

Oregon Land Donation Records

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FamilySearch

Introduction

An offer of free land was hard to resist. The Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 offered just that in Oregon Territory's Willamette Valley. The act became law on September 27, 1850. For those living in the Territory, or who arrived before the December 1, 1850 deadline, the grant was 320 acres for a male citizen 18 or older (or those who had legally declared intention to become a citizen) or 640 acres to a married couple. This legitimized the provisional land claims made before the 1850 act. Disallowed from land were African Americans and Indians, but American Indian half-breeds could apply.

Those arriving in Oregon after the December 1, 1850 deadline and before December 1, 1855 (the expiration of the law) were eligible to receive half the amount of donation land. The size of the land piece was dependent upon the date of arrival and the marital status of the claimant. The law allowed for 320 acres of designated land free to a married man and his wife. A single man was eligible for 160 acres. In an extension of the law in 1854 land was available but sold for \$1.25 per acre, with the cap of 320 acres. After 1862 the Homestead Law applied to Oregon land. Claimants were to live on the land and cultivate it for four years and after having done so would own it outright.¹ The potential for a nice homestead in Oregon was motivation for tens of thousands of white settlers to migrate to the Oregon Territory from 1850 through 1855.

The Oregon Trail went from western Missouri across the Great Plains into the Rocky Mountains to Oregon City, Oregon. Used in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s it was most heavily used in 1852. It was the longest historic overland migration trail in North America. The length of the wagon trail from the Missouri River to the Willamette Valley was about 2,000 miles. It normally took four to six months to traverse the length with wagons pulled by oxen. About 80,000 pioneers used it to reach Oregon, and about 20,000 to Washington before the transcontinental railroad in 1869.²

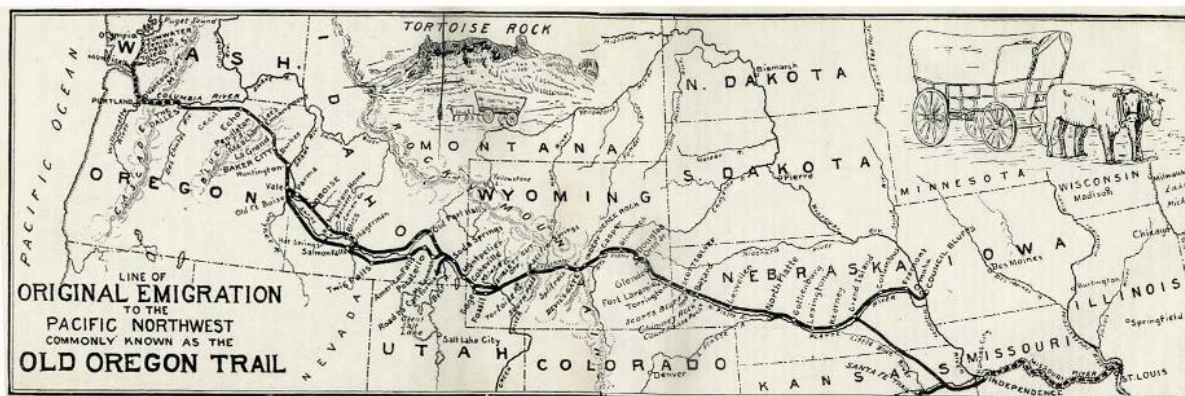
¹ W. W. Lester, "Part I, The Laws passed by the Congress of the United States, in reference to Public Lands, &c., No. 181," *Decisions of the Interior Department of Public Land Cases, and Land Law Passed by the Congress of the United States, together with the Regulations of the General Land Office* (Philadelphia: H. P. & R. H. Small, 1860), 165-9; digital images, *Google Books* (<https://books.google.com/books?id=N5E0AAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=inauthor:%22William+Wharton+Lester%22&hl=en&a=X&ved=0ahUKEwjs3rjLhsfMAhUeLmMKHVbDDk0Q6AEIHDA#v=onepage&q&f=false> : accessed 9 March 2016). Champ Clark Vaughan, "The Donation Land Act of 1850," *A History of the United States General Land Office in Oregon* (No date), 11-12; digital images, *A General Land Office Book* (<http://www.blm.gov/or/landsrealty/glo200/files/glo-book.pdf> : accessed 9 March 2016). William G. Robbins, "Oregon Donation Land Act," *The Oregon Encyclopedia* (No date); digital database (http://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/oregon_donation_land_act/#.VuCal_krldU : accessed 9 March 2016).

² FamilySearch Research Wiki, "Oregon Trail" (www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Oregon_Trail : accessed 17 November 2019), citing Wikipedia contributors, "Oregon Trail" in *Wikipedia: the Free Encyclopedia* (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oregon_Trail : accessed 12 July 2012).

Objectives

At the end of this presentation you will be able to:

- Understand the genealogical value of the Oregon Donation Land Claim files.
- Find helpful websites for indexes, history, maps and more.
- Access the original application files.



Genealogical Value of the Donation Land Claim Files

A Donation Land Claim file abounds in genealogically valuable information. The original application file will be the most valuable of the records associated with a Donation Land Claim. The following are often contained in a file.

1. full name
2. birth information
3. marriage verification
4. name of spouse
5. relationships
6. former residence
7. Oregon arrival date
8. claim dates
9. land description
10. citizenship

³ Ezra Meeker, "Oregon Trail, Line of Original Emigration to the Pacific Northwest Commonly Known as the Old Oregon Trail from The Ox Team or the Old Oregon Trail 1852-1906," *Wikimedia Commons* (https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Oregontrail_1907.jpg&oldid=141809132 : accessed 16 March 2016), Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Helpful Resources

FamilySearch

FamilySearch Research Wiki article: *Oregon Trail*

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Oregon_Trail

FamilySearch digital book: *Index to Oregon Donation Land Claims*

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/217794?availability=Family%20History%20Library>

Ancestry

Ancestry Collection: *Pioneer Families of the Oregon Territory, 1850*

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/28583/>

Ancestry Collection: *Index to Oregon donation land claim files in the Nation Archives*

[ancestry.com/search/collections/25541/](https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/25541/)

Digitized books: search the Ancestry Card Catalog using keywords such as: pioneers; Oregon; donation land claims or a combination of these and similar terms.

Oregon Websites

“The Oregon Territory and Its Pioneers”

<http://www.oregonpioneers.com/ortrail.htm>

Genealogical Forum of Oregon: “Pioneers and Early Oregonians Indexes, Donation Land Claims”

<https://gfo.org/resources/indexes/pioneer/overview.html>

Oregon Secretary of State: “Early Oregonian Search”

<https://secure.sos.state.or.us/prs/personProfileSearch.do?earlyOregonian=true&searchReset=true>

Trail Websites

“The Overland Trail”

<http://www.over-land.com/>

“Oregon California Trails Association”

<https://www.octa-trails.org/family-history-research/>

Histories, Journals and Diaries

FamilySearch Catalog: search the Catalog “Keyword” field with terms such as: Oregon, pioneer, trail, diary or a combination of these and similar terms.

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>

FamilySearch Books: search FamilySearch digital books and those of about a dozen partner libraries. In the search field use terms such as: Oregon: pioneer, trail, diary, history, or a combination of these and similar terms.

<https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/>

Ancestry Card Catalog: search “keyword(s)” field using such terms as: Oregon, pioneer, trail, or a combination of these and similar terms.

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog/#>

Maps

FamilySearch Catalog: search maps by using the locality in a “place” search.

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>

University of Oregon

<https://library.uoregon.edu/map/GIS/Data/Oregon/GLO>

Bureau of Land Management

<https://glorerecords.blm.gov/default.aspx>

Accessing the Original Records

Indexes are readily available in many forms and finding your ancestor in an index is the first step. Most indexes include the land office and the numbers you need to locate the original file. Indexes are found at many of the previously mentioned websites in the Helpful Resources section. It is the original application file which contains the genealogical goodies.

National Archives and Records Administration, Seattle Branch

Original files are available at the National Archives Seattle branch. They are free if you personally go to the archive but cost if you order them.

National Archives at Seattle: “Oregon and Washington Donation Land Files, 1851-1903” click on order copies.

<https://www.archives.gov/seattle/finding-aids/blm-subject-guide#blmatsea>

Genealogical Forum of Oregon

Application files are available at the Genealogical Forum of Oregon for a small copying fee and can be ordered online.

“Pioneers and Early Oregonians Indexes, Donation Land Claims”

<https://gfo.org/resources/indexes/pioneer/overview.html>

FamilySearch

FamilySearch has digitized the microfilm copies of the original application files and placed them online for free. Using the link below first locate the land office. The files are organized by land office and then by donation certificate no.

FamilySearch Historical Records Collection: “Oregon and Washington Donation Land Files, 1851-1903.”

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/18339?availability=Family%20History%20Library>