



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 American 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.*

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 AI/ANs**

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 American Indian 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 AI/AN 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 AI/AN people include the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Agriculture, Education, Labor, Commerce and Energy.

All AI/ANs, 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 Contact the Tribe I may have Indian Ancestry from?**

The Tribal Leaders Directory that is published by the BIA lists all of the federally recognized AI/AN tribes with their contact information. It also lists all the Regions, Agencies and Offices within Indian Affairs. Obtain one on-line at <http://www.bia.gov/DocumentLibrary/index.htm> or call Amanda Begay at 202-513-7602.

## **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?**

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genealogical research. The genealogical research books give a good understandi



## Cherokee Indian Ancestry

We have many requests on how to trace your Indian ancestry if it is Cherokee that we have provided a section for that purpose. The information on How to Locate the Dawes Rolls is useful to those trying to locate an ancestor that was from one of the five-civilized-tribes which is made up of Chickasaw, Choctaw, Seminole, Creek, and Cherokee Indians.

- **Brief Overview of Cherokee History**

About 200 years ago the Cherokee Indians were one tribe, or "Indian Nation" that lived in the southeast part of what is now the United States. During the 1830's and 1840's, the period covered by the Indian Removal Act, many Cherokees were moved west to a territory that is now the State of Oklahoma. A number remained in the southeast and gathered in North Carolina where they purchased land and continued to live. Others went into the Appalachian Mountains to escape being moved west and many of their descendants may still live there now.

Today, individuals of Cherokee ancestry fall into the following categories:

- (1) Living persons who were listed on the final rolls of the [Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma](#) (Dawes Commission Rolls) that were approved and descendants of these persons. These final rolls were closed in 1907.
- (2) Individuals enrolled as members of the [Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians](#) of North Carolina and their descendants who are eligible for enrollment with the Band.
- (3) Persons on the list of members identified by a resolution dated April 19, 1949, and certified by the Superintendent of the Five Civilized Tribes Agency and their descendants who are eligible for enrollment with the [United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians](#) of Oklahoma.
- (4) All other persons of Cherokee Indian ancestry.

After about a half century of self-government, a law enacted in 1906 directed that final rolls be made and that each enrollee be given an allotment of land or paid cash in lieu of an allotment. The Cherokees formally organized in 1975 with the adoption of a new Constitution that superseded the 1839 Cherokee Nation Constitution. This new Constitution establishes a Cherokee Register for the inclusion of any Cherokee for membership purposes in the Cherokee Nation. Members must be citizens as proven by reference to the Dawes Commission Rolls. Including in this are the Delaware Cherokees of Article II of the Delaware Agreement dated May 8, 1867, and the Shawnee Cherokees of Article III of the Shawnee Agreement dated June 9, 1869, and/or their descendants.

P.L. 100-472, authorizes through a planning and negotiation process Indian Tribes to administer and manage programs, activities, function, and services previously managed by the Bureau of



Indian Affairs. Pursuant to P.L. 100-472 the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma has entered into a Self-governance Compact and now provides those services previously provided by the BIA. Enrollment and allotment records are maintained by the Cherokee Nation. Any question with regard to the Cherokee Nation should be referred to:

Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma  
P.O. Box 948  
Tahlequah, OK 74465  
Phone: (918) 456-0671; Fax: (918) 458-5580  
[www.cherokee.org](http://www.cherokee.org)

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians of North Carolina is a federally recognized tribe and has its own requirements for membership. Inquiries as to these requirements or for information shown in the records may be addressed to the BIA Cherokee Agency, 441 North, 257 Tsali Blvd., Cherokee, NC 28719, Phone: (828) 497-9131, Fax: (828) 497-6715, or to the tribe at:

Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians  
Qualla Boundary, P.O. Box 455  
Cherokee, NC 28719  
Phone: (828) 497-2771; Fax: (828) 497-7007  
ask for the Tribal Enrollment Office  
[www.cherokee-nc.com](http://www.cherokee-nc.com)

## Locating the Dawes Rolls

The Dawes Commission was organized in 1893 to accept applications for tribal enrollment between 1899 and 1907 from American Indians of the Five Civilized Tribes who resided in the Indian Territory, which later became the eastern portion of Oklahoma. The Five Civilized Tribes consist of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole, and Chickasaw Indians.

There are several places to get access to the Dawes rolls to see if your ancestor is listed, here are three locations.

National Archives & Records Administration  
Southwest Region  
P.O. Box 6216  
Fort Worth, TX 76115  
Phone: 817-334-5621  
Email: [archives@ftworth.nara.gov](mailto:archives@ftworth.nara.gov)  
URL: [www.nara.gov](http://www.nara.gov)

Oklahoma Historical Society  
Archives and Manuscripts Division  
2100 N. Lincoln Blvd.  
Oklahoma City, OK 73105  
Phone: 405-521-2491

Tulsa City-County Library  
400 Civic Center  
Tulsa, OK 74103  
Phone: 918-596-7977  
URL: [www.tulsalibrary.org](http://www.tulsalibrary.org)  
Collection: <http://www.tulsalibrary.org/genealogy/amindianresearch.php>