

## Westward Migration and Genealogical Research in the United States

Migration is an important concept in the body of genealogical research. While our ancestors had fewer options for transportation than we enjoy today, they did not stay in the same place very long. In 1790, 97 percent of all Americans lived on the East Coast; by 1910, that number had dropped to 41 percent. Between 1841 and 1866 alone, and depending on what sources you examine, between 350,000 and 500,000 were estimated to have migrated westward. When the Northwest Territory became a possession of the United States following the American Revolution, the U.S. began a slow migration westward using territorial purchases to expand, ultimately, to the Pacific Ocean.

Free land was an incentive for military service from the Revolutionary War until about 1855, when Congress began rewarding bounty land warrants only for past service. But many soldiers who received the warrants sold them to others who were willing to relocate. The Homestead Act of 1862 gave 160 acres of land in the public domain to citizens and people who had filed an intention to become a citizen, provided they cultivate the land, build a home on the land, and live there for five years. Other land opportunities were also available, and many families headed for the frontier to fulfill their dreams.

When one talks about westward migration, care must be taken to be aware of the correct historical context of the term. One must possess knowledge of timelines dealing with United States history and westward expansion. For example, in colonial times, the concept of westward migration could mean anything from moving inland from the coast to the western parts of the New England Region, New York State or Pennsylvania. In the early 1800's westward expansion was to areas such as Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, etc. Later the definition expands westward into what we now define as the western states. Even if no one from your immediate family was ever thought to have left the East Coast, it's almost guaranteed that someone in your ancestral lines began the trek westward.

The study of migration patterns may shed light on many genealogical research mysteries. Migration is important because:

1. Most offspring of most immigrants eventually left the communities of original settlement in the east and headed westward.
2. Help extend family lines by:
  - a. Identifying common migration movements of various ethnic groups (they usually followed the same routes taken successfully by their predecessors)
  - b. Remembering people seldom traveled alone. They often followed groups made up of their own ethnic group, church group, neighbors, friends, etc.

There are many variables in genealogical research. However when it comes to the concept of migration, there are some absolutes that apply in over 90% of cases. This would apply both in the old country and later in both the United States and Canada. Some people refer to most migration as “chain migration” for reasons listed below.

1. People seldom traveled alone.

2. They tended to travel in groups with others such as:
  - a. Friends
  - b. Relatives
  - c. Neighbors
  - d. Members of the same church congregation
  - e. Other people from the same town or ethnic group
3. In most circumstances, they would follow the same paths and travel circumstances that were used by people of their same background, ethnic, group, town, etc.
4. The only time there were any deviations would be when circumstances occurred that were beyond their normal control. Examples of these types of circumstances often fell into one of the two categories listed below:
  - a. Single adult males with wanderlust or having the need to escape past criminal or family indiscretions
  - b. Topographical, weather, social, or political related factors that forced a deviation (even in these circumstances, they would try and follow the original plan as close as possible)

The following facts are important when studying migration patterns in America:

1. Migration tended to flow westward and southward.
2. Topographical factors such as mountains, rivers, and flat vs. hilly terrains, often impacted the routes and detours taken.
3. Boundary disputes between jurisdictions may have impacted routes depending on the severity of the dispute and legal fallout.
4. Families' relatives, friends, and neighbors often followed each other in a chain migration format.
5. Migrants tended to be from the lower middle class and below in social status.
6. Land was a major factor in American migration for two reasons:
  - a. Because the concept of crop rotation was unknown soil became depleted and farmers need to move on to new land to grow crops such as cotton and tobacco.
  - b. American labor system of indentured servitude and headrights.
  - c. The desire to own land was always a magnet to attract settlers to the frontier.
7. Before the advent of roads, migration routes tended to follow :
  - a. Waterways (rivers, lakes, bays, canals, streams)
    - (1) Methods of travel included:
      - (a) Canoe
      - (b) Flatboats
      - (c) Ferryboats
      - (d) Steamboats
      - (e) Schooners
    - b. Railroad routes
    - c. Old Indian paths
8. Westward Movement Highlights: The most common migration patterns used by our ancestors coming to the United States between 1790-1930 are listed below:

- a. Coastal regions to inland areas (Colonial and post-revolutionary eras)
  - b. Farms to cities beginning in the 1850's
  - c. Cities to the west beginning in the 1860's
9. Motivations: Our ancestors were motivated by a wide range of factors both positive and negative. Some professionals refer to these factors as a push-pull relationship. The most common factors are listed below.
- a. Positives
    - (1) Expectation of a better life
    - (2) Follow family and friends (was often the most important factor)
    - (3) Availability of land
    - (4) Seeking better farming land and jobs
    - (5) Better opportunities for offspring who were not the firstborn
    - (6) Thrill of adventure
    - (7) Gold
    - (8) Follow construction projects on such projects as canals, rivers, railroads, and clearing areas for settlement
    - (9) Homestead Acts (various throughout the 1800's).
      - (a) One prime example Prime examples would be German American farmers who moved westward across the continent in the mid-1800s.
      - (b) Many took advantage of the free public land offered by the Homestead Act of 1862.
      - (c) From Ohio to Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, and Iowa they planted corn, a crop seldom grown in Germany.
      - (d) A large number of Germans also took up dairy farming. The "dairy belt" included parts of upstate New York as well as Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota.
  - b. Negatives
    - (1) Crop failures due to exhausted soils (concept of crop rotation was unknown to most)
    - (2) Unhealthy climatic/health conditions (swamps, heat, cold, epidemics)
    - (3) Overcrowded conditions in urban areas
    - (4) Labor and employment issues and lack of opportunity
    - (5) Escape stale relationships, unwanted pregnancies
    - (6) Escape punishment due to criminal activity
    - (7) Escape retribution for war time service (Fought for the British in the American Revolution, War of 1812, and the South during the Civil War)
    - (8) Persecution (religious, political, ethnic)
10. Record Sources: There are a variety of sources which researchers may use to trace the migration of ancestors. Some of the most useful in terms of genealogical information are:
- a. Federal and state census schedules generated after 1850
  - b. Mortality schedules in federal and some state censuses (usually 1850-1880)

- c. Church records may show previous places of residence , or notations concerning the names and place of previous church memberships
  - d. Land records often have references to a previous place of residence or land records such as Bounty Land Grants influenced where ancestors often settled.
  - e. Gravestones often shed light on the place of birth, and may reference other highlights that could shed light on other places of residence and dates
  - f. Military service and pension records, regimental histories, combat narratives, bounty land grants, /pension records identify places of service, date and place of birth, family members in other areas, etc.
  - g. Family Bible records and other home sources
  - h. Published biographical works, compiled family histories and genealogies
  - i. Land/Court records
    - (1) Land Grants
    - (2) Patents
    - (3) Deeds
    - (4) Mortgages
    - (5) Plats
    - (6) Title Abstracts
    - (7) Tax records
    - (8) Probate packets, wills, administrations
    - (9) Police Complaints
    - (10) Court Proceedings/Legal Actions
    - (11) Voter registrations
  - j. Vital records
    - (1) Births
    - (2) Marriages
    - (3) Divorces
    - (4) Deaths
  - k. Local, town, county, and regional histories
  - l. Manuscript collections (may include unpublished compiled genealogies)
  - m. Newspapers (Obituaries, marriage/birth/death notices, local news and current events)
  - n. Naturalization records
  - o. Passports (since 1795)
  - p. Internet sources such as:
    - (1) Family Search
    - (2) Ancestry Library Edition
    - (3) Cyndislist
    - (4) Heritage Quest
    - (5) Footnote.com
11. Most Popular Migration Trails/Routes: Understanding migration trails in the localities where your ancestors resided may help to trace their migration to a previous place of residence. The routes taken by many ancestors fell into one of the following categories depending on the time period and place:

- a. Migration routes by land usually followed existing trails and roads. The following options listed below are broken down by region. This is a **sampling** of the most popular routes that were followed. The sources listed in the bibliography will contain sources for more detailed research, maps, and specifics for each entry.
- (1) Northeast of the Mississippi
    - (a) National Road that extended from Maryland, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, to Illinois. **Appx. 780 miles**
    - (b) Boston Post Road extended from the New England region into New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and into the Southern States. **Appx. 800 miles**
    - (c) Old Connecticut Path: From Boston west by southwest through Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York, has two ending points in Hartford and Albany. **290 miles**
    - (d) Iroquois or Mohawk Trail: West from Albany along the Mohawk River through Utica and Rome with a branch going through Fort Oswego to Lake Ontario. **190 miles**
    - (e) Forbes Road: Pennsylvania route stretched from Carlisle to the Forks of the Ohio River around present day Pittsburgh. **200 miles**
    - (f) Great Warrior's Trading Path: Through the Shenandoah Valley covering Virginia and Tennessee. **250 miles**
    - (g) Chicago Road: From Lake Michigan south by southwest through Peoria and Springfield, east of St. Louis to Kaskaskia on the Missouri River. **Appx. 350 miles**
  - (2) Migration Trails Southeast of the Mississippi
    - (a) Natchez-Lower Creeks Trail: East across lower Mississippi and lower Alabama to Montgomery. **380 miles**
    - (b) Natchez Trace (Chickasaw Trail): From Natchez, Mississippi north by northeast to Nashville, Tennessee. **380 miles**
    - (c) Jackson's Military Road: From Nashville south by southwest through Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and ending in Louisiana at Lake Ponchartrain. **445 miles**
    - (d) Federal Road: Began in Macon, Georgia and extended southwest ending in Natchez, Mississippi. **Appx. 380 miles**
    - (e) Great Indian path (also known as the Scioto Trail): Straight south from Sandusky Bay, on Lake Erie along the Scioto River to Portsmouth on the Ohio River. **220 miles**
  - (3) Migration Trails West of the Mississippi
    - (a) Royal Road (also known as El Camino Real): The 600 mile California Mission Trail that connected Alta's California 21 missions, 4 presidios, and several pueblos, stretching from Mission San Francisco Sonoma southward into Baja California.

- (b) Spanish Trail: This was a historical trade route which connected the northern New Mexico settlements near Santa Fe with those in the region surrounding the present site of Los Angeles. **Appx. 1,200 miles**
  - (c) Gila Trail: Gila Trail follows river. It comes up from Mexico along the San Pedro River, just west of Bisbee, Arizona, until the river's confluence with the Gila River, then follows that westward to Yuma, Arizona. A branch of the Gila Trail goes eastward along the Yuma River to the San Pedro River, then follows the San Francisco River to just over the state border into New Mexico, thence north to Zuni, New Mexico. **Appx. 1,500 miles**
  - (d) Old San Antonio Road: This trail is located in Texas and Louisiana. Parts of it were based on traditional Native American trails. Its Texas terminus was about 35 miles southeast of Eagle Pass at the Rio Grande in Maverick County, and its northern terminus was at Natchitoches, Louisiana. The road continued from Texas through to Mexico City. **Appx. 587 miles.**
  - (e) Oregon Trail: The trail opened the Pacific Northwest. The Oregon Trail was the overland emigrant trail for the Missouri River to the Columbia River country, Oregon Territory. Like all western trails it tended to follow rivers where possible. It followed the Missouri River from St. Louis to the Kansas River near Independence, Missouri, then that river to the Little Blue River where it joined the Platte River. It took the North Platte in western Nebraska to the present Casper, Wyoming, followed the Sweetwater River to South Pass, and then went southwest to Fort Bridger Wyoming. At this point the trail split with the Mormon Trail, which continued southwest to the Great Salt Lake, while the Oregon Trail went northwest to Fort Hall, near Pocatello, Idaho. Over the Blue Mountains in northeaster Oregon, then down the Columbia River to Willamette Valley, where the early settlers finished their journey. **Appx. 2,170 miles**
  - (f) Mormon Trail: The Mormon trail followed the North banks of the Platte and North Platte Rivers, unlike the Oregon Trail which followed the South banks. West of Fort Laramie, however, the two trails united and followed the same track until the Mormon Trail turned southwestward toward the Great Salt Lake. **Appx. 1,300 miles**
- b. Traveled along rivers, lakes, and canals, such as:
- (1) Erie Canal
    - (a) Considered the main artery to opening the west in the 1825 and beyond

- (b) Stretched from Albany to Buffalo
  - (c) Linked the Hudson River to Lake Erie
  - (d) The success of Lake Erie began the canal building era especially in the states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.
- (2) Hudson River
  - (3) Ohio River
  - (4) Mississippi River.
  - (5) Great Lakes-St. Lawrence
  - (6) Cumberland-Tennessee River Basins
- c. The establishment of railroads encouraged westward expansion on a greater scale than had ever been seen in previous decades. Railroads greatly enhanced the opportunities for settlers to migrate in a faster and safer manner. The arrival of the railroads brought an end to the canal building era boom after 1860. Some of the more common impacts caused by the advent of railroads included:
- (1) Traveling by wagon or river from say, St. Louis to Oregon took months. It could be done in a couple of days by rail.
  - (2) Railroads stimulated local economies in all sorts of ways - trains had to regularly take on more water, coal, mail and whatever freight was waiting for it at the station.
  - (3) At the more important stops, such as near a gold strike, hotels would spring up along with saloons, barbershops, brothels, etc.
  - (4) Railroads made it easier for settlers to move west, and railroad corporations vigorously promoted settlement in order to sell the land given them by the government.
  - (5) Railroads also helped industry develop in the West. Many new industries—mining and lumbering, for instance—relied on railroads to carry in equipment and materials that could never have been brought in otherwise.
  - (6) Western companies used the railroads to export the rich resources they found there. The railroads also made it easier to transport troops and war materials, and thereby accelerated the end of Native American independence.

### **Suggested Readings For Additional Detailed Research**

The materials listed below contain much more detailed information to supplement this study guide.

**Handybook For Genealogists: United States of America.** 10<sup>th</sup> Edition. Draper, UT: Everton Publishing, c2002. **Genealogy Reference 929.1 HAN**

Billington, Ray Allen and Martin Ridge. **Westward Expansion: A History of the Frontier.** New York, NY: Macmillan, c1974. **Genealogy Reference 973 BILL**

- Condon, George E. *Stars in the Water: The Story of the Erie Canal.* Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1974.
- Dollarhide, William. *Map Guide to American Migration Routes, 1735-1815.* Bountiful, UT: Heritage Quest, c1997. **Genealogy Reference 304.8 DOL**
- Eldridge, Carrie. *An Atlas of Appalachian Trails to the Ohio River.* Chesapeake, OH: Carrie Eldridge, c1998. **Genealogy Reference 975 ELD**
- *An Atlas of Northern Trails From New England.* Chesapeake, OH: Carrie Eldridge, c2000. **Genealogy Reference 974 ELD**
- Elliot, Wendy L. *United States Migration Patterns.* Bountiful, UT: American Genealogical Lending Library, c1987. **Genealogy Reference 304.8 ELL**
- Flanders, Stephen. A. *Atlas of American Migration.* New York, NY: Facts on File, c1998. **Adult Reference 304.809 FLA**
- Friedenberg, Daniel W. *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Land.* Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, c1992. **Genealogy Reference 333.3 FRI**
- Holbrook, Stewart H. *The Old Post Road: The Story of the Boston Post Road.* New York, NY: McGraw Hill, c1962. **Genealogy Reference 388.1 HOL**
- *The Yankee Exodus: An Account of Migration from New England.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968.
- Merk, Frederick. *History of the Westward Movement.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978.
- Michener, James A. *Centennial.* New York: NY: Random House, c1974.  
**Adult Fiction F MICHENER**
- \*\*\*NOTE: While this is a fictitious book, the content is based on historical fact and research.** James A. Michener spent three years researching and writing *Centennial*, his novel on the West. He was proud that he had consulted about three dozen narratives of emigrants who made the historic overland journey from St. Joseph, Missouri, to either Oregon or California. From those pioneer accounts, Michener learned about the rigors of travel along the Great Platte River Road. He also recommended that anyone seeking an understanding of that dramatic period of western expansion, 1812–66, study these fine old documents.
- Nash, Gary B. *Atlas of American History.* New York, NY: Facts on File, c1997.  
**Adult Non-Fiction 911.73 NAS.**

Oberly, James W. *60 Million Acres: American Veterans and the Public Lands.* Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, c1990. **Genealogy Reference 333.16 OBE**

Steckmesser, Kent L. *The Westward Movement: A Short History.* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969.

Unruh, John D., Jr. *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60.* Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1979.

Western Writers of America. *Water Trails West.* Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1978.

Wexler, Allan. *Atlas of Westward Expansion.* New York, NY: Facts on File, c1995. **Adult and Genealogy Reference 973 WEX**

Wexler, Sanford. *Westward Expansion: A Eyewitness History.* New York, NY: Facts on File, c1991. **Adult Non-Fiction 973 WEX**

**NOTE: This study guide is meant to serve as an overview or outline for patrons using the genealogy collection at Fort Myers-Lee County Library. The compiler emphasizes that the information contained in this study guide should not serve as a substitute for taking the time to read one of the books or articles cited in the bibliography, or attend lectures given by the subject specialists cited as authors.**

Compiled by Bryan L. Mulcahy, Reference Librarian, Fort Myers-Lee County Library, 2/24/2009