Montana Genealogy Research

Brief History

Kootenai, Salish, Kalispel, Shoshone, Blackfoot, Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, Crow, Sioux and Cheyenne people lived in the area that is now Montana when white trappers first came there. The Blackfoot lands extended up into what is now Saskatchewan. They hunted buffalo for meat. Some tribes had lived on the plains and moved west into Montana, hunting deer and elk.

The Gros Ventre people had come from the Great Lakes regions where they had an agricultural lifestyle and grew maize. They lived along the Missouri River's Great Falls.

The Salish harvested roots, vegetables and berries in the warm months, caught and dried fish, and hunted deer and elk in the fall.

Interactions with early European trappers and businessmen began as tribe members traded for goods at newly established trading posts in the 1800's. Tribal cultures changed as they began using European tools and weapons; some tribes began using horses. Contagious diseases decimated many of the tribes.

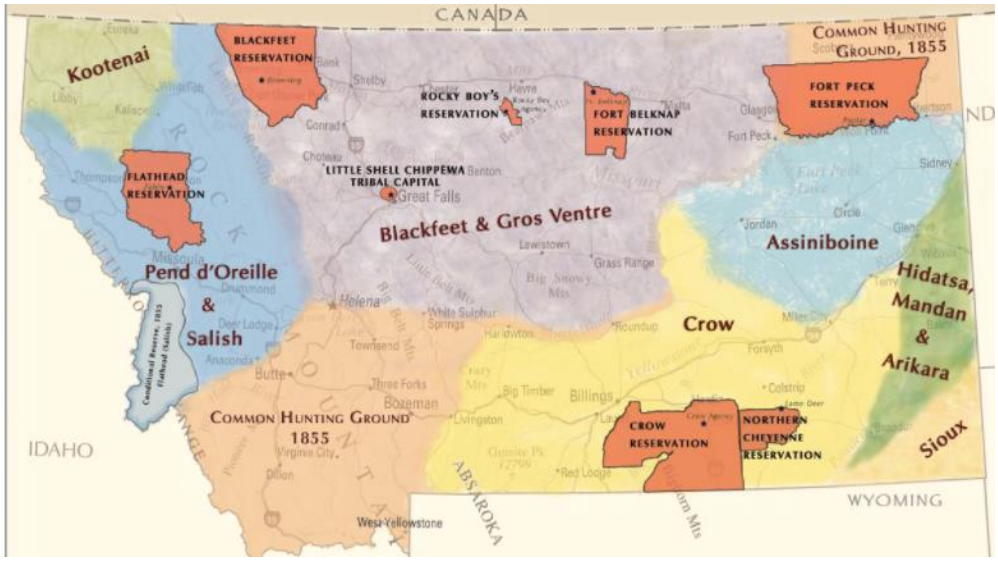
The Chippewa and the Cree were driven into Montana as their former lands were taken over by the U.S. government.

The Louisiana Purchase gave the U.S. government land east of the mountains in Montana. Explorers, fur traders, and trappers began inhabiting the area where the Native Americans lived. In 1841, Jesuit priests founded St. Mary's Mission.

In 1846, Britain relinquished its claims to the area west of the mountains. The trading post at Fort Benton, on the Missouri River, become a permanent settlement.

In the 1850's, St. Mary's Mission became a center of ranching activity in the Bitterroot Valley, where the Salish and Kootenai lived. In 1855, these tribes ceded their lands to the U.S. through the Treaty of Hell Gate. Treaties with the U.S. government, defeats in battle, and the U.S. policy of exterminating the buffalo destroyed the cultures and food sources of the Native Americans. Over time, they were driven onto U.S. Indian reservations.

The picture below shows the boundaries defined by the 1851 and 1855 treaties (background colors) and today's 7 reservations (in orange) on which 12 tribal nations currently live. More information can be found on the Montana State University website page, *Tribal Territories in Montana*: https://www.montana.edu/iefa/introductiontomttribalnations/tribalterritories.html



Brief History continued
In 1859 steamboats first reached Fort Benton.
In the 1860's, portions of what is now eastern and western Montana were attached to different U.S. territories.
In July of 1862, news of an initial big strike at Grasshopper Creek caused a gold rush to western Montana. Between 1862 and 1864, gold miners created the cities of Bannack, Virginia City, and Helena. Some gold miners began farming and set up supply centers, e.g., Missoula, Deer Lodge, and Bozeman.
The Homestead Act of 1862 also promoted homesteading in Montana.
On March 26, 1864, Montana Territory was established with nine counties
"Indian Wars" between the U.S. Army and Native American tribes became fierce between 1867 and 1877. In January of 1870, the U.S. Cavalry attacked a Piegan Indian village and killed 174 residents; 140 people were taken prisoner. Although General Custer was defeated at the Little Bighorn Valley in 1876, the U.S. army renewed its efforts and within 5 years almost all Sioux and Cheyenne people had been forced onto reservations.
Railroads came to the Montana Territory in the 1880's. The population grew to about 40, 000.

Statehood
In November of 1889, Montana became the 41st state in the U.S.
In the 1890s and 1900s, the building of branch railroad lines encouraged new mining and homesteading.
In October 1892, the Crow reservation, which encompassed 1,800,000 acres, was opened to white settlement by Presidential proclamation.
Between 1910 and 1925, the number of counties in Montana doubled as homesteaders moved into eastern Montana.
Unfortunately, a cycle of drought years drove many settlers out of the state by 1930. The great depression closed many factories and mills, many small farms were abandoned, and many families moved to the cities.
The state continued to produce agricultural commodities through the 1940's. Over time forestry, mining and the outdoor recreation industry joined agriculture as sources of income.

Montana Vital Records
Online Indexes/Images
FamilySearch.org and Ancestry.com - Indexes/images of state and county birth, marriage, divorce and death records for various years, many beginning in the 1800's.

Birth and Death Records 1907 to the present
The Montana Vital Records Office stores birth and death records from 1907 to the present. Certified copies of birth and death records can be obtained by only select family members or legal representatives.
Anyone can **obtain informational copies of birth and death records that are over 30 years old** from the Montana Vital Records Office.
The Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS) webpage gives ordering information - https://dphhs.mt.gov/. On the *Home* page, search for *Vital Records;* choose *Birth & Death Certificates* from the list of results.

Marriage and Divorce Records

Indexes
Montana Vital Records Office - indexes of marriage licenses and divorces beginning July 1943.
Montana Historical Society:

- 2 books index Lewis & Clark County and Jefferson County divorce records beginning in the 1800's
- microfilm index of state divorce records 1943 to 1969
- book index of newspaper articles about births, marriages, divorces, and deaths, etc.

Copies of Records
Marriage and divorce records are stored at county offices.
Obtain copies of marriage and divorce records from the Clerk of the County District Court in the county where the event occurred.
You also may be able to obtain marriage information from the Research Center of the Montana Historical Society. Their collection includes county marriage records, newspaper marriage announcements, and church marriage records. Website information about Research Requests is at https://mhs.mt.gov/Research/services/requests/genealogy .

Montana Genealogy Archives, Libraries and Societies
Central Montana Genealogy Society
Great Falls Genealogy Society - statewide scope of materials
Montana Historical Society - society library and state archives
Montana State Genealogical Society - online library and *Montana Memory Project*
Montana State University - Renne Library
National Archives at Denver
University of Montana - Mansfield Library
Western Montana Genealogical Society
Yellowstone Genealogy Forum - educational programs and patron help at Billings Public Library
NOTE: The *WIKI* on *FamilySearch.org* also lists Montana heritage societies, historical societies, ethnic and religious societies.

Montana Church Records
Church records vary significantly depending on the denomination and the record keeper. They may contain information about members, such as age, date of baptism, christening, or birth; marriage information and maiden names; and death date.
Before 1900 the largest religious groups in Montana were the Roman Catholic, Methodist, Episcopal, and Presbyterian churches. Each group arrived during the territorial period to proselyte among the Indians and the miners.
Contact information for the archives of prominent Montana churches is on the *Montana Church Records* page of the *FamilySearch WIKI*
Church records online:

- find databases of Montana church records on *FamilySearc*h and *Ancestry*
- digital copies of church records in the *FamilySearch Catalog*
- church membership information on county *GenWebs*
- check denominational archives/libraries/heritage centers for online databases

In-person research:

- Local libraries and historical societies may have indexes of local church membership/vital records and church histories
- Contact local churches to learn what historical records they may have onsite.

Montana Land Records

U.S. land:

- some early settlers purchased land from the Federal Government to farm, to buy timbered land or to set up mining enterprises.
- Settlers began applying for homestead land in Montana after 1862.

Storage of U.S. Land Records:

- Federal Land Office records are stored at the NARA branch in Denver.
- Tract books, township plats and pre-1908 land patents are stored at the Montana State Office of the Bureau of Land Management in Billings.
- County recorders offices also have homestead patents and patents on timber and mining claims.

Private property:

- County recorders offices keep records of private property purchases, deeds, and mortgages.

Online Indexes/Images of land records:

- View images of federal land patents with indexes of purchase information on the *BLMGLO* website, *Search Documents* tab.
- View digitized books and microfilms of the federal land office records and of Montana county land records dating back to the 1800's in the *Catalog* on *FamilySearch.org.*
- Look on websites of county recorder offices for indexes of their historical property records.

Montana Counties

Atlas of Historical County Boundaries - https://digital.newberry.org/ahcb/

Interactive maps and text covering the historical boundaries, names, organization, and attachments of every county, extinct counties and unsuccessful county proposals from the creation of the first county through December 31, 2000

Migration Routes Through Montana
Montana Trail - Mullan Wagon Road - Northern Overland Route

Montana Genealogy Websites

Check online for the *GenWeb* and *Genealogy Trails* of the county in which your ancestor lived.

Gallatin County Genealogical Society –indexes of divorces, vital records in newspaper articles, funeral home records, naturalization records, obituaries, voter registrations - https://sites.rootsweb.com/~mtgcgs/resources.html
Great Falls Genealogy Society Databases – CASCADE COUNTY - indexes of newspaper vital statistics, local histories, marriages 1887-1967, death records, marriage records, church baptisms, cemetery burials - https://gfgenealogy.org/resources/
MISSOULA, MT: **Public Library Vital Records Index** – newspaper birth, marriage, and death announcements mid-1880's to 1990 – also land purchases, family reunions, naturalizations, military reports, etc. - https://www.missoulapubliclibrary.org/home/services/genealogy/
Montana Memory Project - digitized newspapers, yearbooks, diaries, prison records, photos, etc - https://www.mtmemory.org/
Montana State Digital collections - links to historical materials, military enlistments, newspapers, diaries, livestock brand records, prison records, etc. on the official state website - https://mhs.mt.gov/Research/
Montana Newspapers – search issues of forty-seven Montana newspapers dated 1885-2014- http://montananewspapers.org/
Western States Marriage Index – over 900,000 pre-1900 marriage records from Arizona, Idaho and Nevada counties – a significant number of marriages from selected counties in California, western Colorado, Montana, Oregon, Utah, eastern Washington, and Wyoming - http://abish.byui.edu/specialCollections/westernStates/aboutWesternStates.cfm

Montana Native American Research

First People - Links to State Recognized Tribes, sorted by state - https://www.firstpeople.us/FP-Html-Links/state-recognized-tribes-in-usa-by-state.html
Native Languages of the Americas: Native American Cultures: type the name of a state in the search bar for information about indigenous peoples living in that area - http://www.native-languages.org/home.htm
Tribal Territories in Montana -
https://www.montana.edu/iefa/introductiontomttribalnations/tribalterritories.html

Above information courtesy of:
https://www.montana.edu/iefa/introductiontomttribalnations/tribalterritories.html
FamilySearch WIKI - Montana History, Genealogy Archives, Libraries, Societies, websites, etc.
International Vital Records Handbook
Native American Tribes of Montana - http://www.native-languages.org/montana.htm
Tribal Territories in Montana -