



U.S. Department of the Interior

# Guide to Tracing Your American Indian Ancestry

Office of Public Affairs - Indian Affairs  
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# Establishing Your American Indian Ancestry

Some people want to become enrolled members of a federally recognized tribe. Others want to verify a family tradition (belief, fact or fiction, passed from generation to generation) that they descended from an American Indian, either in their distant or near past. While others might want just to learn more about the people they descend from and where they lived.

When establishing descent from an Indian tribe for membership and enrollment purposes, the individual must provide genealogical documentation. The documentation must prove that the individual lineally descends from an ancestor who was a member of the federally recognized tribe from which the individual claims descent.

When people believe they may be of American Indian ancestry, they immediately write or telephone the nearest Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) office for information. That is not the best place to start. Many people think that the BIA retrieves genealogical information from a massive national Indian registry or comprehensive computer database. *This is not true.* Most BIA offices, particularly the central (headquarters, Washington, DC) and area (field) offices do not keep individual Indian records and the BIA does not maintain a national registry. The BIA does not conduct genealogical research for the public.

## Benefits and Services Provided to American Indian & Alaska Natives

- **The Myth of the Monthly Check**

There has long been a myth that Indians receive a monthly check from the U.S. Government because of their status as Indians. There is no basis for this belief other than misinformation and misconception of the status of American Indians. Some tribes, tribal members and lineal descendants received payments from the Federal Government resulting from claims settlements. But there are very few judgment funds per capita payments that remain today.

Some tribes distribute payments to enrolled members when revenues from the sale of tribal assets such as timber, hydroelectric power or oil and gas permit. Many tribes cannot make per capita payments because they do not have natural resources or other revenue from which they make a fund distribution.

Some tribes have successful businesses that do defense contracting, operate casinos and information technology companies, sell spring water and make candy. If profits warrant it, and tribal members approve it. Funds from those operations can be paid out as monthly, yearly or occasional stipends to tribal members.

There is a clear distinction between judgment funds and tribal funds. Judgment funds are appropriated by Congress after a claim that is filed by tribes or Indian descendant groups against the United States, is settled. Tribal funds are derived from tribal assets (refer to paragraphs above). An individual does not have to be an enrolled member of a tribe to receive a final

judgment fund payment. An individual must be an enrolled member of a tribe to be eligible to receive payments derived from tribal assets.

- **Services for American Indians**

Indian Affairs, through its government-to-government relationship with federally recognized tribes, carries out the Federal Government's unique and continuing relationship with, and responsibility to tribes and Indian people. Indian Affairs programs support and assist federally recognized tribes in the development of tribal governments, strong economies, and quality programs. The scope of Indian Affairs programs is extensive and includes a range of services comparable to the programs of state and local government, e.g., education, social services, law enforcement, courts, real estate services, agriculture and range management, and protection of natural resources.

Many Federal agencies other than the Indian Affairs have special programs to serve the American Indian population, i.e., the Indian Health Service (IHS), an adjunct of the Public Health Service, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). The IHS provides health care services through a network of reservation-based hospitals and clinics. Besides standard medical care, the agency has established programs that specialize in maternal and child health, mental health, substance abuse, home health care, nutrition, etc. The Administration for Native Americans, another agency within DHHS, administers programs aimed at strengthening tribal governments and supporting the social and economic development of reservation communities. Other agencies of the Federal Government that serve the special needs of Indian people include the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Agriculture, Education, Labor, Commerce and Energy.

All American Indians & Alaska Natives, whether they live on or off reservations, are eligible (like all other citizens who meet eligibility requirements) to receive services provided by the state such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), the Food Stamp Program and the Low Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

## **Enrollment in a Federally Recognized Tribe**

- **What is the purpose of tribal enrollment?**

Tribal enrollment requirements preserve the unique character and traditions of each tribe. The tribes establish membership criteria based on shared customs, traditions, language and tribal blood.

- **What are tribal membership requirements?**

Tribal enrollment criteria are set forth in tribal constitutions, articles of incorporation or ordinances. The criterion varies from tribe to tribe, so uniform membership requirements do not exist.

Two common requirements for membership are lineal descendency from someone named on the tribe's base roll or relationship to a tribal member who descended from someone named on the base roll. (A "base roll" is the original list of members as designated in a tribal constitution or other document specifying enrollment criteria.) Other conditions such as tribal blood quantum, tribal residency, or continued contact with the tribe are common.

- **How do I apply for enrollment in a tribe?**

After you have completed your genealogical research, documented your ancestry, and determined the tribe with which your ancestor was affiliated, you are ready to contact the tribe directly to obtain the criteria for membership.

Rarely is the BIA involved in enrollment and membership. Each tribe determines whether an individual is eligible for membership. Each tribe maintains its own enrollment records and records about past members. To obtain information about your eligibility for membership, you must contact the tribe.

- **How do I Locate the Tribe I may have Indian Ancestry from?**

The Tribal Leaders Directory that is published by the Bureau of Indian Affairs lists all 562 federally recognized American Indian Tribes and Alaska Natives. It also lists all the Regions, Agencies and Offices within the BIA. Obtain one on-line at <http://www.doi.gov/bia/docs/TLD-Final.pdf> or call: 202-208-3710.

## **Doing the Genealogical Research**

### **DO I NEED TO USE A COMPUTER?**

Yes, it cannot be stressed more that the use of a computer is a valuable tool in your effort to do genealogical research. There are many organizations and individuals that have digitized their records, pictures and files and placed them on the World Wide Web. The ability to gather records, current addresses, phone numbers and other vital information that you will use, make it a necessary tool to use. Computers and the Internet can be accessed at your local public library or local community college, check in your area.

Once on, there are many sites dedicated to the work of genealogical research, we do not recommend or endorse any of them. Also, be aware that these sites are usually private, for-profit and will charge you for their service. All the information they have collected is readily available for you to collect, if you know where to go and you are willing to do the work.

You should be familiar with the use of a search engine to find web sites that are of interest to you. Search engines are computer programs that search the Internet for specific words, that you enter, listed in meta tags of the web site. Use words such as Native American genealogy or tracing American Indian Ancestry as search words.

## **HOW DO I BEGIN THE SEARCH FOR MY ANCESTORS?**

Start your genealogical research with yourself. Do not begin genealogical research in Indian records for this can most often be the wrong approach. Instead, begin research in current, rather than historic records. If an individual is not currently a member of a federally recognized tribe, band or group research should begin in non-Indian records or other public records such as those records maintained by state and local governments, churches, and schools.

Individuals should find all the information they can about their parents, grandparents, and more distant ancestors and write such information down. The most important information is vital statistics, including ancestral names, dates of birth, marriages (or divorces) and death, the places where ancestors were born, lived, married, and died. During such research, the goal, especially for tribal membership purposes, is to establish and document the relationships of Indian ancestors and to identify the Indian tribe with which their ancestor may have been affiliated.

## **WHERE DO I LOOK FOR INFORMATION?**

- **AT HOME**

The first place to begin genealogical research is at home. Valuable information can be found in family Bibles, newspaper clippings, military certificates, birth and death certificates, marriage licenses, diaries, letters, scrapbooks, backs of pictures and baby books.

Relatives, particularly older ones, are another good source of information. Persons doing this research should visit or write family members who may have the genealogical information that they are seeking. Someone else in your family may also be working on a family history.

- **ON THE LOCAL AND STATE LEVEL**

It is often useful to check school, church, and county courthouse records for information. Researchers should not limit the scope of their search to birth, death and marriage records. Historical and genealogical information can be found in other civil records at the county courthouse such as deeds, wills, land or other property conveyances.

Write to the Bureau of Vital Statistics, usually in the state capital to request copies of birth, death and marriage certificates, or divorce decrees. Include the name of the individual, date and place of birth and your relationship to that person. State governments did not keep birth and death records until the turn of the century, about 1890-1915, so searches in state records for ancestors who were born or died before that time may be limited.

- **IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND OTHER REPOSITORIES**

Visiting the local library is a good starting point for gathering facts about Indians and Indian tribes. A wealth of information exists concerning the history of Indian tribes, tribal cultures, the historic tribal territories, and the migration patterns. Most libraries also have books on how to do

genealogical research. The genealogical research books give a good understanding of standard research techniques.

Researchers can also contact genealogical organizations, historical societies, and other private institutions. For example, the Family History Centers are "branch offices" of the Family History Library of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon). This private institution contains a large collection of genealogical documents relating to Indians that may be useful in research.

- **ON THE FEDERAL LEVEL**

***Records Concerning Public***

The National Archives (Archives) in Washington, D.C. has records of genealogical value. The Federal government took the census every ten years since 1790 and is a very good source of information for individuals who are trying to identify their ancestors. Census records from 1790-1920 are available on microfilm in the National Archives' regional branches. Seventeen branch offices are in major metropolitan areas throughout the country. A brochure describing the branch offices is available from:

The Archives at: National Archives and Records Administration, Publication and Distribution Staff (NECD), Room G-3, Eighth St. and Pennsylvania Ave., NW  
Washington, D.C. 20408-0001.

The National Archives also has military and service related records, passenger arrival records, and other records of value to persons involved in genealogical research. A copy of the free leaflet, *Genealogical Records in the National Archives* is available on request.

The National Archives has various publications for sale. The Archives have microfilmed all censuses. Individuals can purchase copies of the microfilm rolls and associated genealogical materials. Various rolls of microfilm are available for rental at the National Archives. The telephone number for rental and sales requests is:

1-800-234-8861

The National Archives Internet address is [www.nara.gov](http://www.nara.gov).

**Records Concerning American Indians**

At some point in the research, the researcher will have identified the tribal affiliation of one's ancestor(s). Now is the time to begin research in records about American Indians. The Native American collection at the National Archives includes special censuses, school records, and allotment records. For more information concerning the special censuses of various tribes, the National Archives offers:

