

RESEARCH IN ATLANTA AND THE ATLANTA AREA

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BACKGROUND

Millions of Americans of very different backgrounds have family stories of ancestors who lived “near Atlanta” sometime in the past. The “Gate City” and the “Capital of the New South” always welcomed newcomers--except Sherman and his army in 1864.

Atlanta has always served as an important crossroads for families who moved on to build modern America. The area’s research sources are plentiful, although “lived near Atlanta” means virtually anywhere within seventy-five miles of Five Points, the city's historical center, and west to the Georgia border with Alabama.

Researchers, however, can find Atlanta as confusing as its streets' illogical naming and arrangement. The area, allegedly Creek Indian lands occupied by the Cherokees, first appeared as a name on a map as a Native American community along the Chattahoochee River called Standing Peachtree.

This mixed Cherokee-Creek settlement became the site of a military outpost in 1813 and is the origin of the name for the more than sixty "Peachtree" streets in the city today. Native Americans gave up the territory to the state of Georgia in 1821.¹

The area became DeKalb County in December 1822. Originally a crossroads community around a tavern called Whitehall, the settlement that would become Atlanta was first known as Terminus after the state of Georgia determined to make it the southern end of the proposed state-owned Western & Atlantic Railroad in 1837.² The W&A, however, never went to the West or the Atlantic!

Other railroads joined the W&A at Terminus. The city would eventually prosper on rail, highway, and air transportation but not as a port. Atlanta’s Chattahoochee River is notoriously shallow that far north.

Officially incorporated as Marthasville in 1843, the city that grew up at that crossroads just before it had a permanent municipal government that kept records. On December 29, 1847, became incorporated as Atlanta, a name invented by railroad superintendent J. Edgar Thomson (later a national transportation czar) from the Western & Atlantic Railroad that made this “Gate City” possible.³

Contrary to popular myth, General Sherman’s soldiers did not burn Atlanta or its records during the Civil War. The city’s buildings did suffer much damage from both armies during its 1864 siege, however, inspiring Atlanta’s symbol of a phoenix rising from flames. That almost nothing from the Civil War city is due to fires in the early Twentieth Century and to the constant demolition and new construction that continues today.⁴

During the city's early years, as part of DeKalb County, its county seat was nearby Decatur. In December 1853, the Georgia legislature created Fulton County, with Atlanta as the site of its new courthouse.

Atlanta officially became the capital of the state of Georgia in 1868. On January 1, 1928, the city acquired residential areas in western DeKalb County so that, while Atlanta is the county seat of Fulton County, its eastern neighborhoods are in DeKalb County and have Decatur as their county seat. In December 1932, the citizens of bankrupt Campbell and Milton counties voted to abolish and incorporate their counties (and records) into Fulton County.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT RECORDS

For a detailed description of urban Georgia records most often preserved for Atlanta, see Paul K. Graham, "Historical Records of Urban Georgia," *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* 43 (Summer 2007): 87-90. R. Michael Brubaker has used such records from the Kenan Research Center of the Atlanta History Center to publish articles on Atlanta's often forgotten or overlooked: "Atlanta Police Court Docket, May 1872-August 1872," *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* 43 (Spring 2007): 17-57; "Some Residents of the Fulton County Almshouse," *ibid.*, 45 (Summer 2009): 149-52; and "Some Records from Atlanta's Home for the Friendless—1908-1909," *ibid.*, 46 (Spring 2010): 23-32.⁵

Georgia records, in general, are among the most extensive in the southeastern United States. The Georgia Archives in nearby Morrow, Georgia, and the Genealogical Society of Utah have microfilm of almost all bound Georgia county records to at least 1900, including civil marriages, criminal and civil court minutes, estates, and tax digests. These records are also accessible from the free online site Familysearch.org.

County records for the Atlanta area usually survive except for those lost in the DeKalb County courthouse fire of 1842, the Ku Klux Klan's burning of the Gwinnett County courthouse in 1871, and the loss of the Cobb County civil archives in a misguided effort to save the records from approaching Federal troops in 1864. Fulton County deed books B, F, H, and mortgage book E were destroyed when thrown down the courthouse well around 1880.⁶

Many records do survive, however, and some special sources are listed here. The Georgia Archives also has almost complete sets of original county tax digests (c1872 to present) for the entire state.⁷ Ted O. Brooke has published Fulton County's first marriage books and a state-wide list of wills to 1860.⁸

Miscellaneous records of Campbell, Fulton, and Milton counties have been donated to the Kenan Research Center of the Atlanta Historical Society, although the most important original manuscript county records for all remain in the Fulton County Archives and Fulton County Court House, 141 Pryor Street SW, Atlanta, GA 30303-3444. Many of these records are on microfilm at the Georgia Archives.

VITAL RECORDS

Vital records for the Gate City are confusing. Atlanta has city birth records beginning in 1887 and death records starting in 1896. Through 1918 these records should be requested from the Fulton County Health Department, 99 Butler Street, Atlanta, GA 30303.

The state of Georgia began keeping vital records on January 1, 1919 although the law went largely ignored by the individual counties until ca. 1928. Death records for 1919-1927 are indexed and available online on the Georgia Archives' Virtual Vault. Death records for 1919-1943 are also indexed and available through Familysearch.org. The originals through 1943 are also available at the Georgia Archives.

For death certificates from 1944 to the present, contact the Georgia Department of Public Health at:

Vital Records

1680 Phoenix Blvd, Suite 100
Atlanta, GA 30349
Tel.: 404-679-4702

These records are kept by the Vital Records Unit, Georgia Department of Human Resources, Room 217-H, 47 Trinity Avenue, Atlanta, GA 30334 and can be ordered through the VRU's website on the Internet: <https://dph.georgia.gov/ways-request-vital-record/online-ordering>.

OTHER DEATH RECORDS

For deaths before 1919, the most valuable single Atlanta specific source for genealogical research must be the Atlanta or Garrett necrology of the Kenan Research Center of the Atlanta History Center. Franklin Miller Garrett (1906-2000), Atlanta's famed historian, compiled death information from cemetery records, death certificates, and obituaries on tens of thousands of white Atlantans for the 1840s to the 1920s.

The index exists as a computer database that refers the researcher to note books that are on microfilm and can be found in many genealogical libraries. It can be accessed from the Atlanta History Center's website: <http://garrett.atlantahistorycenter.com/about.html> The Garrett Necrology has also been scanned and indexed, without its title on the subscription site Ancestry.com.

This index does not include the records of Oakland Cemetery (the city's oldest public cemetery), Westview Cemetery (the second public cemetery), the DeKalb County estates, and the Fulton County estates, as the entries on each of those rolls of the necrology microfilm are usually in alphabetical order.

The Georgia Archives has on microfilm an indexed scrapbook of Atlanta obituaries and funeral notices prepared by Mr. Garrett but not included in his necrology; see "Some

Atlanta Obituaries, 1923-1932," *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* 29 (Fall 1993): 166-73. Some Atlanta death notices are also found in Jeannette Holland Austin, *Atlanta Constitution (1868-1884, 1887, 1890)* (n. p.) and her *Georgia Obituaries (1905-1910)* (n. p.)

The Georgia Archives also has a copy of the original records of Atlanta's Oakland Cemetery, including information on the thousands of Confederate soldiers who died in the city's Civil War hospitals and battlefields. Available on the Georgia Archives' website, <https://vault.georgiaarchives.org/digital/collection/adhoc/id/1361/rec/2>. Names of these rebel dead are also found in volume two of Georgia Division United Daughters of the Confederacy, *Roster of Confederate Graves* (Atlanta: Georgia Division, UDC, 1995).

Most of the records of the patients of Atlanta's Confederate hospitals are in the Stout Collection of the University of Texas in Austin and were not included in the compiled service records now on the National Archives and Records Administration microfilm. The Stout Collection has not been indexed.⁹

Federal dead from the Atlanta campaign were buried in the Marietta National Cemetery. They are included with others buried there in volume three of Cobb County Genealogical Society, *Cobb County, Georgia, Cemeteries* (Marietta, Ga.: Cobb County, Georgia, Genealogical Society, 1994).

NATURALIZATIONS

Atlanta has always had a significant foreign-born community, but finding naturalization and other citizenship records can be difficult. Before 1907, these records might be filed in the city court, county Superior Court, or Federal court minutes.

Naturalization records from the Federal court records are indexed in Linda Geiger and Meyer L. Frankel, *Index to Georgia's Naturalization Records to 1950* (Atlanta: Georgia Genealogical Society, 1996); also see "Alien Atlantans in 1864," *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* 24 (Winter 1988): 110. Foreign place of birth is indicated in federal census records beginning in 1850.

Beyond those standard naturalization records, citizenship information on many of the foreign-born men appears in the 1867-1868 returns of qualified voters for Atlanta and the rest of Georgia at the Georgia Archives. The registered white men are included in John David Brandenburg and Rita Brinkley Worthy, *Index to Georgia's 1867-1868 Returns of Qualified Voters and Registration Oath Books* (1995).¹⁰

NEWSPAPERS

No complete run of any Atlanta newspaper survives from before 1868 and even the surviving issues are scattered among libraries across the eastern United States. A thorough bibliography of what has survived does not exist. Copies of previously thought lost issues are still being discovered.

A bibliography of known American newspapers is kept by the Library of Congress' Chronicling America: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/>; also see Rutch Elaine Feldman, "A checklist of Atlanta Newspapers, 1846-1948," (Master of Arts, Emory University, 1948), a copy of which is in the Kenan Research Center. The American Antiquarian Society keeps records of originals of pre-1870s newspapers nationwide.

Not all of the newspapers have been microfilmed and no single repository has copies of all of the microfilm. The Boston Athenaeum, Kenan Research Center, the Georgia Archives, and the Woodruff Library of Emory University have different but significant collections of original and microfilm of the Atlanta newspapers beginning in the early 1850s.

Georgia Historic Newspapers of the Digital Library of Georgia offers free access online to many historical Atlanta (and Georgia) newspapers: <https://gahistoricnewspapers.galileo.usg.edu>. The Georgia Newspaper Project of the University of Georgia Libraries has the largest collection of Georgia newspaper microfilm, although not all that is found in other repositories. The inventory of the GNP can be accessed over the Internet at: <http://www.libs.uga.edu/gnp/titlelist>

Many of the newspaper websites such as Genealogybank, Newspaperarchive, and 19th Century Newspapers include Atlanta newspapers, especially the *Atlanta Constitution*, *Atlanta Georgian*, *Atlanta Journal*, and *Southern Confederacy*. Chronicling America includes the Atlanta Civil War issues of the *Memphis Daily Appeal*.

MISCELLANEOUS

The first Atlanta city directory appeared in 1859 and included the original of the several of the city's genealogically valuable histories, see *Williams' Atlanta Directory, City, Guide, or Business Mirror* (Atlanta, GA, 1859), available on the Internet from Hathi Trust, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=emu.10002331152&seq=1>, accessed May 24, 2024. Also see "Residents of Atlanta, Georgia, 1859-1860," *Georgia Genealogical Magazine* 36 (4) (1996): 285-293.

Other such works include include Pioneer Citizens' Society, *Pioneer Citizens' History of Atlanta, 1833-1902* (Atlanta: Byrd Printing, 1902), and Lucian Lamar Knight, *History of Fulton County, Georgia: Narrative and Biographical* (Atlanta: A. H. Cawston, 1930). The original volume three of Franklin Garrett, *Atlanta and Environs* (New York: Lewis Publishing, 1954) was a collection of biographical sketches.

Most of these works have no index or have been poorly indexed. Researchers will find access better through the scanned copies online, including onto the free Internet sources such as the HathiTrust and Google Books.

The Kenan Research Center of the Atlanta History Center has scanned the back issues of *Atlanta History* and its other historical publications. Access is free to everyone on the Kenan Research Center online site. The Atlanta History Center also has a card catalog index to these all now defunct historical journals.¹¹

The *Atlanta Historical Bulletin* includes most of the text of what became Garrett's monumental two volume *Atlanta and Environs: A Chronicle of Its People and Events* (2 vols., New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company; 1954; facsimile reprint, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), the great history of Fulton and surrounding counties. Those two volumes are very poorly indexed, however, making the above card catalog sometimes a better way of accessing its information than its own index (and also where these volumes have been scanned onto the Internet).¹²

Many other unusual records for Atlanta and Fulton County have at least indexes in print, see for example, "Biographical Index to Some Early Atlantans," *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* 30 (Winter 1994): 261-262; "Some Civil War Atlantans," *ibid.* 35 (Winter 1999): 252-254; "Civilians Held Prisoner in Atlanta, 1865-1866," *ibid.* 38 (Spring 2002): 36-38; and "The General Sherman Census of Atlanta, September 1864," *Georgia Genealogical Magazine* 31 (1991): 132-141. Civil War widows and orphans who received benefits from the Masonic Orphans Home Lottery, 1870-1876, appear in Robert S. Davis, *The Georgia Black Book II* (Easley, SC: Southern Historical Press, 1987), 159-190.

Members of the Fulton County militia in 1864, for example, with age, occupation, and place of birth for each man,. These records are included in Nancy J. Cornell, *1864 Census For the Re-Organizing the Georgia Militia* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2000), 252-265.

Aside from the sources mentioned elsewhere, many other less well-known records for all of Georgia or the United States have great value. These works include Ted O. Brooke and Robert S. Davis, *Georgia Research: A Handbook for Genealogists, Historians, Archivists, Lawyers, Librarians, and Other Researchers Paperback* (2nd edition, Atlanta: Georgia Genealogical Society, 2012) and William Dollarhide, *Georgia Name Lists, 1733-2010* (Bountiful, UT: Family Roots, 2013).

Atlanta and Fulton County, along with what survives for the rest of Georgia, from Federal direct tax records for 1865-1866 (National Archives Microfilm 762); the extensive personal information on African-Americans in Freedman's Bank Records for 1870-1874 (National Archives microfilm M816); and records of the field offices of the Freedmen's Bureau in Georgia (National Archives microfilm M1903) are all included on the subscription websites Ancestry.com and Ancestrylibrary.com and can there be searched electronically.

LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

Atlanta's research sources are scattered among many research centers, not all within the seventy-five-mile radius of Five Points. Getting to them can be an adventure beyond research. Who would want to pass up the chance to experience the city's infamous traffic and enigmatically twisted streets, what local writer Lewis Grizzard described as asphalt-covered buffalo tails and water runs? The major research centers are listed below, but many local libraries, such as Marietta and Decatur, also have heritage rooms with valuable local resources.

The Kenan Research Center, Atlanta History Center, 130 West Paces Ferry Road NW, Atlanta, GA 30305-1366, has extensive Atlanta-oriented private manuscript and photograph collections. The grounds include educational, entertaining, and extensive museums:¹³ <https://www.atlantahistorycenter.com/buildings-and-grounds/kenan-research-center/>.

The Georgia Archives (formerly the Georgia Department of Archives and History) is immediately southwest of Atlanta at 5800 Jonesboro Road, Morrow, Ga. 30260. It has extensive holdings of government, church, photographic, and manuscript materials for all of Georgia.¹⁴ Website: <https://www.georgiaarchives.org>.

The National Archives Southeast Region, the Federal archives for court records, and much more for Atlanta, Georgia, the Deep South, and Kentucky, shares a parking lot with the Georgia Archives, 5780 Jonesboro Road, Morrow, Ga. 30260. Among its holdings of special interest to Atlanta researchers are Federal court records, post-Civil War federal direct tax records, and the records of the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. It has a number of valuable handouts on its specific holdings. Website: <https://www.archives.gov/atlanta>.

The Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library (MARBL), Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, 540 Asbury Circle, Atlanta, Ga. 30322-2870, has extensive Atlanta holdings but especially Civil War letters, diaries, etc., and papers of the city's most famous citizens: <http://marbl.library.emory.edu>

Just outside of the famous seventy-five-mile range of "near Atlanta" are two of Georgia's greatest libraries for Georgia research. The Hargrett Rare Book & Manuscripts Library, University of Georgia Libraries, 320 S. Jackson St., Athens, Ga. 30602-1641 (website: <http://www.libs.uga.edu/hargrett>), has the most extensive holdings of historical Georgia manuscript materials and books in the world as well as family, biographical, and other vertical files.¹⁵ The Genealogical & Historical Room, Washington Memorial Library, 1180 Washington Ave., Macon, Ga. 31201-1790 (website: https://bibblib.org/genealogy_archives/index.php), specializes in central Georgia, the eastern United States, and Great Britain.¹⁶

Much of Atlanta's early citizens came from, moved to, or passed back and forth from Troup County, Georgia, and the adjoining areas of Alabama and Georgia. A valuable resource for researching these sometimes Atlantans is the Troup County Archives, 136

Main Street, POB 1051, LaGrange, Ga. 30241 (website: <http://www.trouparchives.org>) for its local government records and genealogical collections for the families of the Georgia-Alabama border.¹⁷

The Southern History Department, Central Branch, Birmingham Public Library, 2100 Park Place, Birmingham, Al. 35203-2744 (website: <https://www.cobpl.org/locations/central/southern/>) is two hours west of Atlanta. It is the one of the greatest collection of material for Southern genealogy and historical research ever assembled and has holdings far beyond resources for studying Atlanta's closest urban neighbor. Mercer University and the Georgia Archives each have microfilm of church records of many different Georgia faiths.

For other faiths, see:

Queries about Baptist records in the Atlanta area should be sent to Special Collections and University Archives, Mercer University:
<https://ursa.mercer.edu/handle/10898/346>

The Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta:
<https://archatl.com/offices/archives/>

For Atlanta's Jewish community, there is the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum: <https://thebreman.org>. Also see Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers within the Gate City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915* (Philadelphia, PA, 1978):
<https://archive.org/details/strangerswithing000hert/page/n7/mode/2up>.

For the Methodist Episcopal Faith, see Brent H. Holcomb's abstracts of marriages and deaths from the *Southern Christian Advocate*. Wofford College Library in South Carolina has abstracts of obituaries from that newspaper and some issues of the *Methodist Advocate*, 1869-1870s, that are on the subscription site GenealogyBank. Original issues of Georgia's *Weslyann Christian Advocate*, 1878-2008, are in the Pitt Theological Library, Emory University, Atlanta.

NOTES

¹ See "John Coffee's Search for the Lost History of the Cherokees," *Chattanooga Regional Historical Journal* 8 (December 2005): 143-64.

² Franklin M. Garrett. *Atlanta and Environs: a Chronicle of Its People and Events* (2 vols., Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1954), 1: 1-37; Robert S. Davis, "John Coffee's Search for the Lost History of the Cherokees," *Chattanooga Regional Historical Journal* 8 (December 2005): 143-64.

³ Marthasville and Atlanta were both officially named for Martha Atalanta Wilson, the daughter of Georgia transportation promoter and governor Wilson Lumpkin. The governor had roughly chosen the site for the southern terminus of the W&A.

⁴ Sarah Conley Clayton, *Requiem for a Lost City: a Memoir of Civil War Atlanta and the Old South*, ed. Robert S. Davis (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999), 19.

⁵ Mr. Brubaker also serialized the Atlanta Police Court Docket for the 1870s, beginning in *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* 41 (Winter 2005): 230-37.

⁶ Paul K. Graham, "The Search for Fulton County's Stolen Records," *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* 45 (Fall 2009): 217-22.

⁷ Joanne Smalley, "Georgia County Records: an Overview of Some Genealogically Significant Records," *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* 45 (Winter 2009): 301-10.

⁸ Ted O. Brooke, *Fulton County, Georgia, Marriage Records 1854-1902* (Cumming, Ga.: The Author, 2002); *Fulton County, Georgia, Marriage Records 1866-1902* ("Colored Books" A-G) (Cumming, Ga.: The Author, 2003); and *In the Name of God, Amen: Georgia Wills 1733-1860* (Atlanta: Pilgrim Press, 1976).

⁹ Most of the Stout Collection has been microfilmed and is available at such libraries as the Family & Regional History Program, Wallace State Community College, Hanceville, Alabama.

¹⁰ Also see "The South's 1867 Returns of Qualified Voters & Their Value in Genealogical Research," *Heritage Quest* no. 54 (November/December 1994): 62-3.

¹¹ The *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, in the last two decades, has published a great deal on Atlanta history. It is indexed annually and has an annual but bibliography of history articles about Georgia.

¹² *Atlanta and Environs* originally had a third volume of biographical sketches of then (1954) locally prominent men and, in 1987, a new third volume by Harold Martin in 1987 to bring the series up to 1976.

¹³ See Mike Brubaker, "Genealogy Resources at the James G. Kenan Research Center," *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* 43 (Spring 2007): 3-6.

¹⁴ For information on its holdings and those of other Georgia libraries see Ted O. Brooke and Robert S. Davis, *Georgia Research* (Atlanta: Georgia Genealogical Society, 2001) and Joanne Smalley, "Research at the Georgia Archives," *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* 43 (Fall 2007): 151-58.

¹⁵ See Linda Aaron, "Research at the University of Georgia Libraries," *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* (Winter 2007): 215-18.

¹⁶ See Amanda J. Cook, "Genealogical Resources in Washington Memorial Library, Macon, Georgia," *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* 43 (Summer 2007): 91-94.

¹⁷ See Ann L. Sherman and Jane L. Splawn, "Libraries in Georgia with Genealogical Holdings: Atlanta-Fulton Public Library, Atlanta, Georgia," *Georgia Genealogical Society Quarterly* 36 (Fall 2000): 237-40.