

Early Wisconsin Research

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While Wisconsin did not become a state until 1848, there were valuable records created before then. Most Wisconsin researchers are aware of the Territorial Censuses, but that's not all. In this brief survey, I offer some tips I've found helpful in researching the time before statehood.

Historical Background

In order to find any record you have to know a little history about the area in which you are conducting the search. You need to know what political or government entity the area was a part of at the time the person(s) you are researching was there. **You have to be in the right place at the right time.**

The first white people to visit the region that later became known as Wisconsin were explorers, fur traders, and missionaries. They tended to stay fairly close to the main water routes of the Great Lakes and the rivers, including the Fox, the Wisconsin and the Mississippi. Many of them intermarried with the natives in the area. Most of the records that were created for them were records of sacramental acts by Catholic Missionaries.

Lead miners began working the lead deposits in the southwestern part of the state around 1822. Most of the miners at first went south for the winter because of the harsh weather. Others dug caves where they spent the winter, according to tradition they were called Badgers.

Before 1848 Wisconsin came under the jurisdiction of a series of territories: from 1783 to 1800, the Northwest Territory; from 1800-1809, the Indiana Territory; 1809-1818, the Illinois Territory; and from 1818-1836, the Michigan Territory. In 1836 the Wisconsin Territory was formed with Madison as the capital. The first U.S. Censuses that included Wisconsin were the 1820 and 1830 for the Michigan Territory. The 1840 U.S. Census includes the Wisconsin Territory.

The formation of counties began while part of Michigan Territory, the earliest along the main waterways. Brown County on Lake Michigan with Green Bay as its main settlement and Crawford on the Mississippi River were both formed in 1818. Both are included in the 1820 and 1830 Federal Census for the Michigan Territory. They were followed by Iowa (formed 1829, and on the 1830 Michigan Territory Census), and Milwaukee in 1834.

Records available before Wisconsin became a state and where to find them.

To find out when a county was formed and from what county or territory, go to www.familysearch.org library catalog, place search. Enter the name of the county by itself i.e. "Crawford" when the list comes up click on "Wisconsin, Crawford" and at the top of the catalog list the date of formation and name(s) of the county or counties the territory was taken from are shown. Another good source is *Wisconsin: Its Counties, Townships and Villages* compiled by Wendy Uncapher and Linda Herrick (Janesville, WI: Origins, 1994) which also includes the full date of formation and the county seat. The records recorded in a county stayed with that county. When a new county was formed from part of another county that is when their records began.

Other early counties were:

Calumet formed in 1836 from Brown County

Dane formed in 1836 from Crawford, Iowa and Milwaukee Counties

Dodge formed in 1836 from Brown and Milwaukee Counties

Fond du Lac was formed in 1836 from Brown County

Grant was formed in 1837 from Iowa County

Green was formed in 1837 from Iowa County

Jefferson was formed in 1836 from Milwaukee County

Manitowoc was formed in 1836 from Brown County

Marquette was formed in 1836 from Brown County

Milwaukee was formed in 1834 from Brown County and Michigan Territory

Portage was formed in 1836 from Milwaukee County

Rock was formed in 1836 from Milwaukee County

Sauk was formed in 1840 from Crawford, Dane, and Portage Counties

Sheboygan was formed in 1836 from Brown County

St. Croix was formed in 1840 from Crawford County

Walworth was formed in 1836 from Milwaukee County

Washington was formed in 1836 from Brown and Milwaukee Counties

Winnebago was formed in 1840 from Brown, Calumet, Fond du Lac and Marquette Counties

Because of the dearth of records don't overlook any clue. Family association is very important. If you get stuck on your direct line researching the collateral lines may give you a clue, another piece for your puzzle. Church records especially baptismal records often identify sponsors. Often these sponsors are related to the child's family. Early marriages are often found only in church records or records of the local Justice of Peace. How many Justice of the Peace records are available, I couldn't say. Very few I would imagine. Another place to find clues is naturalization records, they usually at least give a date of arrival in the United States and the port such as New York, July 1842. The passenger lists can then be searched for that month and year and if this person gave the right information you may find the whole family arrived together. In most cases you will get a small clue from one source and another from another source and it is your job to analyze these clues to see if a pattern forms that fits your ancestor.

States differ in what sources are available, but most have early church records.

Remember the denomination may change depending on what is available in each location to which the family moves. Some of my Irish ancestors started out as Presbyterians in Ireland and Pennsylvania, then became Quakers in North Carolina, and later Methodists, Catholics and Episcopalians to name a few. I rely heavily on church records in early Wisconsin research. If you are able to find early newspapers in the area your ancestor lived they can be helpful especially if they are indexed. Some genealogical societies have indexed births, deaths, and marriages, in their counties. County histories are also very useful, unfortunately many are not indexed or only the biographies in the history are indexed. Using www.cyndislist.com or www.google.com you can link to libraries, genealogical societies, and/or historical societies in the area where you wish to do research to see what records are available. Don't forget cemetery, probate, and land records.

The Official Federal Land Patent Records Site

The new Bureau of Land Management (BLM), General Land Office (GLO) Records Automation web site (<http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov>) provides live access to Federal land conveyance records for the Public Land States. They also provide image access to more than two million Federal land title records for Eastern Public Land States, issued between 1820 and 190 documenting the initial transfer of land titles from the Federal government to individuals. It does not yet contain every Federal title record issued for the Public Land States.

Information on this site will allow the researcher to associate an individual (Patentee, Assignee, Warrantee, Widow, or Heir) with a specific location and time (Issue Date). Certified copies of land patents can be requested electronically or through the mail. Non-certified digital copies can be downloaded without fee. The site is easy to use and has a lot of useful background information

A couple Hints About the Earliest Counties

In addition to the extensive collections of the Wisconsin Historical Society at Madison, you may find the Brown County Library (<http://www.co.brown.wi.us/library/libinfo/genealogy.html>) collections very useful. The library holds a lot of records, including a complete collection of territorial censuses for Wisconsin (Michigan Territory for 1836 and 1838, Wisconsin Territory for the rest), and a 400 = volume set of French Canadian Records.

As the other original county, some early for Crawford County. Go to <http://www.rootsweb.com/~wicrawfo/> for a listing of early Crawford County records available there. They include transcriptions of the 1820 census of Prairie Du Chien, 1830 Census of Crawford County. For those who can travel to Prairie Du Chien there are some quite extensive family trees of early French settlers at the Fort Crawford Museum.

This brief review of some of the records that are available for those researching early Wisconsin (pre-Statehood) families has been provided in the hope of encouraging you not to give up. There may not be a lot of records out there, but there are probably more than you think. Does that include the ones you want? Well, you never know unless you look. Good luck!