

# Understanding County Boundaries Through Time

DOING RESEARCH IN the southeastern US has taught me the importance of really understanding county and state boundaries and how they have changed through time. When an ancestor suddenly shows up in the records of a new county, or disappears from the records of an old county, it may be a case where he is exactly where he has been for years. Perhaps a new county was formed and/or a county boundary changed. To show you what I mean, let's look at this North Carolina example — someone could have lived in Anson county in 1750 and then, in 1753, they were in Rowan County. Then in 1770, it was Surry county, Wilkes by 1777 and Ashe by 1799. So, in less than two generations, this family lived in, and conceivably is recorded in the records of, five different counties.

Much has been published about the formation of counties in various states. The issue that I always struggled with was how to “visualize” what was actually taking place as these new counties were formed. Legal descriptions of boundary changes, with all their details of landmarks with which I am unfamiliar, challenged me too much to fully appreciate what the lay of the land was.

Historically, I have used books such as those mentioned on the next page, to help me better understand county formation history. Once your research starts taking you all around the country, possibly for only a generation or two, it may not be practical to acquire these for one's library.

Fortunately, there are two websites that can help you visualize and understand how county boundaries have changed over time. While neither of these give you the nitty-gritty details of exactly what the “law” was at the time a new county was formed, or

a boundary changed, they give you a visual overview of what was occurring. With an improved understanding of the evolution of counties in your target area, you are less likely to overlook what could be valuable records located in a predecessor (or successor) county.

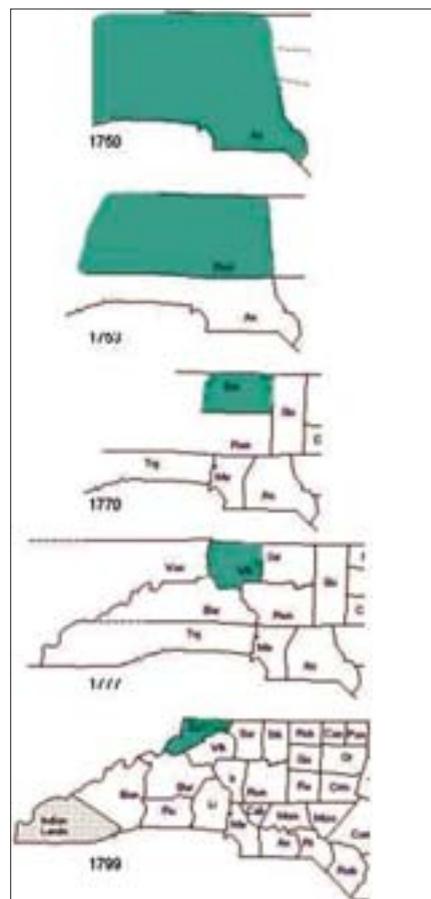
## US County Maps

[http://www.familyhistory101.com/map\\_county.html](http://www.familyhistory101.com/map_county.html)

This website contains a series of maps that were created using AniMap Plus County Boundary Historical Atlas v. 3.0 (Win), <http://www.goldbug.com/store/animap3.html>.

Let's see what we can learn from the maps that correlate to the dates mentioned in our example — 1750, 1753, 1770, 1777 and 1799. Now it's possible to see that Ashe county (shaded in teal), formed in

*Right: Ashe County NC Formation, 1750-1799, via FamilyHistory101.com. Below: The FamilyHistory101 site is a great map-based online resource.*



## Understanding County Boundaries Through Time

1799, is the upper left corner of what was Anson county in 1750. This tells me that anyone who remained in what became Ashe county during this 50 year time period was originally a pioneer in the hinterlands of North Carolina in 1750. By 1799, North Carolina has ceded its western region (now Tennessee) and the state is composed of about 60 counties (versus 16 in 1750). The westward march of settlers is clearly going strong.

Similar county evolutions exist for many locales. The best feature of this website is that you get a quick sense of how the counties evolved over time with respect to their surrounding and/or parent counties.

Other maps created in a similar fashion, for different purposes, can be found at My Census Maps, [www.familyhistory101.com/map\\_census.html](http://www.familyhistory101.com/map_census.html) (every 10 years, 1790-1930). With a focus on the census, this helps you correlate census results with the county boundaries of the time.

The next website is a little different, in that it provides you with context with respect to “modern” county boundaries.

### Atlas of Historical County Boundaries

<http://www.newberry.org/ahcbp/>  
Start with “View Historical State and County Maps” and the maps link. The metadata links provide a “commentary” and “bibliography and sources” for each of the states. This makes for an interesting overview of that state and its county formation history, as well as an extensive bibliography of resource material regarding county formation throughout that state’s history.

One feature of this website is that modern county boundaries are shown as an underlying layer. This provides you context about what a county’s boundaries were, with respect to what they are today.

Additionally, there are “layers” of other information that you can make active, such as Modern County Seats, Unsuccessful Proposals, Historical Counties and Modern Counties Names. And,

### ADDITIONAL PRINT RESOURCES:

Here are a few examples of print books that discuss historical county formation. See if one exists for the state that interests you.

- *The Formation of the North Carolina Counties 1663-1943* by David Leroy Corbitt.
- *Formation of the Pennsylvania*

*Counties* by Susan S. Koelble and Kristin K. Bryson.

• *Virginia Counties: Those Resulting from Virginia Legislation* by Morgan P. Robinson.

• *The Formation of Counties in South Carolina* by Michael E. Stauffer.

you can remove the State Background and Modern County layers if you just want to focus on historical county evolution.

Looking at 1750 and 1753, to correlate with our previous exam-

county name, or really had just moved there! Because most states records are stored in the “county” where the event occurred historically (regardless of what modern county’s boundary may encom-



1750, above, and 1753, below, NC Counties via Atlas of Historical County Boundaries.



ple, you will see that the historical county boundaries are shown a bit differently. Remember that maps are as imperfect as any other documents — they are a product of assumptions and available technology, and they reflect different purposes and interpretations. For these reasons and more, you can never look at too many maps!

Before you start your next project, look into the history of the county you are researching. If your ancestor arrived early, determine whether they could have already been in the area, under a different

pass that area), it behooves you to create a timeline of county formation and boundary alteration activity in parallel with or as a part of a timeline of vital events for your ancestor.



*Diane L. Richard has been doing genealogy research for more than 22 years. She currently does professional research in North Carolina and can be found online at [www.mosaicrpm.com/](http://www.mosaicrpm.com/) Genealogy*