

Step 12: Land Records  
— Terry and Jim Willard

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the twelfth in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step."* <http://ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2082.asp>

In doing genealogy, it is only a matter of time before researchers run into a brick wall. That is, they trace a family line as far as possible until discovering an individual or couple who seem to be without documentation.

Interestingly, land records have provided genealogists with a solution to climbing over the brick wall. Land records are plentiful, accessible, easy to use, informative, and interesting.

While on a walk in beautiful Madison, Wisconsin, we found ourselves in front of a cabin and a small historical marker that denoted the building as the Peck cabin—built by Ebenezer Peck and his wife Rosaline—Madison's first residence, business, and post office. We wondered what genealogical data could be discovered about the Pecks by using only land records as sources of information. After all, any experience we might have in gathering information would be similar to that of a novice doing a comparable search on a family member.

We decided to take on the challenge. Because the Pecks were entirely new to us, we felt like beginners, and we were forced to approach the task the way a beginner would. The steps we used in our land records research will help any beginner overcome that formidable brick wall.

#### Step One

Most important, researchers must identify the individual. As in using other records, the more information you know about the person, the greater the likelihood of success. Remember to gather as much information as possible. Full names, approximate ages, names of family members, or any other relevant data can prove useful. Write down all available clues and have them ready. From the historical marker, we knew the couple's names.

#### Step Two

Determine where the individual may have owned land (in town, in the county, even in the state). If you are uncertain where your ancestor lived, use census records to determine the information. (See "[Step 8: Census Records](#)" in the March/April 2000 issue of *Ancestry Magazine* to get started.) As with family names, the more information you can gather on the place, the better. In our example, we knew the family name was Peck, and we knew they were early settlers of Madison, Wisconsin.

#### Step Three

Determine what types of land records exist for that locality and where you might find them. We went to the Wisconsin State Historical Society Library armed with our notes and the Peck pedigree chart. Our goal was to find a good general reference book that would give us information on how land records were organized for Wisconsin. The librarian directed us to the land records section of [Ancestry's Red Book: American State, County & Town Sources](#), edited by

Alice Eichholz, Ph.D., C.G., (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, revised edition, 1992.) This resource is available for purchase online at Ancestry.com, at any major bookstore, or in a good research library.

From *Ancestry's Red Book*, we learned that most land records in the United States are kept at the county level, with four exceptions. Louisiana's land records are kept at the parish or county level of government, and Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Vermont have land records at the town level.

We also learned that land transactions (after initial ownership) were recorded at the county's register of deeds. Since Wisconsin is a public land state, the land was originally claimed by the federal government. Therefore, if the Pecks were the initial purchasers of the property, the first transaction would be between the federal government and the Pecks. We needed to do further research to determine if this was the case.

Again, the librarian came to our assistance. We learned from her that Madison was in Dane County. She then gave us a fact sheet entitled "Wisconsin Land Records," which informed us of the Wisconsin Land Records Index Project. The project has attempted to index the names of owners of land from the late 1830s to 1910—the time period we were seeking. The first source used in this project was the United States General Land Office local tract books, which recorded the sale of land by the federal government to its original owner. As luck would have it, the Index Project was on microfilm at the library.

#### Step Four

Use the records. We cranked the microfilm reader through the alphabetical entries until we reached the Ps, then we turned slowly until we reached Peck. We found no entry. More than likely, the Pecks had not purchased their land from the federal government.

The assistant at the desk told us that land records after the initial sale were located at the Office of the Register of Deeds (something we had also learned from the *Red Book*). Before we could ask for directions, however, he told us to check first in the archives, located in another part of the library. Basically, we were repeating step three—locating the appropriate records.

In the archives we learned that Wisconsin land records from 1839 to 1916 were fully indexed and available on microfilm. Further, the microfilm was available in the archives—saving us a trip to the Office of the Register of Deeds.

The genealogist in the archives also explained that there were two indexes: one alphabetical by the last name of the grantor (seller), and one alphabetical by the last name of the grantee (buyer). She also told us that these indexes were similar to those of most states in the United States. Each county in every state (with the exception of the four states mentioned earlier) has a grantor or grantee index. The four exceptions have these indexes as well, but they are located in the office appropriate to the locality. Virtually any person who owned land in the United States could be located in one of these indexes.

We took the roll of microfilm labeled *Grantee Index, Dane County Register of Deeds, 1839—1916, Vol. 3* to the microfilm reader. In no time we located the last name Peck, first name Ebenezer, and learned of a transaction between the Pecks and a James Doty in 1839—just what we were looking for. The index referred us to another roll of film on which we would find the actual entry for the transaction. Once again we loaded film, and this time we found the entry detailing the sale.

#### Step Five

Evaluate the data. As you read the land record entry, remember that it is not the original record, but a copy of the original. The original deed would have been in the possession of the purchasers of the property. Also, remember that handwriting can present some problems. If you have difficulty reading the entry, scan some of the other entries that appear before and after it to see if you can better read the writing. In this example, the land record reinforced what we already knew, and we learned where Ebenezer and Rosaline Peck were from prior to purchasing land in Madison. The trail was no longer cold. We now had a new lead that would prove invaluable for future research on the Pecks.

With luck, you will be able to locate the following facts about the people at your brick wall from a typical land record:

1. An accurate date and place. A deed is a legal document that puts your ancestors in one place at a clearly defined point in time. As you reconstruct their lives, this adds to your knowledge about them.
2. The name of the individual or individuals purchasing the land. In those cases where your research has led you to the man's name but not his wife's, the land record may be the only way you will learn her name. Unfortunately, you will probably not learn her maiden name.
3. Where the couple or individual was living when the purchase occurred. On more recent land transactions, you may learn the actual street address.

At the beginning of this article, we indicated that land records were plentiful, accessible, easy to use, informative, and interesting. Let us review these features.

**Plentiful.** In 1850, 90 percent of free males in the United States owned land, making land records one of the most plentiful sources of genealogical information. Even today, land ownership represents about half of the U.S. population. See E. Wade Hone's book, [\*Land and Property Research in the United States\*](#) (Ancestry, 1997) for more details on land records in the United States.

**Accessible.** Every county, parish, or town responsible for keeping land records makes the records available for research. In addition, the Internet is becoming an excellent source of land records. Web sites such as [Cyndi's List](#), [RootsWeb](#), and the [Bureau of Land Management](#) provide links to land records. The real beauty of online land records is that they are searchable by name. In some

cases, as with the BLM Web site, you can download a copy of the actual document. In the future, land records will only become more accessible.

**Easy to Use.** In virtually every case, land records are indexed (grantor index or grantee index). This feature sets land records apart from many other sources of information.

**Informative.** The data researchers gather from land records can be the breakthrough in the brick wall barrier. It is important to now go beyond the brick wall. Examine who may have owned property adjacent to your ancestors, since adjacent property owners were often somehow related. The names of these people can serve as valuable clues in solving your own relationship puzzles.

**Interesting.** Few experiences in genealogy can compare with learning exactly where your ancestors lived. If you ever have the chance to visit one of your ancestral homes, be prepared, and enjoy the opportunity of visiting the home and learning the many interesting things that will undoubtedly be discovered.

Remember that genealogy is about who, what, where, and when. Any of this information can lead to another generation, and land records are often the only source of where somebody was living.

At first glance, finding a single piece of information may not seem very exciting; however, that information may prove to be the link that will lead you to the next critical piece of the puzzle. Land records are a key source in finding that single piece of valuable data.