog page: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2074276>
  - Collection search page: <https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/2074276>

- *Wiki*. “United States Bureau of Land Management Tract Books – FamilySearch Historical Records.” Background on tract books.  
[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United States Bureau of Land Management Tract Books - FamilySearch Historical Records](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Bureau_of_Land_Management_Tract_Books_-_FamilySearch_Historical_Records)
- *Wiki*. “United States Bureau of Land Management Tract Books – Inventory.” Guides you to the correct tract book using section, township, and range.  
[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United States Bureau of Land Management Tract Books - Inventory](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Bureau_of_Land_Management_Tract_Books_-_Inventory)

### Fold3

- “U.S., Homestead Records (NE), 1863–1908.” “Land entry case files and homestead final certificates.” Nebraska.  
<https://www.fold3.com/publication/650/us-homestead-records-ne-18631908>

### Google

- *Google Maps* <https://www.google.com/maps>
- *Google MyMaps*. Create your own map. <https://www.google.com/maps/d/>

### Miscellaneous

- Kathryn R. Goetz, “Timber Culture Act,” online article, 2013, *MNOpedia*.  
<https://www.mnopedia.org/thing/timber-culture-act-1873>

### National Archives

- History Hub. “Common Terms used by the General Land Office.”  
<https://historyhub.history.gov/land-records/b/land-records-blog/posts/common-terms-used-by-the-general-land-office>
- *The Homestead Act: Land Records of Your Ancestors*. Slides from 2019 presentation by James Muhn. <https://www.archives.gov/files/calendar/genealogy-fair/6-muhn-presentation.pdf>

### National Park Service

- *National Park Service*. Homestead National Historical Park, Nebraska.”  
<https://www.nps.gov/home/index.htm>

## LAWS

- *The Advancing Genealogist*. “Law Library Index.” Links to historic statutes, case law, and related items. <https://advancinggenealogist.com/laws-and-statutes-index/>
- United States Congress, *United States Statutes at Large*, Vol. 12 (1861–1863), (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1863), 392, “An Act to secure Homesteads to actual Settlers on the Public Domain,” passed 20 May 1862 (12 Stat. 392). <https://www.loc.gov/item/lsl-v12/>
- United States Congress, *United States Statutes at Large*, Vol. 17, Ch. 278 (Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown, and Company, 1873), 605, “An Act to Encourage the Growth of Timber of western Prairies,” passed 3 March 1873. <https://www.loc.gov/item/lsl-v17/>
- United States Congress, *United States Statutes at Large*, Vol. 18 (1873–1875), Ch. 55 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1875), 21, “An act to amend the act entitled ‘An act to encourage the growth of timber of western prairies,’” passed 13 March 1874. <https://www.loc.gov/item/lsl-v18/>

## MISCELLANEOUS

- *Cyndi’s List of Genealogy Sites on the Internet*. <https://www.cyndislist.com/>
- “Google Patents,” index and digital images. <https://patents.google.com/>

## SUGGESTED READING

- Kenneth Hawkins, compiler. *Research in the Land Entry Files of the General Land Office, Record Group 49* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, rev. 2009). Free PDF booklet. <https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/ref-info-papers/rip114.pdf>
- E. Wade Hone. *Land and Property Research in the United States* (Salt Lake City, UT: Ancestry, 1997).
- Robert M. Kvasnicka, compiler. *The Trans-Mississippi West, 1804–1912, Part IV: A Guide to the Records of the Department of the Interior for the Territorial Period. Section 3: Records of the General Land Office* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 2007). Digitized book. *Internet Archive*. <https://archive.org/details/transmississippi43kvas/page/n3/mode/2up>