



Home on the Range: United States Federal Land Records

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Following the American Revolution, the U.S. Federal Government took responsibility for disposing of land within its borders. A unique survey system was established and the land was made available for purchase. In this class you will learn about the laws, the survey system, and the records created by the sale of Federal Land in the United States.

THE HISTORY

In order to expand its borders to the Pacific Ocean, the United States gained land through treaties and land sales, including

- **Louisiana Purchase** (1803) – for 15 million dollars, the fledgling United States acquired 828,000 square miles in fifteen modern states.
- **Adams-Onis Treaty** (1819) – Spain ceded Florida
- **Texas Annexation** (1845) – Texas sought and gained entrance in the United States
- **Oregon Treaty** (1846) – divided the Oregon Territory along the 49th parallel between the United States and Great Britain
- **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo** (1848) – Mexico ceded lands in the west following the Mexican American War
- **Gadsden Purchase** (1853) – United States purchased a strip of land along the Mexican border for \$10 million dollars in order to accommodate a southern transcontinental railroad.

Alaska Purchase (1867) – also known as Seward’s folly, the United States paid Russia \$7.2 million dollars for 140,000 acres of land

THE LAWS

- **Northwest Ordinance of 1785** – established a federal survey dividing land into thirty-six square mile sections; allowed for the sale of land in sections and townships; set aside sections for education and military purposes
- **Act of 1796** – altered the way surveyors numbered sections in each township
- **Harrison Land Act of 1800** – land was available for purchase in half sections; price set at \$2.00 an acre; land available on credit with four payments made over five years
- **Act of 1820** – eliminated credit sales; land available in eighty acre increments; minimum price reduced to \$1.25 an acre
- **Preemption Act of 1841** – any head of a family (including widows) who was a citizen could purchase land they had developed prior to the official survey at \$1.25 an acre

- **Bounty Land Acts (1847, 1850, 1852, 1855)** – gave veterans (or their heirs) of any war up to 160 acres of land; warrants issued to veterans who could exchange them for patents at any land office (warrants were often used as scrip and sold instead)
- **Homestead Act of 1862** – Anyone who was a citizen and of twenty-one years of age could receive 160 acres for the cost of filing
- **Taylor Grazing Act of 1934** – Closed most public domain to entry

THE RECORDS

Patents: Once conditions had been met by the individual applying for the transfer of land, individual local land offices would submit a certificate to the General Land Office (GLO) in Washington D.C. The GLO would then issue a patent giving the individual final claim and rights to the land. A copy of each patent was kept on file by the GLO (now the Bureau of Land Management).

Land Entry Case Files: As an individuals applied for and met requirements to obtain land, all paperwork was collected and compiled by local land offices. Following the sale of most public land in an area, the local land office would be closed and all case files forwarded to the GLO in Washington D.C. Most land entry case files are currently held by the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA). Type of paperwork varies according to the law or act under which the land was purchased.

- **Private Land Claims** – following the annexation of new land, the United States government confirmed land ownership to new citizens who could prove valid ownership of the land prior to the annexation; files include affidavits and other documents supporting private land claims
- **Credit/Cash Sales** – sale of land with credit (1800-1820) or cash (1800-1934); files mostly contain receipts, etc.
- **Bounty Land Warrants** – Veterans obtaining land under the Acts of 1847, 1850, 1852, and 1855 were issued a warrant which could be exchanged for a patent; files are organized by the individual who obtained land (oftentimes not the Veteran) but include the original warrant and record as well as any sales
- **Preemption Files** – those filing for preemption had to be 21 years of age, a head of household, a citizen, and prove they had developed their claim prior to survey; files can include affidavits and other documents supporting preemption claims
- **Homesteads** – those filing for homesteads had to be citizens and spend five years living on and developing the land; files include initial applications, neighbor affidavits, citizenship papers, proof of residence, and much more
- **Other:** additional acts of Congress also produced Donation Lands (FL, NM, OR, and WA), Mineral Lands, Timber Lands, Grazing Lands, and School Lands

Tract Books: Tract books are organized by section, township, and range and list every person making claim to a specific parcel of land. If an individual began a homestead but failed to meet the requirements and obtain a patent, he or she will still be listed in the tract books.

Locating Records

Online Federal Land Records:

- <http://www.fold3.com> (\$) – Broken Bow (Nebraska) Homestead Files
- <http://glorerecords.blm.gov> – index to federal land patents (also list section, township, range, and land office needed to order Land Entry Case Files; created by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM))

Federal Land Records on Microfilm:

- All existing tract books have been microfilmed and are available through FamilySearch, first film 1,445,277 (<http://www.familysearch.org>)
- Microfilm copies of tract books are available at the regional offices of the National Archives (<http://www.archives.gov>)

Federal Land Records On-site

- Western States Tract Books (AZ, CA, CO, ID, KS, NE, NV, NM, ND, OK, OR, SD, UT, and WA) held at the National Archives in Washington D.C.
- Eastern States Tract Books (AL, AR, FL, IL, IN, IA, LA, MI, MN, and MS) held at the BLM office in Springfield, VA
- Land Entry Case Files are held at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. Each case file costs \$50 (Land Entry File) or \$30 (Bounty-Land Warrant File). You will need to know the land office, document number, and act under which the land was obtained to order a file (<http://eservices/archives.gov/orderonline>)