

# Earliest Records of Western New York State

By Marian S. Henry

When conducting successful genealogical research it is important to know not only what sorts of records might prove useful for any given problem, but also where those records might be located. For records at the county level, this requires keeping track of the changes in local government over time. Many of us have faced the situation in which our pioneer ancestors settled in a location before formation of the modern county. Thus the earliest records for a location can be in a county seat quite far removed from the current one. A case in point is Ontario County in New York State. In its current form, Ontario County covers an area of 640 square miles in central New York State. However, when first formed in 1789, this venerable county encompassed an area of roughly 2500 square miles! It covered all of New York State west of the preemption line -- very roughly, a north-south line from Lake Ontario to the Pennsylvania line passing through the northern end of Seneca Lake. The earliest records of this region, which currently consists of fourteen counties, are held in the Ontario County Records and Archives Center in Canandaigua. I toured this facility in November 2001 and describe here what I found.

Ontario County maintained its initial size for less than twenty years. This was a time of intense land speculation and hundreds of deeds in this time period track the land being sold, resold, and subdivided. Steuben County was formed from the southern portion of Ontario in 1796, and records for that county can be found in Bath. Territory to the west became Genesee County (county seat Batavia) in 1802. Genesee daughter counties include Allegany (1806); Cattaraugus, Niagara, and Chautauqua (all 1808); Orleans (1824); and Wyoming (1841). Livingston County (county seat Geneseo) was formed in 1821 from parts of both Ontario and Genesee counties. More territory to the south was lost with the creation of Yates County (county seat Pen Yan) in 1823. The present northern boundary was formed with the creation of Wayne County (county seat Lyons), also in 1823.

The Ontario County Records and Archives Center is located about three miles east of downtown Canandaigua, the county seat, in the town of Hopewell. (Canandaigua, pronounced can-an-DAY-gwa, is on the northern tip of Canandaigua Lake, less than ten miles south of exits #43 or #44 on the New York State thruway.) The center receives material from all of the county offices. Three full-time staff members work to convert the incoming records to microfilm. After filming, records are either returned to the county office or shredded, depending on the content. Original material to be archived is stored in acid-free folders and boxes in a climate-controlled chamber on floor-to-ceiling rolling shelves. Some of the records in the facility are closed to the public by court order or state law. Most of the records useful for genealogical research have been microfilmed. The following is a description of these records.

## Census Records

Ontario County federal census records from 1790 to 1920 are available on microfilm at the Archives Center. Indexes are available for 1790 to 1820, 1850, and 1860. State census records are available for 1845, 1855, 1865, 1875, 1892, 1905, 1915, and 1925. The indexes for 1850, 1855, 1860, 1865, 1870, and some indexes for 1875 are available online at the Archives Center [website](#).

## Land Records

Deeds are available from 1789 (the inception of the county) to 1915 and include the original pioneer sales in the Phelps-Gorham purchase. Mortgage records from 1789 to 1947 and assessment rolls from 1789 to 1993 are also available. Although the early records are not complete, they can be a useful complement to deeds and mortgages. [Indexes to deeds](#) from 1789 to 1845 are online.

## Court Records

County court records have not been fully indexed; it is a work in progress. The indexes for [nineteenth](#) and [twentieth](#) century naturalization records however, are available online. Holdings cover the time span 1803-1956 and include declarations of intent, petitions for citizenship, and naturalization certificates. Surrogate Court records (1789-1965) are indexed by name; indexes up to 1926 are [online](#). Files can include inventories and debts along with wills.

Guardianship records, available for the years 1789 to 1929, usually involve administering estates of minors. Jury lists for the nineteenth century are available at the Center and their [indexes](#) are available online. In addition to establishing the residency of your ancestor, these lists also sometimes list occupation.

### **Military Records**

Revolutionary War pension records and some early militia records are available. Draft lists are available for 1862, 1864, and 1917. A variety of Revolutionary and Civil War records are listed on the Center website.

### **Poor House Indentures**

Lists of children indentured to Ontario County families in the nineteenth and early twentieth century are available. The index is [online](#) and includes child's name, guardian's name, year, and town.

### **Vital Records**

Compared with other regions like New England, there are very few vital records for New York State. The state did not require vital records until 1880. The vital records that do exist are usually held by the individual municipality rather than the county. The Center does have some [marriage records](#) from 1908 to 1935, which are listed on the website. Alternative vital records sources such as newspapers or diaries are not found here. This they properly leave to historical societies.

### **How to Access the Records**

Ontario County Records and Archives Center

3051 County Complex Drive

Canandaigua, New York, 14424

Tel: (716) 396-4376

Fax: (716) 396-4390

[E-mail records management officer Hans Finke](#)

[Website](#) (From this home page, click on "site map" for links to individual indexes.)

The center is usually open for research from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. weekdays, but call ahead to be sure regular hours are in effect. This is a "pencils and gloves" facility. Stacks are not open. Researchers may bring their laptop computer, and even flatbed scanners are allowed.

Research service is available for \$25/hour (half-hour minimum). Direct your inquiries to Mary Jo Lanphear, Assistant Records Management Officer. A check for \$12.50 minimum, payable in advance, should accompany your request. You can print out a request form at the web site. Copying service is available for \$0.50/page (\$1.00 minimum).

The only negative note: There are no public restrooms or public telephone in the building. The closest facilities are in a nearby building appropriately housing the Department of Human Services.