



## THE BIRMINGHAM GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

Founded April 15, 1959

[www.bgsal.org](http://www.bgsal.org)

<http://birminghamgenealogy.wordpress.com/>

## THE PIONEER TRAILS NEWSLETTER JANUARY 2018

**General Meeting for January:** The Birmingham Genealogical Society will meet at 2:00 p.m. on **Saturday, January 27th** on the fourth floor of the Birmingham Public Library (in the Computer Lab next to the Arrington Auditorium). The Board of Directors will meet at 1:00 p.m. in the same room.

Please join us as **Jim Anderson, of the Birmingham Genealogical Society presents: “From Notes to Notable: How scribbles led to an Ancestor with Historical Significance”** Most of us hope to find the rich and famous in our family history, and I found one, but famous for something you would never guess. Please join us!

### Research & Genealogical Tips

© Michael John Neill, “Genealogy Tip of the Day,”

<http://genealogytipoftheday.com/>, TIPDATE

**Administrators Do Not Have To Be Relatives:** Administrators do not have to be relatives of the deceased. Do not assume there were no relatives living nearby if a “non-relative” is appointed to administrate the estate. Administrators can be neighbors or others appointed by the court. In some locations relatives (including the spouse) may have to sign a waiver giving up their preferential right to act as administrator.

**A Homestead can mean several things, but two of them are rather specific:** **Homestead claims** were claims to federal property that were filed in the western states under the terms of the Homestead Act of 1862. The claim process (initially to 160 acres) was established by the 1862 Act. A **right to homestead** is generally speaking a right the surviving spouse has to remain on their “homestead” after the death of their spouse. The surviving spouse for whom this is an issue usually is the widow and the “homestead” may not include the entire farm—depending upon the amount of real estate involved. Homestead in this sense is generally determined by state statute and there may be additional references to homestead in other sections of state code (most often in reference to property taxes). A farm or piece of property that a family originally settled on and lived on for years could be more generically and more appropriately called a “homeplace.” Homestead (generating from Federal law) and right to homestead (usually generating from state law) are fairly specific terms suggesting specific records or property rights. Homeplace is something slightly different.

**SAVE THE DATE:** The Alabama Genealogical Society Spring Seminar will be held on Saturday, March 24, 2018 at Samford University. David Rencher will present “Online and Offline, Records are Windows to the Past.” You may find more information and additional information about the AGS Spring Seminar at <http://www.algensoc.org/main/SeminarFlyer.pdf>

**The past is not dead. It isn't even past. --William Faulkner**

*Scott A. Martin, BGS Newsletter Editor*

## Plat Books

*The following article is from the Ancestry Daily News and is (c) MyFamily.Com. It is re-published here with the permission of the author. Information about the Ancestry Daily News is available at <http://www.ancestry.com>.*

I knew what a plat book was before I ever heard of the word genealogy. Like many farm families we always had the latest one and three or four old ones sitting somewhere on my Dad's desk. The older editions of these books showing property owners throughout the county were always dog-eared from use. It was not long after I began my family history search that I realized these books were useful to the family historian.

### What Is a Plat Book?

A plat book is a set of maps (usually for an entire county) that show the owners of farm property and the approximate acreages and shape of each parcel. These usually privately published books are frequently compiled from county property and tax records. Plat books such as the ones discussed this week are not government records and are not official documents or proof of land ownership. The plat books discussed in this week's column are different from official plats and land surveys that may be recorded at the county recorder's or assessor's office. These official plats or surveys are usually drawn up by a surveyor and are made a part of the county's records. Plat books are not usually guaranteed to be completely accurate.

And that accuracy brings us to an interesting observation. It has been reported that in some cases in the last several decades, intentional errors have been inserted into these privately published plat books. The rationale behind the errors is that anyone simply copying the book to resell it as their own will also recopy the errors and thus prove that the copyist did not compile an original work. How true this is I cannot say, however, we always noticed a few minor errors in a local plat book that never seemed to be corrected as new editions came out.

### What Areas Have These Books?

Those with ancestors in state land states should be aware that the plat books discussed today are not often published in these areas (maps showing the locations of residences without indicating property lines may be available though). The land ownership maps discussed in this article are most frequently published in federal land states, where the township and range system is used. Drawing such maps for state land states where metes and bounds were used is significantly more problematic. [ADN Editor's Note: For a list of state land states and federal land states, see [today's Fast Fact](#).]

Before using a plat book, it is a good idea to become roughly familiar with townships, sections and how land is described in federal land states. (Readers unfamiliar with this system of land description can learn more from previous "Beyond the Index" columns on this topic [here](#).)

### An Example

This week, we will focus on an older plat book, one typical of the type a genealogist is likely to encounter: the 1874 plat book for Hancock County, Illinois.

This plat book contained an owner's map for every township in the county, but it did not end there. A directory of subscribers (purchasers of the book) was also included which provided the subscriber's township and section of residence along with their "business," nativity, and year of settlement in the county. A few subscribers also had sketches of their residences included in the publication as well. Unfortunately my ancestors were not subscribers to the book, so detailed information about them was not provided. In addition to the township plats which will be discussed later, there were plat maps for all the county's towns and villages. Some of these maps showed the names of various subdivisions and the owners of some larger town lots.

Street names were also included and in some cases one can easily see how many names have changed over time. One town's main street actually had three names (one name on the west end of town, one name in the middle of town, and another name on the east end of town) and one village with numbered streets started the numbering with Zero Street instead of First Street.

# Pioneer Trails Newsletter

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## The Farm Section of the Book

The map I used for Walker Township contained property listings for two ancestral families: John Michael Trautvetter and the Rampley family. (Readers who have never seen plat book images can [view samples here](#)). We will look at John Michael first.

The plat of John Michael's farm in section 31 indicated his farm was partially timber and had a creek running from the northern to the southern border of the property. John's home was apparently located along the property's northern edge about a half mile from the village of Tioga.

A quick scan of the neighboring sections revealed a few other German sounding names but no other families with the same last name as John. Section 31 is in the extreme southwestern corner of the township and the three neighboring townships should also be searched for possible family members. In this case the search will require use of plat books in Adams County, Illinois, as the Adams-Hancock County line is a mere quarter mile from John's farm. A search of the township to the east (Rocky Run) quickly located John's two brothers living on adjacent farms approximately seven miles from John. Not every person has relatives living next door.

The eastern part of Walker Township contained several members of the extended Rampley family. Father, James Sr., and sons, James Jr., John, Thomas, and Riley, together owned nine parcels in sections 12, 13 and 24 of this township. Here is where a map is helpful: Townships 12, 13, and 24 are in a column, with 12 being the northernmost section, 13 in the middle, and 24 being the southernmost section. A significant amount of the family's property is timberland and Bear Creek runs through several of the properties. In situations such as this, a map makes for a clearer picture than simply a verbal description. John Luft, whose wife was a sister to the Rampley brothers, owns property adjacent to Thomas Rampley. A. J. Newman is another nearby property owner and the brother of Riley's wife. There is a cross for a nearby cemetery, which happens to be where many of the Rampleys are buried. As I read the names of other nearby landowners in 1874 I recognized several as being mentioned in the Civil War pension files of three of the Rampley brothers.

## Finding Plat Books

Plat books may be available in print form, on microfilm or microfiche, or online in digital format. Books that are only accessible on paper will probably require onsite access as most of these items are in restricted collections. Many older plat books have been put on microfilm or microfiche and these films are more likely to be available through your local library on interlibrary loan. Older plat books (out of copyright) may have been scanned and placed on a website.

Here's an incomplete listing of plat book finding aids for some states:

- [Maps in the Illinois State Library](#)
- [Indiana State Library](#)
- [University of Iowa Map Collection](#)
- [Kansas State Historical Library](#)
- [Michigan](#)
- [Minnesota](#)
- [Nebraska Atlases and Plat Books](#)

Additional bibliographical information can be found by searching for "plat book [your state]" (without the quotes and brackets) through your favorite search engine.

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State and local libraries are excellent places to look for such materials. Larger libraries, such as the Newberry library ([www.newberry.org](http://www.newberry.org)), the Allen County Public Library ([www.acpl.lib.in.us](http://www.acpl.lib.in.us)), the Library of Congress ([www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)), and the Family History Library ([www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)) have significant collections of these materials. Even if the facilities do not allow for interlibrary loan, a search of their catalog may at least make the researcher aware of the existence of a particular item. County genealogy web sites ([www.usgenweb.org](http://www.usgenweb.org)) may contain scans of older plat books, indexes of names of landowners, or a listing of years for which books are available. Some plat books may have been reprinted with an index by a local genealogical or historical society. Representatives from a local genealogical or historical society may know what plat books have been published for their area and how these materials can be accessed.

## Modern Plat Book Publishers

For many counties in federal land states, current plat books are still published. In many cases the county's recorder of deeds, assessor's office, farm bureau, or extension office may know where a current book can be purchased. Modern books can help the genealogist determine the present owner of an ancestral farm or from what landowner permission must be obtained before visiting an abandoned cemetery.

- Farm and Home Publishers  
[www.farmandhomepublishers.com](http://www.farmandhomepublishers.com)
- Rockford Map Publishers  
[www.rockfordmap.com](http://www.rockfordmap.com)
- Platmaps.com  
[www.platmaps.com](http://www.platmaps.com)
- Cloud Cartographics  
<http://ccimaps.com/index.php>

Whether printed in the last week or in the last century, a plat book for your rural ancestor's county may give you a picture of his property and his neighborhood. And who among us couldn't use one more picture relating to an ancestor?

Michael John Neill is the Course I Coordinator at the Genealogical Institute of Mid America (GIMA) held annually in Springfield, Illinois, and is also on the faculty of Carl Sandburg College in Galesburg, Illinois. Michael is currently a member of the board of the Federation of Genealogical Societies ([www.fgs.org](http://www.fgs.org)). He conducts seminars and lectures nationally on a wide variety of genealogical and computer topics and contributes to several genealogical publications, including *Ancestry Magazine* and *Genealogical Computing*. You can e-mail him at [mjnrootdig@myfamily.com](mailto:mjnrootdig@myfamily.com) or visit his website at [www.rootdig.com](http://www.rootdig.com), but he regrets that he is unable to assist with personal research.

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## WHAT WERE POORHOUSES?

<http://www.poorhousestory.com/history.htm>

Poorhouses were tax-supported residential institutions to which people were required to go if they could not support themselves. They were started as a method of providing a less expensive (to the taxpayers) alternative to what we would now days call "welfare" - what was called "outdoor relief" in those days. People requested help from the community Overseer of the Poor (sometimes also called a Poor Master) - an elected town official. If the need was great or likely to be long-term, they were sent to the poorhouse instead of being given relief while they continued to live independently. Sometimes they were sent there even if they had not requested help from the Overseer of the Poor. That was usually done when they were found guilty of begging in public, etc.[One misconception should be cleared up here; they were **not** technically "debtors' prisons." Someone could owe a great deal of money, but if they could still provide themselves with the necessities for remaining independent they might avoid the poorhouse.] Prior to the establishment of poorhouses the problem of what to do with paupers in a community was dealt with in one of three ways:

**Outdoor Relief provided through an Overseer of the Poor:** When people fell upon hard times and members of their family, friends or members of their church congregations could not provide enough assistance to tide them over, they made application to an elected local official called the Overseer of the Poor. Within a budget of tax money, he might provide them with food, fuel, clothing, or even permission to get medical treatment to be paid out of tax funds.

**Auctioning off the Poor:** People who could not support themselves (and their families) were put up for bid at public auction. In an unusual type of auction, the pauper was sold to the *lowest bidder* (the person who would agree to provide room and board for the lowest price) -- usually this was for a specific period of a year or so. The person who got the contract got the use of the labor of the pauper for free in return for feeding, clothing, housing and providing health care for the pauper and his/her family. This was actually a form of indentured servitude. It sounds a lot like slavery -- except that it was technically not for the pauper's entire lifetime. And it had many of the perils of slavery. The welfare of the paupers depended almost entirely upon the kindness and fairness of the bidder. If he was motivated only by a desire to make the maximum profit off the "use" of the pauper, then concern for "the bottom line" might result in the pauper being denied adequate food, or safe and comfortable shelter, or even necessary medical treatment. And there often was very little recourse for protection against abuse. (See scan of an authentic record of an auction in 1832 in Sandown NH.)

**Contracting with someone in the community to care for Paupers:** In this situation the care of a *group* of paupers was delegated to the person(s) who would contract to provide care at, again, the lowest price. This system allowed the opportunity for somewhat better supervision as indicated in the terms of the contract -- which might specify what minimum standard of care must be provided and that community officers would do inspections, etc. There were still often the same opportunities for abuse that were noted above. Note: In some cases (before state laws began to *require* the establishment of County Poorhouses) local communities had already discovered that a place to house paupers helped reduce the cost of poor relief. These **small town poorhouses** were the prototypes for the later state-required county poorhouses. Those earlier poorhouses often instituted the use of an adjacent farm on which the paupers could work to raise their own food, thus making the houses more self-sufficient (relying less on local tax funds). That is how the term "poor farm" came into being.

During the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the industrial revolution had its effect on the United States, the importation of the factory system from England was followed almost immediately by the full scale adoption of what seemed to be an inherent component of that system -- the Poorhouse System. These poorhouses were built with great optimism. They promised to be a much more efficient and cheaper way to provide relief to *paupers*. And there was a fervent popular belief that housing such people in institutions would provide the opportunity to reform them and cure them of the bad habits and character defects that were assumed to be the cause of their poverty.

# Pioneer Trails Newsletter

## REMOVAL OF THE COUNTY JAIL.

The editor of the Evening News has become very enthusiastic in his efforts to have the county jail removed, but he has thus far failed to give a single argument in favor of its removal. He says it must be done, and farther than this he can say no more. I do not believe it will be removed. It was located where it now stands in 1873 or 1874 by the votes of the people of Jefferson county, and there, as I confidently believe, it will remain long after Mr. Rhodes has passed to his eternal reward.

From all the information I can gather our people are opposed to the removal by a large majority. Our able and competent Board of Revenue, I am informed, will give no encouragement to the removal. Carthage fell many centuries ago, but the county jail will doubtless remain on its present site for many centuries to come, when the city of Birmingham will number its inhabitants by many millions.

C. C. ELLIS.

**The Jones Valley Times**  
**12 July 1906**



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