

[Getting Started in Deed Research](#)

[Dollarhide Columns](#), [Land & Property Records](#) on Jan.18, 2013

The following article was written by my good friend, William Dollarhide. Enjoy...



Dollarhide's Genealogy Rule No. 26: When in a courthouse miles from home, you will always find the breakthrough court record at 4:55pm on Friday afternoon.

This is my sixth Genealogy Blog article related to using land and property records. For anyone just starting out, this article should be the first one to read, not the last. The titles and links to the other five land articles are at the end.

Definitions:

A deed is a private document that records that the ownership of a parcel of land was transferred from one party to another. A deed certificate acts as the title to property in the possession of the buyer. A copy of the deed is recorded in the county or town wherein the land is located, even though the sale of land may have taken place somewhere else. There are several types of deeds such as Warranty Deeds, Trust Deeds, or Quit Claim Deeds, all of which may be used to transfer or relinquish a claim to property. Generally, an unrecorded deed is still a legal document, but it would be very difficult to transfer title to property without a recorded deed. Therefore, most deeds are recorded at a local courthouse where they become public records.

- The grantor is the party selling or relinquishing land.
- The grantee is the party buying or being granted land.
- The grantor/grantee index is a general alphabetized index to the names of buyers and sellers of land. In some counties it may be called the Direct (grantor) Index and Indirect (grantee) Index. Or, it may be called the Index to Real Estate Conveyances. The format of the index is virtually the same in all counties of the U.S.A. The Grantor/Grantee index is a valuable genealogical resource. Before 1850, for example, a Grantor/Grantee was a better list of the residents of a county than a heads-of-household census for the same county. This is based on the fact that over 90 per cent of all adult, white males owned land before 1850.

Where and how are deeds recorded?

Deeds are found at a county courthouse for 46 states (including Louisiana, where a county is called a parish). In three states the deeds are recorded at the town level (Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Vermont), and in Alaska (the only state with no counties), land exchanges are recorded at three judicial district courthouses (Juneau, Anchorage, and Fairbanks). In the District of Columbia, deeds are recorded at the office of the Registrar of Deeds. In all 51 jurisdictions, the information from deed certificates are copied into bound books. They are recorded as they

happen and all of the deed books are arranged chronologically, e.g., “Deed Book A or “Deed Book 1” are often the first bound volumes of recorded deeds in a series of books.

Accessing Deed Records

Research in county/town deed records requires that you have access to the grantor/grantee index and then access to the deed books which provide a written transcript of the land transactions. There are several books that list every county in the U.S., and the name of the office which maintains the land records. My favorite is the review of the county offices found under “Land Records” for every state in *The Red Book: American State, County & Town Sources*, edited by Alice Eichholz, Ph.D. C.G., (Salt Lake City, UT: Ancestry, Inc., 1992). The Red Book lists the name of the county office in charge of deeds; an address for the county seat/courthouse; as well as an address for each of the New England towns; the District of Columbia Register of Deeds; and the Alaska judicial districts.

Four ways you can conduct research in deed records

1. **Research at the courthouse.** The best way is to travel to the county courthouse and read the deed books yourself. The next best method is to try contacting a local genealogical society to see if there is a person who can visit the courthouse in your behalf. There may be a small fee or donation to the society, but this is an ideal way of locating another amateur genealogist to look up items for you in a courthouse. An address list of genealogical societies can be found in *The Genealogist's Address Book*, by Elizabeth Petty Bentley, (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc.).
2. **Research by mail.** A county's registrar of deed records may look in a deed index for you if your request is concise and to the point. Write to the keeper of deeds and ask for a check of the Grantee/Grantor Index for evidence of your ancestor's name during a period of about twenty years, enclosing a Self Address Stamped Envelope (SASE). The index will indicate the book and page number for a deed transcript with the exact citation. Write again and ask for copies of the deeds themselves, enclosing an appropriate fee.
3. **Research microfilm or digitized copies of the deeds.** The Family History Library has microfilmed deed records and indexes for over 1,500 counties in the U.S. Check the FHL's catalog at www.familysearch.org. Many deed indexes, as well as the records themselves are now being posted online at www.familysearch.org. If the indexes and records aren't yet posted online, they can be borrowed for a small fee and used at a local FamilySearch center. You could even catch a plane to Salt Lake City, and use the films at the Family History Library itself.
4. **Research at NetOnline.com** (www.netonline.com/public_records.htm). This site is a portal to find any county of the U.S. with real estate records online. Not all counties have these records online, but those that do can be found here from their list of all 3,146 U.S. counties. Depending on the state, the County Clerks, Assessors, Records, Auditors, etc., are the official repositories for recorded deeds, property tax assessments, and property histories. The modern versions of these documents now online are usually for records from about the 1970s or later, and are all excellent sources for a full name, full street address, city, state, zip code; and often, a phone number for any person involved in a real estate transaction. Once you have found a county online that has real estate records

available, you can access the website directly from NetrOnline.com, and since these type of documents are public records, there is never a fee to access the database. However, you may be charged a fee to make copies of records, which is no different than doing this research in person at a county courthouse.

A Check List for Deed Research

- A county must be first known. Since deeds are recorded at the county level, you must have at least a clue as to the county where your ancestor lived. The exceptions are land records in Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Vermont, where deeds are recorded at the Town level and you must know the name of the town. In Alaska, the deeds are recorded in the district courts at Fairbanks, Anchorage, or Juneau.
- Come prepared with census or tax lists to find the names of the neighbors of your ancestor. It helps to have the names of other people who you know lived near your ancestor. This is a way of confirming that you are in the right place, by looking for the other names in the same area. In some cases, reading the deeds for neighbors may turn up your ancestor's name as a witness, confirming you are in the right courthouse.
- Start with the grantee/grantor index. Write down the name, date, deed book, and page number for every deed indexed. If you are looking for a William Johnson and know that he had a brother, Thomas Johnson, it may be important to look for all siblings' deeds as well.
- In addition to your ancestor's full name, look for "et al" after the same surname in the index ("et al" is Latin for "and others") that may indicate a group of heirs. This was used as a short-cut for a clerk writing a deed index entry in which there were more than one name for the grantors or grantees, such as "Thomas Johnson, et al." If your ancestor's name was William Johnson, he may be mentioned in the deed transcript along with Thomas Johnson — but the index may only show "Thomas Johnson, et al."
- Read each deed. Note that each will usually give the place of residence for the grantor and the grantee — this is valuable information. Before 1900, deeds usually give the county or town of residence; but today you can find an exact street address for both the grantor and grantee, right down to the zip code.
- Locate the Probate Office at the same time that you are in a courthouse. You may come across a reference to a probate in a deed. The relationship between deeds and probates is that deeds to heirs may be recorded as a result of a probate judgment. In some cases, you may find a reference to a probate case file number in a deed transcript – which is a back-door index to the probate files.
- Locate the Civil Court office at the same time you are in a courthouse. Before 1850, the subject of over half of the lawsuits in America had something to do with land disputes. A deed transcript may give you a back-door index to a civil court case and may even give you a case file number.
- Get a USGS (7.5 series) Topographical map of the area or see if the County Engineer's office has detailed maps available. (See the [Find a Place, Find an Ancestor](#) article for details).

Finally, to get more information about using deed records in your genealogical pursuits, go to the Genealogy Blog archives for “[Dollarhide Columns](#)” and click on any of the following titles:

- [Dower Share, Dowery, and Dower Rights](#)
- [If He Owned Land, There's a Deed](#)
- [Tracing the Trails of Your Ancestors Using Deed Records](#)
- [Follow-up to Tracing the Trails of our Ancestors Using Deed Records](#)
- [Quit Claim Deeds and Deed Releases](#)

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