

# THE FREE NARA GENEALOGY CHEAT SHEET

*Free Online Genealogy Resources at the National Archives*

A Quick Reference for Researchers at Every Skill Level





## HOW TO USE THIS CHEAT SHEET


Scan by category to find the records you need. Every resource is tagged with an access indicator so you know instantly whether you can view it from your couch or whether a trip (or workaround) is required.

All links go directly to free, official sources — primarily archives.gov. When NARA access is limited, check the "Alternative Free Sources" section for equivalent records you can pull up at no cost.

## ACCESS LEGEND

 **Online (Free)** Fully digitized & free to view from home.

 **Partial Online** Some records online; others in-person only.

 **In-Person Only** Must be requested or viewed at a NARA facility.

## BEFORE YOU PLAN AN IN-PERSON VISIT — READ THIS

Many NARA regional research rooms have closed permanently or operate on reduced/restricted hours since the COVID-19 pandemic. Hours, holdings, appointment requirements, and even building locations have shifted significantly.

Always confirm status before traveling — call ahead, check the facility page, and request records in advance. Verify hours & status here: <https://www.archives.gov/research>

## CENSUS RECORDS

U.S. federal censuses (1790–1950) are the cornerstone of American genealogy — and every digitized year is online for free.

### **1950 Census** *Online (Free)*

The newest publicly released census, with name-searchable images via NARA's dedicated portal.

 <https://1950census.archives.gov/>

### **1940 Census** *Online (Free)*

Fully digitized images and population schedules, free at NARA.

 <https://1940census.archives.gov>

● **Census Records Hub (1790–1950)** *Online (Free)*

Master landing page for every available federal census, including non-population schedules and supplements.

🔗 <https://archives.gov/research/census>

● **Non-Population Census Schedules** *Partial Online*

Agriculture, manufacturing, mortality, slave, and DDD (defective/dependent/delinquent) schedules — often overlooked goldmines.

🔗 <https://www.archives.gov/research/census/nonpopulation>

💡 **Pro Tip:** The 1890 federal census was destroyed by fire. Substitute with state censuses, 1890 Veterans schedules, city directories, and tax lists for that decade.



## MILITARY RECORDS (REVOLUTIONARY WAR → MODERN)

Service records, pension files, and bounty land applications — many digitized, many still in-person only.

● **Revolutionary War Pension & Bounty-Land Warrant Files** *Online (Free)*

Approximately 80,000 files digitized and viewable in the NARA Catalog at no cost.

🔗 <https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=revolutionary+war+pension>

● **War of 1812 Pension Files** *Online (Free)*

Fully digitized through the 'Preserve the Pensions' project — free on Fold3 (no subscription needed for this collection).

🔗 <https://www.fold3.com/title/58/war-of-1812-pension-files>

● **Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Database (CWSS)** *Online (Free)*

Search index of 6.3 million Union and Confederate soldiers, regimental histories, and sailor records.

🔗 <https://nps.gov/civilwar>

● **WWI Draft Registration Cards** *Online (Free)*

All 24 million cards digitized; free index and images via the NARA Catalog and FamilySearch.

🔗 <https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=WWI+draft+registration>

● **WWII Army Enlistment Records (AAD)** *Online (Free)*

Searchable database of ~9 million enlistment records (1938–1946) via Access to Archival Databases.

🔗 <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/series-description.jsp?s=3360>

● **Official Military Personnel Files (OMPF)** *Online, Mail and In-Person*


Post-WWI service records held at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. Most require a written/eVetRecs request; a 1973 fire destroyed many Army records.

🔗 <https://www.archives.gov/personnel-records-center/ompf-access>

## ● **Compiled Military Service Records (Pre-WWI)** *Partial Online*

Indexes online via Catalog and FamilySearch; full files often require ordering or in-person review.

 <https://archives.gov/research/military>

 **Pro Tip:** Always check the NARA Catalog AND Fold3/FamilySearch for the same record. Different platforms index the same documents differently — one may find what the other misses.



## IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION

Naturalization records are split across federal, state, and county courts. NARA holds federal records — and many are digitized.

### ● **Naturalization Records Overview** *Online (Free)*

Master guide to where naturalization records live (federal, state, county) and which are online.

 <https://archives.gov/research/naturalization>

### ● **Indexes to Naturalization Records (Various Districts)** *Partial Online*


District court Soundex indexes for cities like Chicago, New York, and Boston — many digitized in the Catalog.

 <https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=naturalization+index>

### ● **Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files** *Partial Online*

Case files (1882–1943) for individuals investigated under the Chinese Exclusion Act — many digitized and searchable.

 <https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=chinese+exclusion+act>

 **Pro Tip:** Pre-1906 naturalizations could happen in ANY court of record. If you can't find an ancestor's papers in federal records, search the county courthouse where they lived.



## PASSENGER ARRIVAL LISTS

Ship manifests covering U.S. ports from the 1820s through the mid-20th century.

### ● **Passenger Arrival Records Overview** *Online (Free)*

Comprehensive guide to ports, time periods, and microfilm/digital availability.

 <https://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/passenger-arrival>

### ● **Ellis Island Passenger Records (1892–1957)** *Online (Free)*

Free name-searchable database hosted by The Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation, drawn from NARA microfilm.

 <https://heritage.statueofliberty.org/>

● **Castle Garden (1820–1892)** *Online (Free)*

Pre-Ellis Island arrivals at New York's earlier immigrant depot — free searchable index of ~10 million records.

🔗 <https://castlegarden.org/>

● **Passenger Lists in NARA Catalog** *Partial Online*

Browse and search digitized microfilm of arrival lists for New York, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New Orleans, San Francisco, and more.

🔗 <https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=passenger+lists>

💡 **Pro Tip:** Always cross-reference Ellis Island finds with the original NARA-digitized manifest in the Catalog — the Foundation's transcription occasionally has errors the original image will resolve.



## NATIVE AMERICAN RECORDS

Bureau of Indian Affairs records, tribal rolls, and Indian Census rolls — substantial portions are online.

● **Native American Records Portal** *Online (Free)*

NARA's central guide to BIA records, allotment files, school records, and tribal enrollment.

🔗 <https://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans>

● **Dawes Rolls (Final Rolls of the Five Civilized Tribes, 1898–1914)** *Online (Free)*

Primary roll for citizenship in the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole Nations. Searchable images online.

🔗 <https://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/rolls/dawes>

● **Indian Census Rolls (1885–1940)** *Online (Free)*

Annual rolls compiled by BIA agents on each reservation. All 692 rolls digitized and free in the NARA Catalog.

🔗 <https://www.archives.gov/files/research/microfilm/m595.pdf>

● **Eastern Cherokee Applications (Guion Miller Roll, 1906–1909)** *Online (Free)*

Applications submitted by people claiming Eastern Cherokee descent — substantial genealogical detail per file.

🔗 <https://www.archives.gov/research/native-americans/rolls/guion-miller>

💡 **Pro Tip:** Don't skip the application packets. Even rejected Dawes and Guion Miller applications often contain richer family history than approved ones — applicants had to prove descent in detail.



## AFRICAN AMERICAN RECORDS

Freedmen's Bureau, USCT military records, slave schedules, and more — significant collections digitized at no cost.

### ● **African American Heritage Portal** *Online (Free)*

Central hub for African American genealogy at NARA, organized by record type and era.

<https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans>

### ● **Freedmen's Bureau Records (1865–1872)** *Online (Free)*

Records of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. Fully digitized; full-text searchable via FamilySearch's transcription project.

<https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=freedmen%27s+bureau>

### ● **Freedman's Savings & Trust Company Records** *Online (Free)*

Bank registers (1865–1874) with detailed family information for depositors — invaluable for African American researchers.

<https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=freedman%27s+savings>

### ● **U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) Service Records** *Online (Free)*

Compiled service records for ~178,000 USCT soldiers — digitized and free via the NARA Catalog and Civil War Soldiers and Sailors Database.

<https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/military/colored-troops>

### ● **Southern Claims Commission Records** *Partial Online*

Postwar claims by Southern Unionists — both Black and white — often containing detailed witness testimony about family and community.

<https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=southern+claims+commission>

**Pro Tip:** Use the Freedman's Bank records as a 'family group sheet substitute' — depositors typically named parents, siblings, spouses, children, and former enslavers when opening accounts.



## LAND RECORDS & BOUNTY LAND WARRANTS

Federal land patents and military bounty land warrants document westward migration and military service.

### ● **BLM General Land Office Records** *Online (Free)*

Searchable database of more than 5 million federal land patents (1820–1908) — free, with downloadable patent images.

<https://glorerecords.blm.gov/>

### ● **Bounty Land Warrant Application Files** *Partial Online*


Files for veterans (or heirs) of pre-1855 service who claimed land warrants. Many Revolutionary War warrants are digitized; later wars vary.

<https://www.archives.gov/research/military/bounty-land-warrants>

### ● **Land Entry Case Files** *In-Person Only*

Original homestead, cash entry, and credit entry files behind each patent — held at NARA D.C. Most require an order or in-person request.

 <https://www.archives.gov/research/land>

 **Pro Tip:** The BLM patent itself names only the patentee and date. The case file at NARA holds the application, witnesses, and proof of residency — order it for any homesteader ancestor.



## COURT, PRISON & FEDERAL RECORDS

Federal district and circuit court records, U.S. penitentiary inmate files, and other federal-jurisdiction records.

### ● **Federal Court Records** *Partial Online*

District and circuit court records held in NARA regional archives. Online presence is limited; expect to request copies or visit.

 <https://www.archives.gov/research/court-records>

### ● **Federal Prison Inmate Case Files** *Partial Online*


Records from Leavenworth, Atlanta, McNeil Island, and Alcatraz penitentiaries. Some indexes and earlier files digitized.

 <https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=inmate+case+files>

### ● **Bankruptcy Records** *Online, Mail, and In-Person*

Federal bankruptcy case files, especially under the 1841, 1867, and 1898 Acts. Mostly held at regional facilities.

 <https://www.archives.gov/research/court-records/bankruptcy>

 **Pro Tip:** Federal court holdings are split by region. Identify the proper NARA regional facility BEFORE ordering — the wrong region = a 'no records found' reply.



## PASSPORT APPLICATIONS

U.S. passport applications (1795–1925) often include detailed personal descriptions, photographs (after 1914), and family info.

### ● **Passport Applications, 1795–1925** *Online (Free)*


Roll-by-roll digitized microfilm available via the NARA Catalog and free on FamilySearch and (subscription) Ancestry.

 <https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=passport+applications>

### ● **Passport Application Indexes** *Online (Free)*

Card indexes covering various date ranges — digitized and free.

 <https://www.archives.gov/research/passport>

 **Pro Tip:** After 1914, passport applications include photographs. For ancestors born in the late 1800s, this may be the only photograph that survives in any public record.

## **MAPS & PHOTOGRAPHS**

Cartographic and still-picture branches of NARA — millions of images, with a growing digital footprint.

### ● **Cartographic & Architectural Records** *Partial Online*

More than 15 million maps, charts, and aerial photographs. A substantial subset is digitized in the Catalog.

 <https://www.archives.gov/research/cartographic>

### ● **Still Picture Branch** *Partial Online*


Approximately 16 million still photographs and graphics. Major series like 'Pictures of African Americans During WWII' are fully digitized.

 <https://www.archives.gov/research/still-pictures>

### ● **Pictures of the Civil War (Mathew Brady Collection)** *Online (Free)*

Digitized highlights including the iconic Brady photographs.

 <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/civil-war/photos>

 **Pro Tip:** Search the NARA Catalog with the filter 'Type of Archival Materials = Photographs and other Graphic Materials' to surface only digitized images.

## **NARA CATALOG & ACCESS TO ARCHIVAL DATABASES (AAD)**

These tools are the master keys to everything NARA has digitized — start here for almost any search.

### ● **National Archives Catalog** *Online (Free)*

The central search tool for all NARA holdings — descriptions, digitized images, electronic records, and authority files.

 <https://catalog.archives.gov/>

### ● **Access to Archival Databases (AAD)** *Online (Free)*

Free access to ~85 million electronic records from more than 30 federal agencies — military, immigration, casualty, and more.

 <https://aad.archives.gov/aad/>

● **Citizen Archivist Dashboard** *Online (Free)*

Help transcribe and tag records — and search what other volunteers have already indexed. Free account, no expertise required.

🔗 <https://archives.gov/citizen-archivist>

● **DocsTeach** *Online (Free)*

Free primary source teaching tool — also a fast way to surface curated digitized documents by topic.

🔗 <https://www.docsteach.org/>

💡 **Pro Tip:** In the Catalog, click 'Available Online' under the search filters to instantly hide records that are NOT digitized. This single filter saves hours of dead-end browsing.

🏛️ **LIBRARY OF CONGRESS SPOTLIGHT — COMPLEMENTARY FREE FEDERAL RESOURCES**

When NARA doesn't have what you need, the Library of Congress almost certainly does. Every resource below is free.

📰 **Chronicling America** — 20+ million pages of historic U.S. newspapers (1777–1963), name-searchable. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

📁 **LOC Digital Collections** — manuscripts, photographs, maps, sound recordings, and city directories. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/>

👤 **By the People** — LOC's crowdsourced transcription project. Search transcribed pages others can't. <https://crowd.loc.gov/>

🎧 **Veterans History Project** — First-person interviews, letters, and photos from American war veterans. <https://www.loc.gov/vets/>

📖 **LOC Local History & Genealogy Reading Room** — research guides and remote reference help. <https://www.loc.gov/rr/genealogy/>

🆓 **ALTERNATIVE FREE SOURCES FOR THE SAME RECORDS**

When NARA's online presence falls short — or a regional facility is closed — these free sources often hold equivalent or identical records. Many are mirrors of NARA-digitized content.

● **FamilySearch** *Online (Free)*

Massive free index AND image collection, often hosting NARA microfilm. Free account required for some images.

🔗 <https://familysearch.org>

● **Internet Archive** *Online (Free)*

Out-of-copyright county histories, city directories, military regimental histories, and pension index books.

🔗 <https://archive.org>

● **Digital Public Library of America (DPLA)** *Online (Free)*

Aggregator searching millions of items across U.S. libraries, archives, and museums in one query.

🔗 <https://dp.la>

● **HathiTrust Digital Library** *Online (Free)*

Searchable full text of millions of digitized books — vital for genealogies, county histories, and government docs.

🔗 <https://hathitrust.org>

● **State Archives & State Libraries** *Online (Free)*

State-level censuses, vital records, militia rolls, and naturalization records often missing from NARA.

🔗 <https://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/state-archives.html>

● **Ancestry Library Edition (via Public Libraries)** *Partial Online*

Most U.S. public libraries offer free in-library access (and sometimes remote access with a library card).

🔗 <https://www.ancestry.com/cs/library-edition>

● **Fold3 (via Public Libraries)** *Partial Online*

Many libraries provide free Fold3 access. Fold3's 'Free Records' section is open to everyone, no subscription.

🔗 <https://fold3.com/browse/free-records>

● **USGenWeb** *Online (Free)*

Volunteer-built county-by-county directories of free transcriptions and digitized records.

🔗 <https://www.usgenweb.org/>

● **Cyndi's List** *Online (Free)*

Curated index of more than 300,000 free genealogy links, organized by topic and locality.

🔗 <https://www.cyndislist.com/>

💡 **Pro Tip:** Cross-platform searching is your superpower. The same NARA microfilm roll might be free on FamilySearch, indexed differently on Fold3 (library access), and appear in the NARA Catalog as raw images. Search all three — your ancestor is hiding in whichever has the cleanest transcription.

✅ **QUICK-START RESEARCH CHECKLIST**

1. Start with the NARA Catalog — filter by 'Available Online' to see only digitized hits.
2. Run the same search on FamilySearch — different index, same records, often better OCR.
3. Check AAD for any electronic database that fits the era (especially WWII-era).
4. For newspapers, jump to Chronicling America before any subscription site.
5. Only after exhausting the free options should you consider in-person travel — and confirm hours first.