

Colorado State Research Guide

Family History Sources in the Centennial State



Colorado History

Colorado fell under several governmental jurisdictions during its developmental history, being for a time part of the territories of Spain, Missouri, Mexico, Utah, the United States, New Mexico, unorganized Native American land, and finally Nebraska and Kansas. Non-federal records, however, exist only for the domains of Utah, New Mexico, Kansas, and Nebraska territories. The territory of Colorado, with its seventeen counties, was formed in 1861. Sixteen years later, on 1 August 1876, it was admitted as the thirty-eighth state in the Union.



The Musquito Trail, Rocky Mountains of Colorado. L. Prang & Co., American Chromolithographs, 1870. (Library of Congress Photo Collection, 1850-2000)

Bent's Fort, built in 1833 and now a national historic site near La Junta, established an extensive trading system between Native Americans and fur trappers, but the San Luis Valley was the site of the first permanent nonnative settlement in what became Colorado, with the town of San Luis being founded in 1851. One year later, Fort Massachusetts, later replaced by Fort Garland, was erected on the Ute Creek to protect travelers on the Santa Fe Trail. At that time most pioneers were not settling in Colorado, but rather moving through to California and Oregon.

Mining accounted for the first extensive settlement around what is now Denver. Reports of gold began in the spring of 1858 and brought many newcomers to the area. Later that year the "Pike's Peak or Bust" gold rush began, and in 1859 a "Second Stampede" brought additional thousands searching for gold, including both settlers and speculators. Within only a few years, however, the population began to shift from speculator to settler. The 1860 territorial census of Colorado counted 32,654 white males and 1,577 white females, but by May 1861 the census taken by Territorial Governor William Gilpin counted 20,798 males and 4,484 females. Clearly, as the men were moving on to other ventures, the type of people coming to Colorado began to change.

Early native tribes in Colorado included the Ute, the Apache, and "the wandering tribes" of Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Sioux. On 18 February 1861, the Cheyenne and Arapaho negotiated a treaty at Fort Wise, Kansas, in which they ceded all lands in the Pike's Peak region to the United States. A treaty with the Ute followed in 1864, ceding all Ute land east of the Continental Divide. Despite the treaties, the period from 1861 to 1864 was a time of enormous tension between natives and the settlers. Before the Sand Creek massacre in November 1864 there were numerous raids and killings. By 1881 the Ute Indians completed moving from the western part of the state into Utah, and large sections of Colorado became open for settlement.

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During the Civil War, over 8,000 men served in Colorado units. Many Northerners living in Colorado returned to their prior residences in other states to help fight for the Union cause, while some settlers remained in their new domicile. Colorado participated in a major battle in the Civil War that occurred in March 1862 when Governor Gilpin organized one of three Colorado companies to stop the Confederate attempt to block the western supply of gold to the eastern states. Forces clashed at Glorieta Pass, New Mexico, and the Confederates retreated.

After the Civil War, the population of Colorado began to expand primarily through the development of railroads. The first "Iron Horse" arrived in Denver on 24 June 1870. The researcher with early Colorado ancestors should therefore watch for migration during the 1870s and follow the growth of the railroads. A promotional organization, the Colorado Board of Immigration, was created in 1872, and the population of Colorado tripled between 1870 and 1875. Unfortunately, this decade also brought grasshoppers and economic depression, forcing many settlers to return to the East or go farther west. Throughout these difficult times, mining and agriculture remained the two important industries.

Most migration to Colorado came from a block of states extending from New York and Pennsylvania on the east to Kansas and Nebraska on the west. In 1860 the greatest number of immigrants to Colorado came from Ohio, followed by Illinois, New York, Missouri, and Indiana. The population explosion after the Civil War brought native-born Americans primarily from the states of Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa. The population of Colorado also included a large number of foreign-born immigrants including Czechs, Slovaks, Irish, Germans, Russians, Canadians, Swedish, Scots, Italians, and Chinese. By 1880, one-fifth of the population of Colorado was foreign-born and the state had three official languages: English, Spanish, and German. In the 1890s more Germans arrived, an ethnic group that continues to dominate in eastern Colorado today.

This section is from *History of Colorado* in the Ancestry.com Wiki, and was originally published in *Red Book: American State, County and Town Sources*, ed. by Alice Eichholz, CG, Ph.D., chapter by Birdie Monk Holsclaw, and Marsha Hoffman Rising CG, FUGA, FASG.



The Grand Valley, Grand Junction, Colorado, 1908. From [U.S. Panoramic Photos, 1851-1991](#)

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Colorado Census Records

Federal census records for Colorado began in 1870, and were taken every ten years. Territorial and State censuses: The area which would later become Colorado was included in parts of several territorial censuses in 1860.

- Arapahoe County was included in the Kansas territorial census in 1860.
- Boulder City, Boulder Creek Settlement, Gold Hill Settlement, Miraville City, and the Platte River Settlement were enumerated with Nebraska Territory.
- Denver City was partly enumerated with Nebraska and partly with the Kansas territorial census.
- The southeast portion of Colorado (known as the Rio Grande Valley) was enumerated in parts of Taos and Mora counties of New Mexico Territory.
- Leadville, although a booming mining town at the time and located in what is now Lake County, was in Utah Territory and not enumerated.

A Colorado state census was taken in 1866, but the only available returns are for the northeastern section which included the counties of Logan, Morgan, Phillips, Sedgwick, Weld, and parts of Washington and Yuma. The records are available at the Colorado State Archives. In 1885, a more complete census of Colorado included population, mortality, agricultural, and manufacturing schedules. The population schedules are available on Ancestry.com as the [Colorado State Census, 1885](#). Other schedules can be found at the Colorado State Archives. Both state and county copies of this census exist, though for complete information, the researcher will need to use the original state copy. Related census records available on Ancestry.com:

- [Colorado State Census, 1885](#)
- [Navajo Springs, Colorado Ute Census, 1904-08](#)
- [U.S. Federal Census Mortality Schedules, 1850-1885 \(Includes Colorado for 1870, 1880, and 1885\)](#)
- [U.S. Enumeration District Maps and Descriptions, 1940](#)
- [U.S. Special Census on Deaf Family Marriages and Hearing Relatives, 1888-1895](#)

<i>Population</i>	
1860	34,277
1870	39,864
1880	194,827
1890	413,249
1900	539,700
1910	799,024
1920	939,629
1930	1,035,791
1940	1,123,296
1950	1,325,089
1960	1,753,947
1970	2,207,259
1980	2,889,964
1990	3,294,394
2000	4,301,262
2010	5,029,196

Colorado Vital Records

Statewide registration of births and deaths began in 1875, though compliance was intermittent. Statewide registration was successfully implemented in 1910 for births and 1900 for deaths. Most marriage records are still maintained by individual county clerks. Colorado vital records are restricted by law to those with a proven direct relationship or tangible interest. [Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Genealogy page](#) provides useful information on sources and ordering of vital records.

- [Colorado Vital Records](#): Holds records of births since 1910; deaths from 1900; marriages from 1900-1939 and 1975-present; and divorces 1851-1939 and 1968-present. For marriages from 1940 to 1974 or divorces from 1940-1967, contact the county where the license or decree of divorce was issued.
- [Colorado State Archives](#): Holds a microfiche index of approximately 3,000 Colorado births from 1863-1899, and an index of marriages and divorces from 1900-1939.
- [Western States marriage index \(BYU Idaho\) special collections](#): a searchable index to marriages in several western states, including Colorado. See the web site for specific counties and years included in the index.

State Vital Records on Ancestry.com

- [Web: Western States Marriage Index, 1809-2011, Free](#)
- [Colorado, Statewide Marriage Index, 1900-1939](#)
- [Colorado Marriages, 1859-1900](#)

Other Collections

- [Colorado Soldiers in WWI, 1917-18](#)
- [U.S., Indian Census Rolls, 1885-1940](#)
- [U.S., Women of the West, 1928](#)
- [Historic Towns of the Western States](#)
- [U.S. Map Collection, 1513-1990](#)
- [Encyclopedia of Biography of Colorado : History of Colorado](#)
- [U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989](#) (Use the browse box in the upper right corner to determine what directories are available for your ancestor's area. If they lived in a rural area, check to see if that area was included with a larger city in the vicinity.)

[View all Colorado collections on Ancestry.com](#)

Other State Resources

The organizations listed below provide information about Colorado history and genealogy. In addition to these state-level resources, many counties and towns maintain important genealogical collections in local libraries, genealogical societies, or historical societies, so check for a local resource when researching.

- [Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Genealogy page](#): provides useful information on sources and ordering of vital records.



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- [Colorado State Archives](#): The Archives maintains a research room for on-site visitors. Several important online and digital collections are available from their web site. A historical records index search contains a range of vital records, census entries, wills, tax records, and more. Many records are also available from their family history site which includes links to census, directory, veteran, penitentiary, and other records; and a digital archive which contains scanned records.
- [Colorado State Library](#)
- [History Colorado](#): The Stephen H. Hart library contains a range of [genealogy resources](#), including census, directory, newspaper, and biographical records.
- [Colorado Genealogical Society](#): Holds regular meetings, sponsors special events, and publishes *The Colorado Genealogist* journal. The web site includes a useful listing of Colorado internet genealogy resources.
- [Colorado GenWeb](#): Provides links to county-based genealogy web pages and research links.
- [RootsWeb Colorado Resources](#): Contains links to Colorado genealogy resources, including state and county-level websites; societies and organizations; and personal and miscellaneous web sites related to Colorado research.
- [Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection](#): An online search of a growing collection of digitized Colorado newspapers.
- [National Archives at Denver](#). This facility maintains records from Federal agencies and courts in Colorado, including census, military, court, naturalization, and immigration records.
- [Bureau of Land Management \(BLM\) General Land Office Records](#): The BLM administers Federal Land for public land states including Colorado, and maintains records of land patents which granted land from the Federal Government to individuals. Use the Land Patent Search to locate land grants by name. Many record images are available on the web site. See the FAQ for more information on how to locate and use land patents.

Local and Regional Research

- [Boulder Library – Carnegie Branch for Local History](#): Describes the available collections which cover local people and history.
- [Denver Public Library Western History and Genealogy Collection](#): An extensive list of [genealogy resources and research tools](#) includes links to sources of maps, obituaries, military information, newspapers, building history research, and more.

Help and Advice

- [Map of Colorado](#)
- [Colorado Family History Research](#)
- [Counties of Colorado](#)

Significant Dates (through 1930)

Native American tribes living in present-day Colorado throughout the years include the Anasazi, Apache, Arapaho, Bannock, Cheyenne, Comanche, Jicarilla, Kiowa, Navajo, Pueblo, Shoshone, and Ute tribes.

1500s – Spanish explorers arrived in what is now Colorado in search of gold. They enslaved Native Americans in the area and parts of Colorado fell under the territory of Santa Fe de Nuevo México.

1762 – Eastern parts of present-day Colorado fell under French rule as part of Louisiana.

1778 – Juan Bautista de Anza led 600 men in a battle against Comanches in Colorado, killing their leader, Chief Cuerno Verde. Following the battle, the Comanche agreed to a peace treaty with the Spanish.

1803 – The United States acquired most of present day Colorado via the Louisiana Purchase; all inhabitants other than Native Americans received full citizenship. The boundary that included Nuevo México was disputed with Spain until the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, through which the United States also purchased Florida from Spain. Northeastern Colorado remained an unorganized territory.

1805 – The Louisiana District became Louisiana Territory.

1806 – The area that would become Colorado was explored by Lt. Zebulon Pike and he discovered the mountaintop that would later bear his name – Pike's Peak.

1812 – Louisiana Territory became Missouri Territory.

1821 – With Missouri statehood, the portions of Colorado formerly in Missouri Territory were unorganized territory.

1830s – Parts of present-day Colorado fell in a disputed area claimed by both Texas and Mexico.

1848 – Following the Mexican-American War, Mexico ceded what is now known as the American Southwest and California to the United States through the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

1848 – John C. Fremont expedition set out to find a railroad route through the Rocky Mountains. The expedition failed and surviving members of the expedition were rescued in 1849.

1850 – Colorado is part of Utah, New Mexico, and unorganized Territories.

1854 – Colorado is part of Utah, New Mexico, Nebraska and Kansas Territories.

1858 – The Pike's Peak Gold Rush brought more than 50,000 settlers in search of gold to the region after a small placer was discovered near present-day Denver. Denver City was founded during the rush.

1859 – The Leavenworth and Pikes Peak Express Company made its first trip from Missouri to Denver.

1860 – The population of Colorado Territory was 34,277, of which only 1,586 were women.

1861 – Colorado Territory was formed and the city of Denver was incorporated.

1861 – The Civil War began. Colorado Territory sent 8,000 to serve the Union, although there were also pockets of Confederate sympathizers.

1864 – Camp Collins was re-established at Fort Collins present location after a previous outpost was flooded. It was established to protect Overland trail immigration and mail delivery.

1864 – A Colorado Territorial militia massacred an estimated 200 Cheyenne and Arapaho, mostly women, children, and the elderly in the Sand Creek Massacre.

1865 – In retaliation for the Sand Creek Massacre, Cheyenne and Arapahos attacked the Julesburg station on the Overland Trail.

1867 – The capital of Colorado Territory was moved from Golden to Denver.

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1868 – The Battle of Beecher Island, also called the Battle of Arikaree Fork, was fought near present-day Wray, Colorado, between the U.S. Army and bands of Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Sioux.

1873 – Immigrants Adolph Coors and Jacob Schueler opened their brewery in Golden, Colorado.

1874 – Women were allowed to devise a will.

1876 – Property held by women before and after marriage, and any earnings separate from her husband were considered part of her separate estate.

1876 – Colorado gained statehood with Denver named as its temporary capital.

1879 – The discovery of silver at Leadville led to a silver boom in the state of Colorado. Between the 1870 and 1880 censuses, the population of Colorado swelled by 387% and increased by another 112% by 1890.

1881 – Denver became the permanent capital of the state of Colorado.

1883 – Requirement began for county clerks to issue marriage licenses.

1890s-1930s – Grazing rights caused conflicts between sheep and cattle owners.

1893 – Women were granted complete suffrage in Colorado.

1896 – Much of Cripple Creek, Colorado, was destroyed in two fires that broke out within days of each other.

1900 – A New Year's fire burned thousands of acres in what would in 1915 become Rocky Mountain National Park.

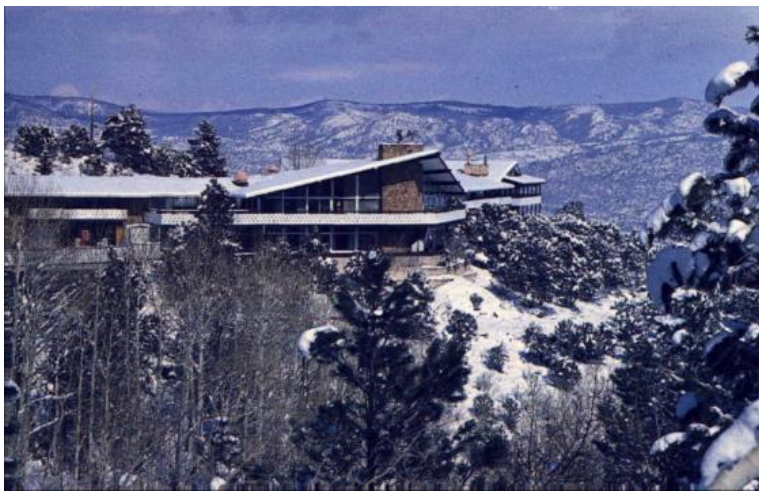
1913 – In September, a general strike of coal miners and coke oven workers was called in Ludlow, Colorado. Upon striking, miners were evicted from company housing and moved into tent colonies set up by unions.

1914 – In a confrontation with the militia at the Ludlow tent camp, dozens of miners and their families are killed, including eleven children and two women who in hiding from the gunfire had dug a pit under their tent. The tent was set on fire when the militia descended on the camp and destroyed it, killing the women and children.

1915 – Rocky Mountain National Park was created. Over the years it has been expanded and now encompasses 415 square miles of breathtaking landscapes.

1922 – A forest fire scorched mountain sides in the San Isabel forest near Pueblo, Colorado. Fires also broke out near Fort Collins and Penrose.

1927 - Six striking coal miners were killed and dozens more were injured when state police fired on them in the town of Serene, Colorado, in what was called the Columbine Mine Massacre.



[Trail West Lodge, Route 1, Buena Vista, Colorado, from U.S. Historical Postcards](#)