Finding Your North Carolina Ancestors

A Beginner's Guide to Census, Land, Court, Church, and Military Records, Online and In Person

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FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

Chapter 1: Why North Carolina Is in So Many Family Trees

This free sample is Chapter 1 of the complete book.
Enjoy it — and happy hunting.

Chapter 1: Why North Carolina Is in So Many Family Trees

A crossroads and a launching pad If your family has roots anywhere in the South or the Midwest, there is a good chance at least one line runs through North Carolina. When the first federal census was taken in 1790, North Carolina was the third most populous state in the Union. By 1860 it had fallen to twelfth. The people did not vanish. They moved. By 1860, about 30 percent of everyone born in North Carolina, more than 400,000 people, was living in another state. They cleared farms in Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Indiana and Missouri. Two future presidents went with that tide: James K. Polk, born in Mecklenburg County, and Andrew Johnson, born in Raleigh, both made their careers in Tennessee. So North Carolina played two roles. For roughly a century, settlers poured in from Virginia, Pennsylvania, Scotland and the German states. For most of the next century, their children and grandchildren poured out again. That in-and-out pattern is the single most useful piece of history you can carry into your research. It explains why an Alabama or Indiana family tree often goes quiet around 1820: the earlier generations were living in North Carolina. It also explains why so many North Carolina families point backward to Pennsylvania or Virginia.

You do not need to memorize any of this. You need just enough of it to know which records your ancestor probably left, and where to look for them. This chapter covers who came, where they settled, when their descendants left, and the clues that tell you a family passed through. Settlement at a glance, 1650–1860 North Carolina filled up mostly between 1730 and the Revolution, and emptied out mostly between 1800 and 1860. Keep those two windows in mind; nearly every record strategy in this book depends on which side

When	What happened	Why it matters to your search
1650s–1660s	Virginians push south into the Albemarle Sound region; about 500 people live there by 1663	The colony's oldest families usually trace back to Virginia
1663–1729	Carolina is run by eight Lords Proprietors	Early land and court records survive mainly for the northeastern counties
1672	First Quaker worship services held in the Albemarle	Perquimans Quaker records begin in 1680, among the oldest family records in the state
1705–1722	Bath, New Bern and Edenton founded; Swiss and German Palatines settle New Bern	Coastal settlement follows the rivers and sounds
1729	The Crown takes over the colony; Lord Granville keeps his share of the land	Land in the northern half of the colony was granted through Granville's office, not the Crown's (Chapter 5)
ca. 1733	Wilmington founded on the Cape Fear River	The Cape Fear becomes the main entry route for Highland Scots
ca. 1735	Scots-Irish begin arriving in large numbers down the Great Wagon Road	Piedmont families often came from Pennsylvania, not straight from Europe
1739	About 350 Highland Scots from Argyllshire settle the upper Cape Fear	Start of the largest Highland Scots community in America
ca. 1748	Pennsylvania Germans follow the Scots-Irish south	German Lutheran and Reformed families settle Rowan and the counties around it
1751, 1754	Cane Creek and New Garden Quaker monthly meetings founded	Piedmont Quaker records start here
1753	Moravians settle Bethabara on the nearly 100,000-acre Wachovia tract	Some of the most detailed records in colonial America

When	What happened	Why it matters to your search
1780–1783	NC sets aside Middle Tennessee as bounty land for Continental Line veterans	Many NC veterans and land speculators end up in Tennessee
1789–1790	NC cedes Tennessee to the United States, keeping the right to honor its land warrants	Early Tennessee land titles start as NC grants
1790	First federal census: NC is the third most populous state	Peak of the inflow
ca. 1800	Quakers begin leaving for Ohio and Indiana	Quaker families can be traced meeting to meeting (Chapter 9)
1815–1850	After the War of 1812, wagon trains head west from the “Rip Van Winkle State”	The decades when most NC lines leave the state
1830	Settlement of the whole state essentially complete	Later arrivals are the exception, not the rule
1860	NC falls to twelfth in population; 30% of its native-born live elsewhere	Your “brick wall” in another state may be a North Carolina problem

The streams that met here North Carolina was settled by several distinct streams of people, and each left a different paper trail. Knowing which stream your family belonged to tells you which records to look for, and which direction to look next: back to Virginia, north to Pennsylvania, or across the ocean. Where they

Group	Arrived	Route in	Where they settled	Record tip
English from Virginia	1650s onward	Overland from the Jamestown area	Albemarle Sound, then south along the Pamlico, Neuse and Trent Rivers	The generation before is usually in Virginia
Swiss and German Palatines	1710	By sea	New Bern	A small, early group; start in Craven County
Highland Scots	1739 into the 1800s	By sea to Wilmington, then up the Cape Fear River	Upper Cape Fear: Cumberland, Bladen, Moore, Richmond, Robeson, Anson, Harnett, Hoke, Sampson, Scotland	Gaelic speakers, Presbyterian churches, many repeated surnames
Welsh	1730s	Up the Northeast Cape Fear River	Parts of Pender, Duplin and Sampson	A small group, easy to overlook
Scots-Irish (Ulster Scots)	From about 1735	Great Wagon Road from Pennsylvania	Piedmont, from the Haw and Eno Rivers west past the Yadkin	The parents' generation is often in Pennsylvania
Pennsylvania Germans	From about 1748	Great Wagon Road	Rowan, then Cabarrus, Stanly, Union, Mecklenburg, Lincoln, Davie, Davidson, Catawba, Burke	Early church books may be in German; spellings shift as names are anglicized
Moravians	1753	Great Wagon Road from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania	Wachovia, in today's Forsyth County	Exceptionally detailed church and community records
Quakers	1670s in the east; 1750s in the Piedmont	From Virginia, Pennsylvania, eastern NC and Nantucket	Perquimans and Pasquotank; later Cane Creek and New Garden (Guilford County)	Meeting minutes record births, marriages and moves

The Great Wagon Road The Piedmont, the rolling middle of the state that includes Charlotte, Greensboro and Winston-Salem, was filled mainly by people who came

down one road. It began at Philadelphia, ran through Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, crossed the Yadkin River at the Shallow Ford and continued south to Salisbury, eventually reaching Georgia. Virginians called it the Carolina Road, since that was where it led. If you have driven Interstate 81 through Virginia, you have roughly followed it; U.S. 220 carries the same corridor into North Carolina. The Scots-Irish came first. They were Presbyterian descendants of Lowland Scots who had moved to Ulster, in the north of Ireland, before crossing to Pennsylvania. Many who came south were not new immigrants at all, but the grown children of Pennsylvania families who could no longer find affordable land there by the 1730s. Pennsylvania Germans, mostly Lutheran and German Reformed, followed by the late 1740s. The two groups lived side by side but kept largely to their own churches and communities. Research tip: If a Piedmont ancestor seems to appear out of nowhere between 1750 and 1770, look for the previous generation in Pennsylvania first, then New Jersey, Maryland or Virginia.

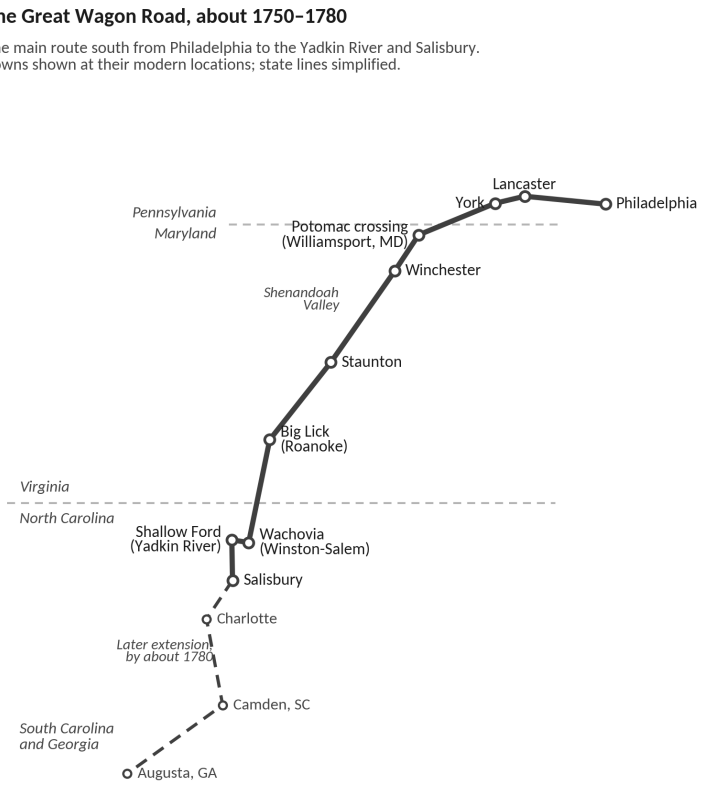


Figure 1.1 · The Great Wagon Road, simplified; drawn for this book from NCpedia and the Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia. Towns at modern locations, state lines approximate.

Highlanders on the Cape Fear Highland Scots usually came straight from Scotland, often in organized shiploads. The first organized group, about 350 people from Argyllshire, sailed into Wilmington and up the Cape Fear River in 1739, settling in what became Cumberland County. The defeat of the Highland clans at

Culloden in 1746, rising rents and changes in Highland farming pushed thousands more to follow before 1775. The area around Fayetteville became the largest Highland Scots settlement in America. Immigration stopped during the Revolution, then resumed within months of the war's end and continued well into the 1800s. Some Highlanders who sided with the Crown left for Canada or Britain after the war. Research tip: Expect the same handful of surnames, such as Campbell, McNeill and Stewart, repeated across many unrelated families, so separating people of the same name is the main challenge. In the colonial period, marriages performed by Presbyterian ministers were not recognized as legal, so a marriage may leave no fficial record at all. The

Moravians In 1753 the Moravians, a German-speaking Protestant church headquartered in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, began settling a tract of nearly 100,000 acres they named Wachovia, bought from Lord Granville. Within about a dozen years their first village, Bethabara, had grown into five communities, including Bethania and Salem, in what is now Forsyth County. For a century the church ran nearly every part of community life, and it wrote everything down. If your family was Moravian, or simply lived nearby and did business with Wachovia, you may find more about them than about almost any other colonial North Carolinians. Much of it has been published in the multivolume Records of the Moravians in North Carolina. The Quakers Quakers were the first organized church in the colony. The first Quaker worship services were held in the Albemarle in 1672, and Perquimans County meeting records begin in 1680. In the 1750s, Quaker families from Pennsylvania, Virginia and eastern North Carolina founded new Piedmont communities: Cane Creek in 1751 and New Garden, in today's Guilford County, in 1754. Nantucket whaling families joined New Garden from 1771.

Quakers also left in large numbers. Their opposition to slavery drew growing hostility, and from about 1800 whole families moved to the free states of Ohio and Indiana. Levi Cffin, later known for his Underground Railroad work, left New Garden for Wayne County, Indiana, in 1826. Research tip: Quaker monthly meetings recorded births, marriages and each family's move to a new meeting. That makes Quaker lines among the easiest to follow across state lines (Chapter 9). Ancestors who did not choose to come Enslaved Africans and African Americans were part of North Carolina from the beginning; some of the first Albemarle colonists brought enslaved people with them. On the eve of the Civil War, more than one in three North Carolinians was enslaved. African American families left the state too, but before 1865 most had no say in it: enslavers took them west or sold them to other states. If your family history points to Alabama, Mississippi or Tennessee before emancipation, North Carolina may be one generation further back. Chapter 11 shows how to find people who appear before 1865 only in other people's records. The first North Carolinians Native nations lived here long before any colonist. The founding of New Bern in 1710 helped spark the Tuscarora War of 1711–1713, the colony's first major war with its Native neighbors. Today's Native communities include the Eastern Band of Cherokee in the mountains and the Lumbee in Robeson County. Stories of Native ancestry are common in North Carolina families. Chapter 12 explains how to test them against tribal rolls and other records. Where they went By 1850, more than 283,000 free people born in North Carolina were living in other states, about a third of all the state's free natives. Tennessee took the most by far, followed by Georgia, Indiana, Alabama and Mississippi.

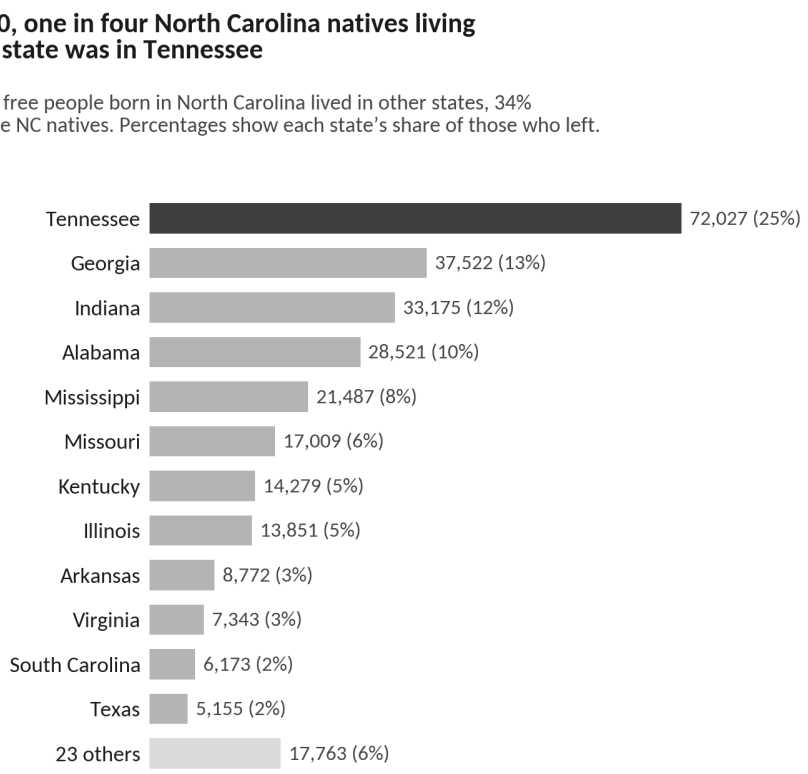


Figure 1.2 · 1850 U.S. census birthplace counts (free population), as tabulated by LEARN NC / ANCHOR, 35 states and territories.

These counts leave out enslaved people, whose birthplaces the 1850 census did not record. Thousands of enslaved North Carolinians were taken or sold to Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi in the same years. Most families did not move in one jump. A common path ran from North Carolina to Tennessee, then on to Missouri, Arkansas or Texas a generation later. A family "from Tennessee" in a Texas record may be just one stop away from North Carolina.

Destination	Main years	Who went, and why	Clue to look for
Tennessee	1780s–1830s	Revolutionary veterans holding NC bounty warrants, land speculators, and their neighbors	Early Tennessee land titles that begin as North Carolina grants or warrants
Georgia	1790s–1840s	Farmers after cheap land in western Georgia	Census birthplaces of older family members
Indiana and Ohio	1800–1850s	Quakers leaving a slave state, plus free Black families the Quakers helped resettle	Quaker certificates of removal from NC meetings
Alabama and Mississippi	1815–1840s	Planters and small farmers seeking cotton land, often bringing enslaved people	Deeds, wills and estate papers naming an NC county
Missouri, Illinois, Kentucky, Arkansas, Texas	1820s–1850s	Often a second or third move, after a stop in Tennessee or Kentucky	Children's birthplaces in the census that step west, state by state

Clue	Where you find it	What it tells you	Chapter
“N.C.” in the birthplace column for a parent or an older child	1850–1880 census; the 1880 census also lists each person's parents' birthplaces	The family was in North Carolina when that person was born	4
Children's birthplaces that change from N.C. to another state	The same census household, read oldest to youngest	The two births bracket the years the family moved	4
A Tennessee land title that starts with a North Carolina grant or military warrant	Tennessee land records; NC Secretary of State land grant files	The holder, or whoever sold him the warrant, had NC ties; a military warrant points to NC Continental Line service	5
A deed in which heirs “of the State of Tennessee” (or Georgia, or Indiana) sell a share of North Carolina land	NC county deed books	Names the heirs and where each one had moved	5, 6
A Revolutionary War pension application	Federal pension files, searchable free on FamilySearch	Applicants often stated where they were born and where they lived during the war	10
A Quaker certificate of removal from a North Carolina meeting	Quaker monthly meeting minutes	Gives the old meeting, the new one, and often the date of the move	9
The same neighbors next door in two states	Census pages before and after a move	Families often migrated in groups; a neighbor's better-documented origin can lead you to yours	5, 15

One clue is a lead. Two that agree make a working theory. Three are usually enough to justify the time to search North Carolina records county by county, which is exactly where Chapter 2 picks up. Try this: find your family's departure window This exercise takes about 30 minutes with a free FamilySearch account, and it gives you the one fact Chapter 2 needs: roughly when your family left, or arrived in, North Carolina. 1. Pick one ancestor who was alive in 1850 and lived anywhere in the South or Midwest. 2. Find the household in the 1850 census on FamilySearch. It was the first census to name every free person and list each one's birthplace. 3. Copy every birthplace in the household, oldest person to youngest. 4. Find the point where the children's birthplaces change from “N.C.” to another state. The two birth years on either side of that change bracket the move. 5. If no one was born in North Carolina, check the 1880 census for the youngest children. It lists where each person's father and mother were born. 6. Write down the surnames of the households just before and after yours on the same page. They may have moved with your family. 7. Finish the sentence: “My family left North Carolina between ____ and ____.”

Keep that sentence. In Chapter 2 you will use it to work out which North Carolina county they lived in, because county lines kept changing, and the right county depends on the year.

Sources and further reading

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by Sir I. Ross — Book 1 in the Sir I. Ross State Genealogy Guides.

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