Delaware State Research Guide

Family History Sources in the First State

Delaware History

For such a small state (only Rhode Island is smaller), Delaware has an involved history. Henry Hudson discovered Delaware Bay in 1609, but the first attempted settlement was in 1631 by the Dutch, who were driven out by Native Americans. From 1638 to 1655 Delaware was controlled by the Swedes as part of New Sweden. The Dutch regained control for the next nine years, during which time some Finns settled there, as did more Dutch and some Mennonites. When New Netherland was taken over by the English, Delaware fell under the control of the Duke of York from 1664 to 1682, with the Dutch regaining control briefly in 1673 to 1674. By deeds executed in 1682, Delaware became the "Three Lower Counties" of Pennsylvania under a proprietary system. William Penn introduced the English tradition of "hundreds" as subdivisions of counties, and Delaware is the only place in the U.S. where the term is still used today, mostly as a geographical description in wills, deeds, and assessment records. Delaware remained a part of Pennsylvania until the Revolutionary War but had its own assembly from 1704.

While many English came directly to Delaware, others, including English Quakers, migrated from Pennsylvania and Maryland. For a long time a dispute existed between Delaware and Maryland over who controlled the areas of western Kent and western and southern Sussex counties. Consequently, very few Delaware records exist for this area before 1775.

Delaware experienced no major battles during the Revolutionary War, but the British did come through on their way to Philadelphia. It has been estimated that about half the population was Loyalist, although there was not as great an exodus from the colony as there was from New York and New Jersey. After the war, many soldiers headed south to Georgia, where they took advantage of attractive land grants.

The Dutch had imported some slaves to the area from Africa, but Maryland planters were responsible for bringing the largest number of African Americans to Delaware. By the time of the Civil War, however, the number of slaves had decreased substantially, mostly through manumission.

Delaware was also the destination of some French who arrived from the West Indies after the American Revolution, and others who came directly from France, including the famous du Pont family. The mid-nineteenth century saw further immigration of large numbers of Irish Catholics and Germans, and by the end of the century, Jews, Poles, and Italians had arrived, with smaller numbers of eastern Europeans and Scandinavians. Most of these people settled in the Wilmington area.

Calling itself the "First State," Delaware was the first of the former thirteen colonies to ratify the Constitution on 7 December 1787. From that time the state's development has been characterized as stable, conservative, and placid, except during the Civil War. Economically, Delaware was allied with the North, especially with its river trade and the coming of the railroads; but there was also strong sympathy with the South, particularly after the war.

This section is from _History of Delaware_ in the Ancestry.com Wiki, and was originally written by Roger D. Joslyn, CG, FUGA, FGBS, FASG and published in _Red Book: American State, County and Town Sources,_ edited by Alice Eichholz, Ph.D., CG.

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Significant Dates (through 1945)

1609 – Henry Hudson discovered the waterways that would be named Delaware River and Delaware Bay.

1609 – Samuel Argall, an English sea captain named river and bay after the Virginia Governor, Lord De La Warr.

1664 – The Dutch who controlled Delaware were driven out and the Delaware became an English Colony.

1682 – Delaware was given to William Penn to control; he made it part of the colony of Pennsylvania.

1701 – Delaware was given its own separate legislature and was known as the Three Lower Counties.

1776 – Delaware voted for independence from England and Three Lower Counties became Delaware State.

1777 – British troops marched across Delaware on their way to Pennsylvania; British later occupied Wilmington.

1787 – Delaware was the first state to ratify the U.S. Constitution.

1792 – State legislature established a public school fund.

1798 – Yellow fever epidemic in Wilmington.

1814 – In a turning point of the war of 1812, Thomas MacDonough of Delaware defeated the British at Lake Champlain.

1828 – A steamboat line between New Castle and Philadelphia was opened.

1838 – The Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Railroad was opened.

1847 – A law to abolish slavery in the state was defeated by one vote.

1855—State wide prohibition law was put into effect.

1857—Prohibition law was appealed.

1861-1865 – While only a few hundred Delaware natives enlisted in the Confederate Army, more than 12,000 joined the Union troops.

Library of Congress, "Mill on the Brandywine," pen and watercolor, John Rubens Smith, c. 1828

1863 – Although slaves in the Confederacy were freed by Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, because Delaware was still part of the Union, slaves in that state were not.

1865 – The 13th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was adopted, freeing slaves in Delaware.

1869 – First women's suffrage convention was held in Delaware.

1889 – Punishing of women at whipping post or pillory was prohibited by law.

1901 – 13th, 14th and 15th Constitutional Amendments were ratified by the state legislature.

1911 – 1924 – T. Coleman du Pont built a highway that ran the length of state and gave it to the State of Delaware.

1917 – 1918 – About 10,000 residents of the state served in World War I.

1935 – The first synthetic fiber was developed at the DuPont Experimental Station.

1939 – DuPont exhibited nylon stockings at the World Fair in both San Francisco and New York.

1941 -1945 – About 30,000 residents of the state served in World War II.

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Delaware Census Records

Delaware federal census are complete from the second federal census of 1800. The first census for 1790 was lost or destroyed, but a reconstruction compiled from tax and assessment records was compiled by former state archivist Leon de Valinger, Jr., and published by the National Genealogical Society as "Reconstructed 1790 Census of Delaware," NGS Special Publication No. 10, 2nd printing (Washington, DC: National Genealogical Society, 1962).

Some earlier enumerations have been constructed from tax records and other lists. These include Harold B. Hancock, ed., *The Reconstructed Delaware State Census of 1782* (Wilmington: Delaware Genealogical Society, 1983); and Ronald Vern Jackson, *Early Delaware Census Records 1665–1697* (Bountiful, Utah: Accelerated Indexing Systems, 1977). There are no available state censuses available for Delaware.

Related Censuses Collections on Ancestry

- U.S. Census Reconstructed Records, 1660-1820
- Delaware, Compiled Census and Census Substitutes Index, 1790-1890
- Selected African Americans in Delaware, 1890 U.S. Census

Delaware Vital Records

Though the Bureau of Vital Statistics was created in 1913, many records have been transferred to the State Archives in recent years. Records of the bureau after 1913 are restricted, and copies are only available to those with "a direct interest" or a need to establish personal or property rights. The city of Wilmington has had a registrar of vital statistics since 1881.

- Delaware Division of Public Health – Office of Vital Statistics: Holds records of births more recent than 72 years, and marriage and death records newer than 40 years.

- Delaware State Archives – Records Request page: The Archives holds birth certificates created since 1913 that are 72 years or older and death and marriage certificates 40 years old or older. See the Vital Records requests section for information on records searches.

State Vital Records on Ancestry.com

- Delaware Marriage Records, 1806-1933
- Delaware Death Records, 1811-1933
- Delaware Marriage Records, 1744-1912
- Delaware Birth Records, 1800-1908
- Web: Wilmington, Delaware, Catholic Diocese Cemeteries Index, 1876-2012 *Free*

Population	
1790	59,096
1800	64,273
1810	72,674
1820	72,749
1830	76,748
1840	78,085
1850	91,532
1860	112,216
1870	125,015
1880	146,608
1890	168,493
1900	184,735
1910	202,322
1920	223,003
1930	238,380
1940	266,505
1950	318,085
1960	446,292
1970	548,104
1980	594,338
1990	666,168
2000	783,600
2010	897,934

Other Collections

- U.S., Union Soldiers Compiled Service Records, 1861-1865
- Delaware Naturalization Records, 1796-1959 *Free*
- Delaware, Craftperson Files, 1600-1995
- Delaware, Land Records, 1677-1947
- Delaware, Wills and Administrations, 1683-1947
- 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.)
- U.S. School Yearbooks, 1880-2012

Help and Advice

- Delaware Family History Research
- Counties of Delaware
- Research in the Mid-Atlantic States

Other State Resources

The organizations listed below provide information about Delaware 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.

- Delaware Public Archives: See the Collections page for an overview of resources held at the Archives, including census, military, probate, and naturalization records.
- Delaware Historical Society: The Research Library in Wilmington contains family histories, surname files, and public records of interest to genealogists. A guide to researching Delaware Genealogy at the Historical Society is available on the website.
- Delaware Genealogical Society
- Delaware GenWeb: Lists links and contact information for local genealogical and historical societies, and includes links to county genealogy web sites.
- RootsWeb Delaware Resources: Contains links to Delaware genealogy resources, including state and county-level websites; societies and organizations; and personal and miscellaneous web sites related to Delaware research.
- Morris Library at the University of Delaware - Genealogy Resources
- National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) at Philadelphia: This NARA facility maintains records from Federal agencies and courts in Connecticut, including census, military, court, naturalization, and immigration records.
- Edward H. Nabb Research Center for Delmarva History & Culture

View all Delaware collections on Ancestry