

The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania

GSP RESEARCH TIP

RESEARCH IN MONTGOMERY COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

by Vivian F. Taylor

Bounded by the counties of Philadelphia, Bucks, Lehigh, Berks, Chester, and Delaware, Montgomery County has an area of about 473 square miles or about 3,380 acres., according to Bean's *History of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania*, Early settlers were predominately of Swedish, Dutch, English, Welsh, and German backgrounds.

William Penn's original Philadelphia County was divided in 1784, with the western portion becoming Montgomery County. Existing townships retained their names. These original divisions were: Abington, Cheltenham, Douglas, Norriton, Franconia, Frederick, Gwynedd, Hatfield, Horsham, Limerick, Lower Merion, Upper Merion, Pottsgrove, Providence, Marlborough, Montgomery, New Hanover, Perkiomen, Plymouth, Skippack, Springfield, Towamencin, Upper Dublin, Upper Hanover, Whitemarsh, Whiptain, and Worcester. Moreland Township was divided, with half remaining in Philadelphia and half given to Montgomery County.

Also in 1784, the town of Norris became the county seat. In 1812 Norristown was incorporated and became a borough. Before 1812, tax records for Norristown residents appear in lists for Norriton Township.

Today the county includes thirty-eight townships formed over time from the original ones, plus twenty-four boroughs. Townships and boroughs are both municipal subdivisions that serve as areas to conduct the county's business, while the county is the main record-keeping government unit. Tax and other records are recorded by township and borough, however, so knowledge of the correct political division for an ancestral residence can help pinpoint where to look for information.

Some early records pertaining to the area that became Montgomery County appear in the published *Pennsylvania Archives*. Among them are Revolutionary War militia and Continental Army lists, election returns, 1780–1789 (Series 6); marriages prior to 1810 (Series 2); State Officers under the Constitution of 1776 (Series 2); War of 1812–1814 returns of Second Division (Series 6); land warrantees 1733–1866 (Series 3); Provincial officers, 1682–1776 (Series 2); and old and proprietary rights (Series 3).

Post-1784 records created by Montgomery County residents and originally found in courthouse offices now reside in the Courthouse or in two related facilities. The County Archives Center dates from 1960 and holds many historical records of interest to genealogists. The Historical Society of Montgomery County, organized in 1881, offers an extensive collection of local records. Today records for Montgomery County from the time of its formation may be found as shown below.

1. Birth and death records from 1893 to 1915 (only period of county registration)—County Archives, with microfilm copies available at both the Courthouse and the Historical Society. Vital records after 1915 are only available from the Pennsylvania Division of Vital Statistics in New Castle.
2. Civil Court records—originals at the Historical Society with microfilm copies at the Office of the Prothonotary (clerk of the Court of Common Pleas) in the Courthouse.
3. Coroner's Records—19th century cases at the Historical Society, 1893–1959 cases at the Archives. County road petitions—Originals for the years 1713–1784 are at the Historical Society. County Archives Center holds records from 1784 to 1870, with an index at the Historical Society.
4. Deeds—Original books 1–299 and a microfilm index are at the Historical Society; microfilm copies of Books 220–299 at the Recorder of Deeds; and original books 300–700 at the County Archives Center. The Historical Society also had Miscellaneous Deed Books 1–87, Sheriff Deed Books A–S, and early mortgage books.
5. Marriage records from 1885 (beginning of licenses for the county) to the present, except most recent six months—County Archives Center. The Marriage License Bureau is located in the Courthouse.
6. Naturalization records—originals at the Historical Society with microfilm copies at the Office of the Prothonotary in the Courthouse.

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7. Orphans Court Records County—Archives Center with microfilmed copies in the Register of Wills office, Courthouse.
8. Tax Records—Original records from 1784 through the 1930s, arranged by townships, are housed at the Historical Society. Some years include information about poor school children who were educated at county expense.
9. Veterans Records—The Office of Veterans Affairs maintains records of the death and burial places of county veterans and of burials of veterans buried in the county.
10. Vital Records, 1852–1855 (births, death, and marriages—County Archives Center. Records are incomplete.
11. Wills, administrations, and related probate records—County Archives Center has originals to about 1992, with microfilmed copies in the Register of Wills office, Courthouse.

The pertinent county offices retain microfilm or microfiche copies of all records created since the 1784 county formation. In an ongoing project, the Historical Society receives the original records once microfilming is complete.

The Historical Society collections include a potpourri of other courthouse records, among them delayed birth registrations (also at the Archives), name change docket, commissioners' docket and all existing almshouse records. Church records, tombstone inscriptions, directories, and newspapers on microfilm are also available. Other projects involve preparing transcripts and indexes for criminal court cases. *The Bulletin of the Historical Society of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania* publishes many articles of genealogical interest.

All county-level records—court, probate, land, and tax—created before 1784 remained in Philadelphia offices. Original wills and letters of administration are in the custody of the Philadelphia County Register of Wills (Room 180, City Hall, <http://secureprod.phila.gov/wills/wills.aspx>). Deeds, mortgages, and taxes are held in the Philadelphia City Archives facility, 3101 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia (<http://www.phila.gov/phils/carchive.htm>). The Historical Society of Pennsylvania holds microfilm copies of many pre-1784 records and many church records for the county.

Many townships and communities have historical organizations devoted to their particular area. Frequently these groups have materials not available elsewhere. Lansdale, Conshohocken, Lower Merion, Worcester, and Lower Salford are examples. For church records, The Mennonite Historical Library and Archives (<http://www.mhep.org>) in Harleysville and the Schwenkfelder Library and Heritage Center in Pennsburg (http://www.schwenkfelder.com/Library_Library.htm) preserve their demoninational materials.

ADDRESSES OF INTEREST

Historical Society of Montgomery County
1654 DeKalb Street, Norristown, 19401
<http://www.hsmcpa.org>

Montgomery County Records Department (Archives)
2000 Old Arch Road, Norristown, 19401
<http://www2.montcopa.org/montco/cwp/view.a.3.q.14582.asp>

Montgomery County Courthouse
Airy and Swede Streets, Norristown, 19404
<http://www.montcopa.org>

Montgomery County Recorder of Deeds Office
1 Montgomery Plaza, Suite 3, Norristown 19404
<http://rod.montcopa.org/rod/site/default.asp>

Montgomery County USGenWeb site
<http://montgomery.pa-roots.com>

USEFUL PUBLICATIONS

History of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania by Theodore W. Bean, 2 volumes. 1884; reprint 1983,
Montgomery County Historical Society

Montgomery County – The Second Hundred Years. 2 volumes. Montgomery County Federations of
Historical Societies, 1983.

Atlases of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, 1871, 1877, 1893. Reprints available from the Historical
Society.

Montgomery Pennsylvania, A History by Clifton Hunsicker, 3 volumes, 1923.

Biographical Annals of Montgomery County by Elwood Roberts, 2 volumes, 1904.

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