

County and Local Court Records at the Archives of Michigan

The Archives of Michigan holds court records from many of Michigan's 83 counties. Archives holdings will vary by county and time period, and the Archives collects primarily records from 1940 and earlier.

Step One: Determine the court in which a case was heard.

Most court proceedings took place in county or local level courts. Prior to 1940, *circuit courts* typically had three divisions—criminal, chancery, and law. Felony trials were conducted in the criminal division, divorce cases and cases related to equity or fairness were heard in the chancery division, and cases that could be resolved by common or statutory law were heard in the law division. (One exception to this is the felony cases tried in the Detroit Recorder's Court.) County *probate courts* dealt primarily with cases related to settlement of estates. *Justice courts* existed at the township level and were administered by justices of the peace. These courts heard cases where penalties or disputes were below a certain dollar amount. The Archives of Michigan has fewer justice court records than circuit court records.

Step Two: Determine if the Archives of Michigan holds the records.

The best way to determine whether the Archives holds records from the court you're researching is to use the ANSWER catalog (www.answercat.org). First, narrow your search to the Archives of Michigan by clicking the link on the home page. Use search terms such as “____ County Mich. Circuit Court,” or “____ County Mich. Probate Court,” or “____ County Justice of the Peace.” The catalog entry will list the types of records available and the dates available, along with a brief description. If the Archives of Michigan does not hold records from a specific court or time period, check with the court itself.

Step Three: Determine what specific records are available from a given court.

Once you have determined that the Archives holds court records that may be of interest, the next step is to figure out the specific types of records available. Record groups from courts may include full *case files*, *indexes*, *calendars* (lists of items filed in cases, usually arranged chronologically by case file number), *journals* (transcriptions of court activities, usually arranged by date of activity rather than case file number), *decree and order books*, and *common rule books and blotters* (records of daily court activities similar to journals). Inventories for these record groups are available in the Archives of Michigan reading room.

You can also contact the Archives if you would like to review an inventory before visiting. Reference staff can scan and e-mail copies of inventories.

Step Four: Find a case file number.

First, check to see whether the record group you're researching has an index. This is the easiest way to tie a name to a case file number. If an index is available, look up a case file number and proceed to step 5. If not, your next step would be to check court calendars. Since calendars are arranged by date, it helps to have at least a ballpark time frame to work with. (For example, you could work backward from a sentencing date to find a criminal case or work forward from a death date to find a probate case. Newspaper articles can also be helpful in finding a date range.) Some calendars have individual indexes in front. If a particular calendar does not have an index, you'll need to page through the volume or volumes until you find the case you need.

Step Five: Find a case file or other additional documentation.

Once you have a case file number, Archives staff can pull the file if it is in our holdings. If not, the court calendar should list which specific journal volumes or decree and order books contain records of motions, orders, etc. Journal volumes can help you piece together what happened in a case, but they won't give all of the information found in a case file. Journals can also come in handy if a judgment or order is missing from a case file. As a last resort, you could also page through journal volumes if you have date range but were unable to find a case file number.