



Primary Sources in Genealogy Research

The Archives of Michigan exists to preserve and provide access to historical records created by state and local government offices. Although they were not created with genealogy research in mind, some of these records are certainly useful to genealogists.

Vital Records

The Archives of Michigan holds relatively few vital records. Researchers can view the following statewide vital records on microfilm in the Archives reading room.

- Index to birth records, 1867-1872
- Index to death records, 1867-1914
- Death records, 1867-1897
- Index to marriage records, 1867-1921, 1950-1969
- Marriage records, 1867-1925
- Index to divorce records, 1897-1969
- Divorce records, 1897-1923

The following statewide vital records are also available online at www.familysearch.org.

- Death records, 1867-1897
- Birth records, 1867-1902
- Marriage records, 1868-1925

Death records from 1897-1920 are available online at seekingmichigan.org.

Vital records created after the dates listed above are available at the Michigan Department of Community Health (517-335-8666) or the county where the birth, marriage, death, or divorce took place. Vital records created before 1867 may be available at the county clerk's office in the county where the birth, marriage, death, or divorce took place.

State Censuses

State census records contain information similar to what is contained in federal census records. When searching census records, it is important to know an individual's complete name, the county and township of residence, and an approximate date. The Archives has records from 1864, 1874, 1884, and 1894. Please note, however, that we do not have records for all counties from all of those years.

County Government Records

The Archives of Michigan holds records from many of Michigan's 83 counties. The type and extent of records varies by county and date, but researchers can get a good idea of our holdings for specific counties by searching our catalog at www.answercat.org. It is helpful to have specific years in mind when searching county records because they are not always indexed by name.

County Treasurer Records. Property tax records and tax assessment rolls can be useful when other types of land records are unavailable. Assessment and tax rolls include a list of taxable property and owners of that property. These records may indicate the name of owner or occupant; legal description of the land; number of acres in a parcel; value of personal estate; and amount of tax assessed for state, county, township, highway, and special purposes. Tax rolls are organized by county and township.

Probate Court Records. Some county probate court records are of value to genealogists. Estate files may contain the name of spouses, siblings, and children as well as information about the estate. Probate court records held at the Archives of Michigan are organized by county, and most were created prior to 1940.

Circuit Court Records. The Archives of Michigan holds circuit court records from many Michigan counties. Records include case files, court journals, and other miscellaneous record books of the court. Case files generally are the most useful. The extent and dates of records vary from county to county.

Naturalization Records

The Archives of Michigan holds naturalization records from most (though not all) of Michigan's 83 counties. Records created prior to 1906 contain little identifying information about the applicant—usually just an individual's name, country of origin, and date of application. Records created after October 1906 contain considerably more information about applicants than earlier records because the federal government began to require standardized forms with more detailed questions.

Researchers using naturalization records will find few early entries for women. From 1866 until the passage of the Married Woman's Act in 1922, citizenship was automatically given to the wife of any male citizen. Since then, women have been required to complete the naturalization process themselves.

Military Records

Michigan Volunteer Descriptive Rolls (Civil War, Spanish American War). The Descriptive Rolls of Michigan Units, 1838-1911, provide biographical information about individuals who served in the military. These records are organized by regiment and company. In order to search these records most effectively, researchers should know an individual's name and approximate dates of service. It is helpful, but not always necessary, to know the unit in which an individual served.

Grand Rapids Home for Veterans Records. The Grand Rapids Home for Veterans was established as the Michigan Soldiers' and Sailors' Home after the Civil War to care for honorably discharged veterans who were disabled and had inadequate means of financial support. In 1893, the facility opened to women residents (military nurses, veterans' wives, and veterans' mothers). The Archives has application files for individuals who lived in the Grand Rapids Home for Veterans. Researchers would need to know a resident's full name and approximate dates of residence to locate records.

Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) Records. The GAR was a fraternal organization for Union Civil War veterans. Post records include muster rolls that outline basic information about post members' military service. Researchers need to know an individual's name and the post to which he belonged in order to locate records.

Civil War Grave Registrations. The grave registration forms for Civil War veterans buried in Michigan were gathered by the Civil War Centennial Observance Commission. The registration forms offer name, enlistment and service records, places and dates of birth and death, name and location of cemetery, lot and grave number, and additional remarks. The records are organized by county, then alphabetically by soldiers' names.

World War I Census of Veterans. After the United States entered World War I, the Daughters of the American Revolution in Michigan established a Home Ties and War Records Committee whose purpose was to preserve materials documenting the contributions that the men of the state made during the war. When the war ended, the committee conducted a census of soldiers who had returned to Michigan. Records from this survey may give information about an individual's military service, family, and occupation and can be accessed using a comprehensive name index.

Bonus, Bounty, and Beneficiary Files. Starting in 1863, Michigan issued payments to soldiers who volunteered for military service in times of war. The Archives of Michigan has records related to bounty and bonus payments to Civil War and World War I veterans, beneficiary payments to families of World War II veterans who were killed in action, and bonus and beneficiary payments to Korean War veterans and families. These files records usually indicate a veteran's name and serial number and include a brief summary of his military service.

Land Records

Land Patents. The Archives of Michigan holds records that document the first transfer of property from the state to private owners. These records are referred to as land patents, and they indicate the date of the transaction, name of the purchaser, and legal description of the property. A computerized database of the records can be searched in the reading room. All sales of the land after the land patent was issued were recorded with county registers of deeds. (Register of Deeds records are not at the Archives.)

Rural Property Inventories. The Archives also has Rural Property Inventory cards for many (but not all) Michigan counties. The Rural Property Inventory project was conducted by the Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. The cards were created in an effort to put land surveyors and engineers back to work while also providing tax assessment information for state and local government agencies. The cards list the owners of property and may contain information on land use, descriptions of buildings, and diagrams of land parcels and structures.

Department of Corrections Records

The Archives of Michigan holds inmate records from Michigan State Prisons in Ionia, Marquette, and Jackson. An extensive card index covering the years ca. 1839-1983 exists for all three facilities. Index cards usually indicate a prisoner's name, length of sentence, dates of sentence, registration identification number, counties where crimes occurred, escape attempts, and parole or discharge dates. Additional records, including mugshots, *may* be available depending on the facility and the year a prisoner was sentenced.

Visiting or Contacting the Archives of Michigan

We look forward to helping you conduct genealogy research at the Archives of Michigan and encourage you to visit our reading room if you are able. We are open from 1:00 to 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday, and an archivist is always available to answer questions and help you locate records. If you're unable to visit us, we may be able to make copies of specific records through our fee-based records request service. If your question requires extensive research, we would be happy to provide you with a list of Lansing-area researchers you may be able to hire to assist you.

Please feel free to call or e-mail our reference staff at any time if you have questions. We can be reached at archives@michigan.gov or (517) 373-1481.

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