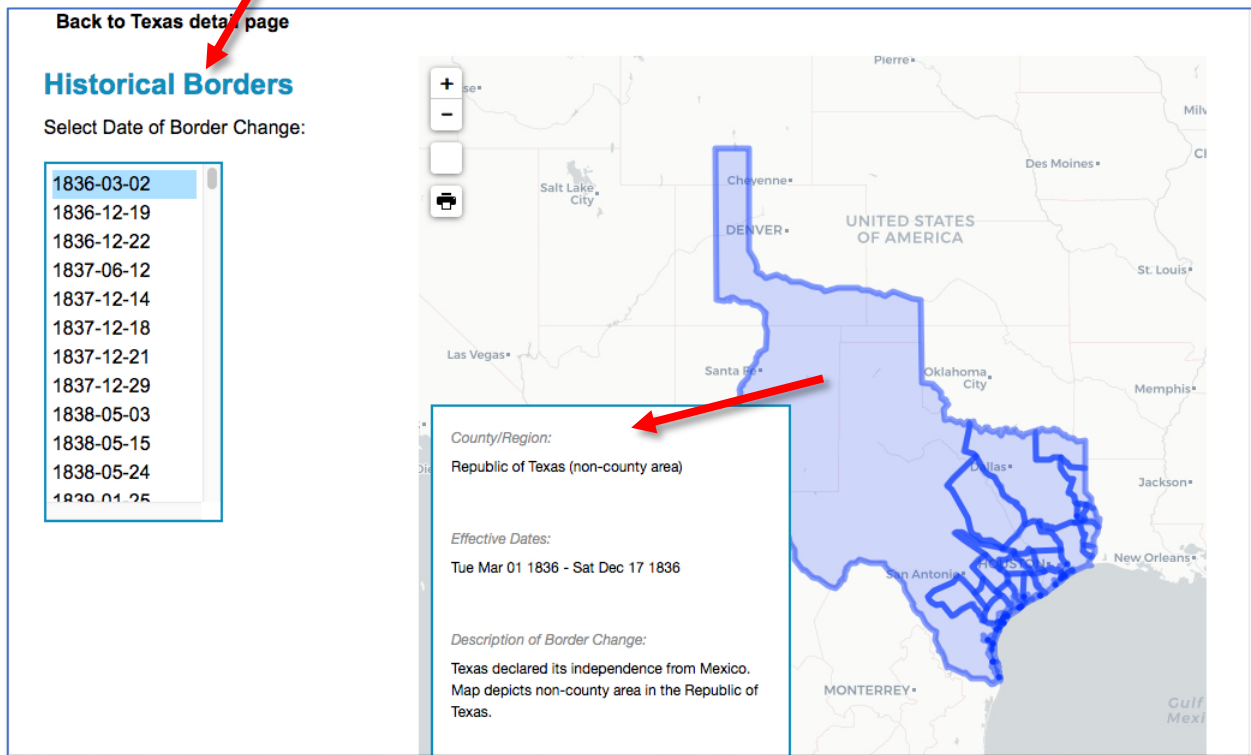# Newberry Atlas of Historical County Boundaries
Sharon Cook MacInnes, Ph.D., CG®

The key to finding your ancestors' records is knowing what county or counties they lived in over time since vital records, deeds, wills, probate records, tax records, and court cases are usually filed in county courthouses. County boundaries, however, were not set in stone: as people moved west to fill up the land, new counties were carved out of old ones. Many times a family living in the same location found themselves in two or three different counties as the boundaries changed around them over time. The Dr. William M. Scholl Center for American History and Culture at Newberry Library has created the *Atlas of Historical County Boundaries* project (https://digital.newberry.org/ahcb/) which is the most authoritative source available of changing American county boundaries year-by-year. Using colonial and state laws that created counties, the project includes all known border changes by date. The project can be viewed several ways.
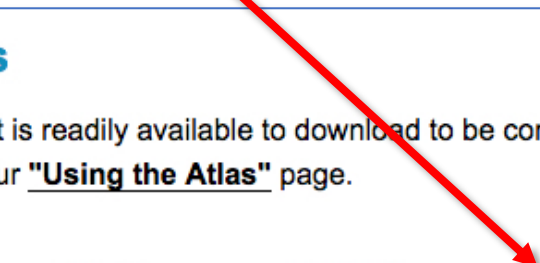
First, click on the state or territory of interest and then click on any of the choices. The ones I'm discussing below are "View Interactive Map," "Download the KMZ File for use with Google Earth," and "Download the PDF File."

1. <u>View Interactive map</u>
   a. Select the date your family lived there using the drop-down menu under "Historical Borders" on the left side of the screen. Check other dates of interest.
   b. Hover over any county given for that date for more information, including territory gained and lost by date
   c. Use the + and – signs in the upper left corner of the map to zoom in and out and see physical characteristics and towns to pinpoint your area of interest
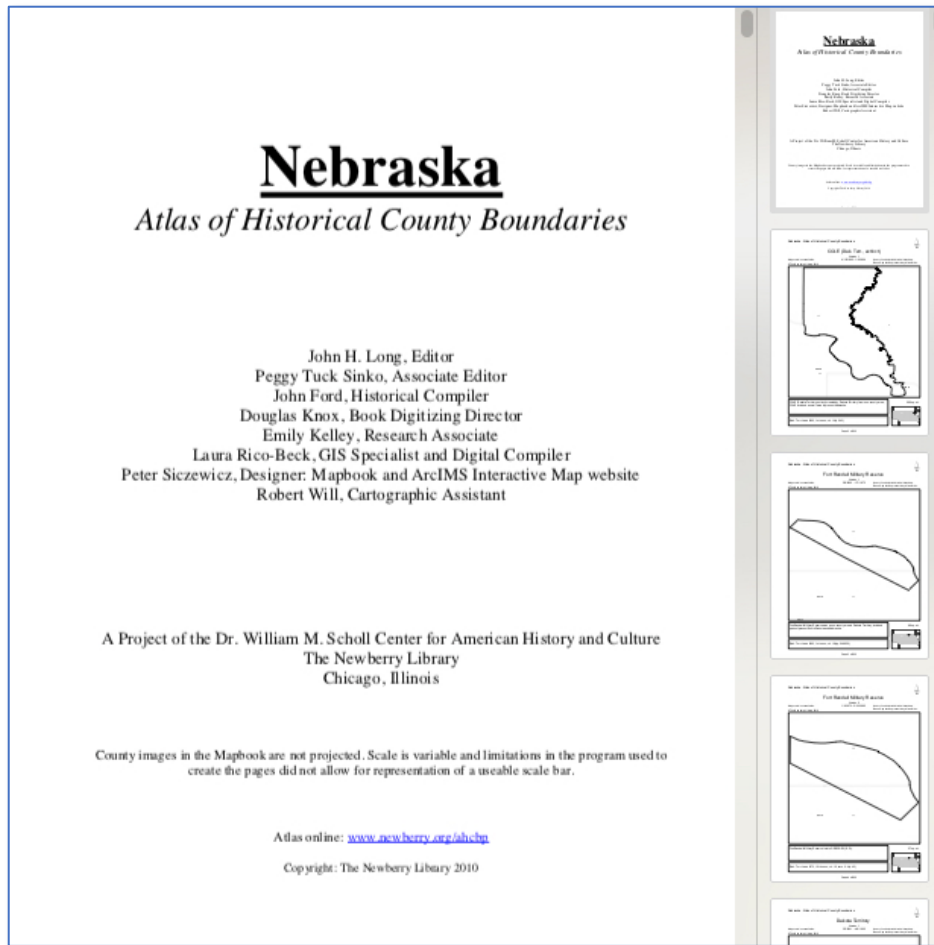
2. Download the PDF File: From the home page, click on "Download Files." Then click on the map labeled "State Downloads" and you will see three possible choices for each state (see below). Choosing "PDF Files" for the state you're interested in will download a zipped folder containing data from the project for each county in a specific state. Unzip it (use YouTube to find a video explaining how to unzip files if you don't know how; a great one for Windows 10 Chrome is https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usHoAc2lFOI). *Save* the unzipped file to your computer!

Download State Files

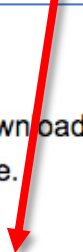The data used in the Atlas project is readily available to download to be consulted, review to use this data, please consult our **"Using the Atlas"** page.

State Name	GIS Files	KMZ Files	PDF Files
Alabama	8.2 MB	4.8 MB	35.1 MB
Alaska	42.9 MB	27.6 MB	16.8 MB
Arizona	2.2 MB	1.4 MB	3.2 MB
Arkansas	10.0 MB	6.1 MB	37.0 MB
California	10.4 MB	6.5 MB	17.9 MB
Colorado	9.4 MB	6.7 MB	27.5 MB
Connecticut	2.1 MB	1.3 MB	7.0 MB
Dakota Territory	10.0 MB	6.1 MB	22.4 MB
Delaware	0.8 MB	0.5 MB	2.1 MB
District of Columbia	0.1 MB	0.02 MB	0.2 MB
Florida	26.8 MB	16.6 MB	28.7 MB

Here's an example of the state atlas for Nebraska showing every change made to county boundaries from the time a small portion of Nebraska was part of Dakota Territory, then Nebraska became part of the District of Louisiana after the Louisiana Purchase from 1804-1812. In 1812 it became part of Missouri Territory, and so forth.

Nebraska
Atlas of Historical County Boundaries

John H. Long, Editor
Peggy Tuck Sinko, Associate Editor
John Ford, Historical Compiler
Douglas Knox, Book Digitizing Director
Emily Kelley, Research Associate
Laura Rico-Beck, GIS Specialist and Digital Compiler
Peter Siczewicz, Designer: Mapbook and ArcIMS Interactive Map website
Robert Will, Cartographic Assistant

A Project of the Dr. William M. Scholl Center for American History and Culture
The Newberry Library
Chicago, Illinois

County images in the Mapbook are not projected. Scale is variable and limitations in the program used to create the pages did not allow for representation of a useable scale bar.

Atlas online: www.newberry.org/ahcbp

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Download state atlases (pdf format) showing every date a county officially changed boundaries
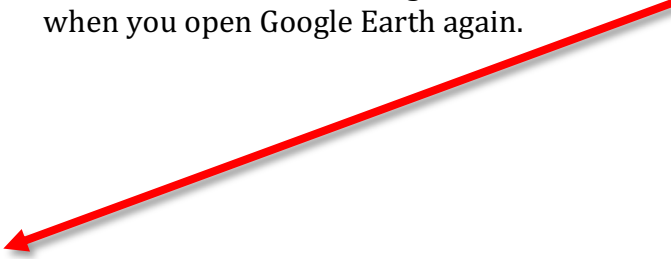
3. <u>Download the KMZ File for use with Google Earth</u>: Choose "KMZ Files" for the correct state. This will download a zipped folder of the atlas that will work with Google Maps or Google Earth if you have installed it on your computer.
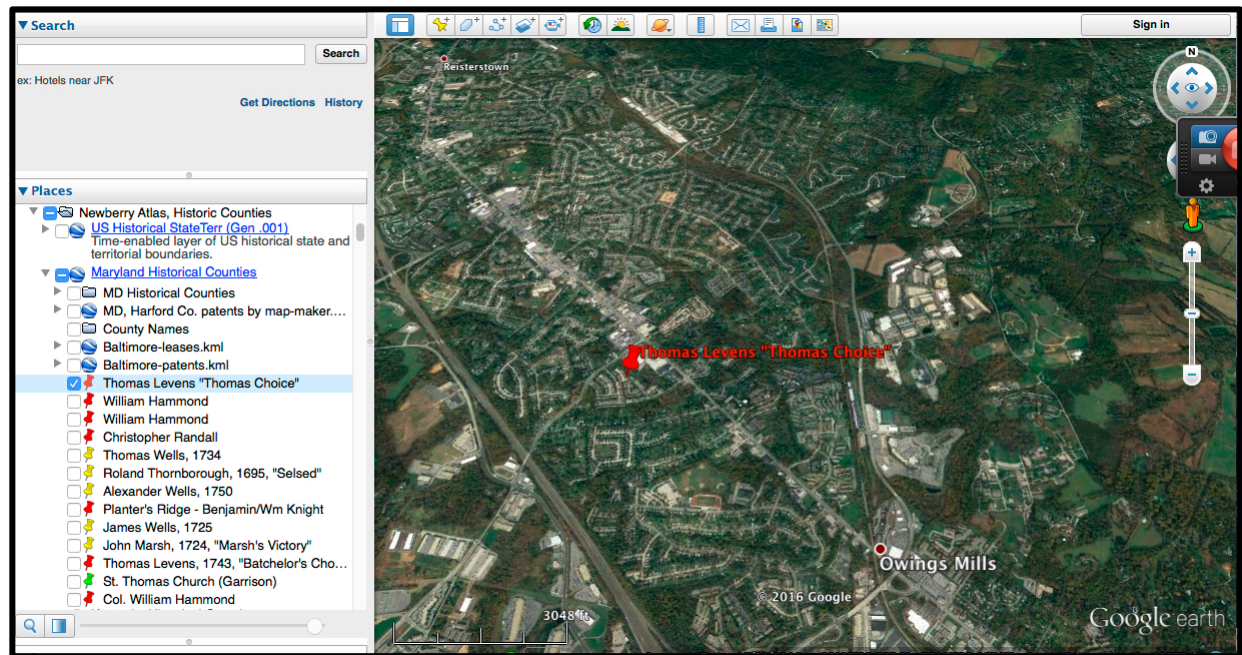
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District of Columbia	0.1 MB	0.02 MB	0.2 MB
Florida	26.8 MB	16.6 MB	28.7 MB

- Once you double-click or unzip the KMZ (Keyhole Markup Zipped) file it will turn into an unzipped KML (Keyhole Markup Language) file labeled "[State] Historical Counties." Save it to your computer (I created a folder on my computer called "Newberry Atlas, Historic Counties" in which to store KML files for all the states in which I am researching). You can then open it from your computer—and Google Earth or Google Maps will open with it. Alternately, you can open Google Maps or Google Earth first and then open the KML file.
- Google Earth will remind you when you close it that some items are in the temporary folder to give you a chance to save it. When you close Google Earth, go to File > Save > "Save Places As" or "Save My Places."

- These KML files will automatically be stored in Google Earth in the "Temporary Places" folder. You can drag them into the "Places" pane so that it is saved and loads when you open Google Earth again.
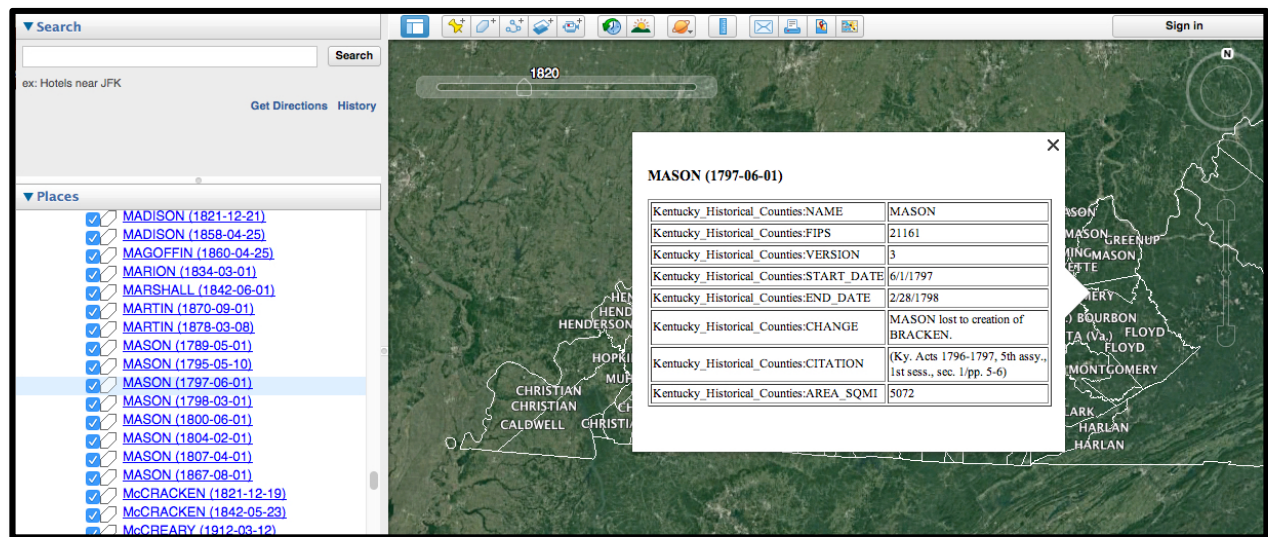
- Use the time slider at the top left of the map to move to different years. This is an image of Kentucky counties as they existed in 1797 superimposed over Google Earth.

Kentucky counties as they existed in 1797 (Newberry Atlas KML file open in Google Earth)

- Use the down arrow pointing at "Counties. "Hover over the county of interest to find when it was created and what its parent county was or choose a date in which the

boundary changed. This is an image of Kentucky counties that existed in 1820 superimposed over Google Earth.

Hover over a county or click on a date for specific changes. If you locate an exact area your family lives, you can zoom in on Google Earth to see more detail. (Kentucky counties as they existed in 1820)