

## Using County Formation Data In Your Research

by Paula Gammell

To follow up on our Info Sheet #2, “East Tennessee County Formation: Dates Formed, Parent Counties, and County Seats,” let’s see how to apply this data to some hypothetical situations.

Let’s use, as an example, Hamblen County. We see that it was created in 1870. Let’s say you found your ancestors there, early, so early that you suspect they were already there when Hamblen County was created.

So now what? Have you reached a brick wall?

No, not at all.

They didn’t just appear out of nowhere. Anybody who was living in Hamblen County on the day it was created was on the day before that living in one of three counties: Grainger, Hawkins, or Jefferson. There’s only the three options. So you just look in each of those counties until you find them.

Let’s say you have found them in Hamblen in the 1910 census, the 1900 census, and the 1880 census. So are they lost in 1870? No: in 1870 they were in either Grainger, Hawkins, or Jefferson. You *could*, of course, check each county’s census separately until you found them (but I’d recommend just checking in the many published or online statewide census indices).

Let’s say your ancestor sold land in Hamblen County in 1880, land that he had bought 20 years earlier. In 1860, when he bought the land, it was located in either Grainger, Hawkins, or Jefferson. Now, again, look in each of those counties until you find it.

Let’s tweak this example a little; let’s say he bought the land in 1869, but the transfer wasn’t proven (or acknowledged), and the deed recorded, until 1871. You would see in the description of the property that the land is located, say, “in the County of Jefferson....” Here of course is your answer: the tract was in Jefferson County. You should be able to go to Jefferson County deeds and pick up the chain of title.

Here’s something you may not have thought about: A person could have been born, lived, died *and have been buried* in one county, say, Jefferson, and yet you won’t find his grave in Jefferson County. You will find his grave in Hamblen County! Why? Simple: years *after* his death when Hamblen County was created his grave was included in the new county of Hamblen. You’ll find his grave in Hamblen County; you’ll find it included in any Hamblen County cemetery inscription compilations – but *don’t* look for his will in Hamblen County! Look for it in Jefferson.

By the way, you’ll want to locate where the land was located on a map. This will help you immensely.

Consider another example: sales of lots in the town of Grantsboro were acknowledged in Grainger County Court Minutes in May, 1801. Then Grantsboro became part of newly-created Anderson County; find acknowledgments and sales in Anderson County records – but only briefly! In 1806 Grantsboro became part of newly-created Campbell County; look there now. This has involved three counties in less than 10 years’ time!

On a related topic: What about the counties created back before Tennessee was a state? Does that change anything? Well, no, it doesn’t change much with respect to where you look.

Before, say, Washington County was Washington County, *Tennessee*, it was Washington County, *Territory South of the River Ohio*. And before that, it was Washington County, *North Carolina*. So you may find a deed or will that begins, “...the County of Washington and State of North Carolina....” No matter. Proceed as usual.

(Yes, it was also Washington County, *State of Franklin*. But that’s a topic for another time. Suffice it to say that there’s no separate ‘State of Franklin’ records.)

Does this seem terribly complicated? Don’t overthink it. Just study the situation carefully and take one step at a time. Remember, settlement preceeded county formation; people were already there, already settled – thus the need arose for a new county to be created; all you have to do is figure out *which* county they were in prior to that. And remember to consider the effect any county formation may have had after the fact.

The effects of various county formation on where and how we conduct our research can prove frustrating at first. But once you figure it out – and you will! – you will see that it makes perfect sense.

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