

Probates (General Information)

Where are Chester County probate records?

Chester County Archives has probate (estate settlement records) for the years 1714-1923. Before 1714, records were filed in Philadelphia. Even after the Chester County records start, some residents still filed wills and administrations in Philadelphia. This practice of filing where it was convenient continued until the Revolution (CCA has published abstracts of Philadelphia wills for 1682-1825).

Chester County records after 1923 are available at the Register of Wills Office in the Justice Center.

What can I expect to find in will and administration files?

A typical will (testate) file contains a will, an inventory of the decedent's personal goods, and an account. A typical administration (intestate) file contains a bond of administration, an inventory of the decedent's personal goods, and an account.

Not all files are complete, as many executors and administrators never filed inventories or accounts.

Other papers, which are less common, include: a codicil (addition made to the will by the testator after the original will was written), a vendue list (list of items sold at public sale), supplemental accounts, and a renunciation (of right to administer the estate).

The following documents may be found in an original Will and Administration file:

Wills

A legal expression or declaration of a person's mind or wishes as to the disposition of his/her property to take effect after death.

Nuncupative Will

An oral will declared or dictated by the testator in his last sickness before a sufficient number of witnesses

Letters of Administration (Administration Bond)

The instrument by which an administrator is authorized by the Register of Wills to settle the estate of an individual who died intestate (without a will)

C.T.A. - "Cum testament annexo"

Letters granted in the cases where a testator makes a will without naming any executors

D.B.N. - "De bonis non"

Letters granted for the purpose of administering such of the goods of a deceased person as were not administered by the former executor or administrator. In most case the first executor or administrator is deceased.

Renunciation

Probate law grants the right to administer the estate of the deceased first to the spouse and then to the children. If a married man died intestate his wife would have the first right to administer his estate. She may choose to renounce her right and appoint another in her stead. A renunciation may also be found in a will file. If an executor appointed in a will decided to decline his/her right to administer the estate, he/she submitted a renunciation to the Register of Wills.

Inventory

A list of the personal property of the deceased. When looking at the original file, researchers may find family clues even here. If the decedent lent money and the inventory reflects his investments, you may find an entry like "bond to son William." It is also useful if the inventory reflects property from another individual's estate, "from the estate of decedent's father John Smith."

Vendue

A list of all the goods and personal property sold at public sale. Vendue lists are not found in every file. A public sale would only occur when the estate required additional monies to pay off legacies or the debts of the decedent. These may provide clues to family relations, providing the names of individuals who purchased items from the sale.

Accounts

A detailed statement of the debts and credits of the decedent. Accounts can provide many useful clues to both property researchers and genealogists. On the credit side, researchers may find a notation of the sale of real estate and to whom it was sold. Legacies granted in the will, will sometimes be reflected in the account. Since accounts are not completed until several years after a will is probated, researchers may discover the married names of daughters and/or the names of their husbands to whom the legacies would be paid.

Orphans' Court

The name of this court is often misleading to researchers. While the court does appoint guardians for minor children, it also acts as a probate court. In many cases, the records generated by the court contain additional information for family historians. Researchers using will and administration files are encouraged to consult the records of this court.

Note: there are no petitions for letters of administration naming next of kin until the late 19th century; there are no accounts of distribution until the 20th century.

How can I find someone named in a will or administration file?

[Chester County Archives has abstracts to wills and administrations for 1714-1855.](#) The abstracts are summaries of the wills and administration bonds. Every name is indexed. The abstracts do not include names listed in accounts of administration. The abstracts are the best way to narrow your search before requesting numerous files of a common surname. After you locate an abstract that interests you, request the original file.

What information does CCA have on probate records for areas outside Chester Co.?

CCA has the following probate abstracts and indexes (note: most abstracts do not include intestate records):

Berks Co., PA – Abstracts of Wills 1752-1825

Delaware Co., PA – Index 1789-1850, Abstracts of Wills 1789-1835

Lancaster Co., PA – Index 1729-1850, Abstracts of Wills 1732-1820

Montgomery Co., PA – Index 1784-1850, Abstracts of Wills 1784-1850

Philadelphia, PA – Index 1682-1810, Abstracts of Wills 1682-1825

Delaware (State) – Calendar of New Castle Co. Wills 1682-1800 (abstracts)

Maryland – Index to Wills 1634-1777, Index to Cecil Co. Wills 1674-1777, Calendar of Wills 1635-1743 (abstracts)

Note: Lancaster Co. (1729) and Delaware Co. (1789) were formed out of Chester Co.; Montgomery Co. (1784) was formed out of Philadelphia Co