

# Guide to Using Guilford County Deeds



## Overview

The county deed books are compilations of court copies of land deeds and other conveyances. They should appear in the books chronologically as they are recorded by the county courts, though not necessarily as the conveyances are made. Frequently, there are delays in recording a deed, and sometimes conveyances (especially State land grants) were never recorded in county books.

Most local history / genealogy collections at NC libraries will have county deed books for their county (and sometimes also parent counties) on microfilm -- at least up to the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Our filmed Guilford County deed books (1771-1906) are located in the same cabinet that houses the U.S. census, early Greensboro newspapers and records of neighboring counties. If you need pre-1771 deeds (i.e., prior to Guilford's formation but within what would become the boundaries of the County), you'll need to check its parent counties, Rowan and Orange (also in the cabinet).

Later deed books can usually be examined at the register of deeds office at the county courthouse. Virtually all deed books for counties in NC (except perhaps the most recent) should be available at the State Archives in Raleigh, either as originals or in microform (or as both).

## Using the Indices

For most NC counties (including Guilford), there are separate grantor and grantee indices to county deed books which are cross-indexed. Researchers will probably want to check both. The Guilford indices are organized in rough alphabetical order by

surname, and are typed and fairly easy to read (though sometimes you will also come across indices which are in manuscript).

It is important to note that indexed entries for deeds for each letter of the alphabet will be preceded by a surname key (e.g., the letter "S" will begin with a key with listings like "Samuels 9" or "Smith, Smyth 144-148"). These entries indicate pages of the indices to check for conveyances associated with a particular surname. Though all surnames beginning with a particular letter of the alphabet will be grouped together, there will be some deviations from strict alphabetical order in the listings. Using the surname key will overcome this difficulty. You should look for this key first (again, at the beginning of each letter of the alphabet), then proceed to the appropriate page numbers for your surname.

Once you've located your surname in the index, you'll find that most of the time the entries are listed chronologically. Moving left to right, the date of the conveyance will be followed by the surname, then the given name. In the righthand columns you will find the type of conveyance (usually a deed), how much was paid by the grantee or the acreage granted by the grantor, a letter or number designating in which book the deed appears, and the page number. Be sure to record the deed book letter or number and the page number for each deed you wish to look up.

## Using the Deed Books

To look up the deed, find the microfilm reel which corresponds to your book and page number. Since most old deed books were compiled by court clerks in manuscript, they may often be difficult to read. Sometimes ink and paper may have degraded over the years, also creating problems for researchers.

But, fortunately, deeds (land deeds anyway) tend to follow a fairly consistent formula, and once you get used to the formula it becomes easier to make out a difficult hand.

The first name to appear in a land deed is usually the grantor. Thus, you may see something like "John Smith of Guilford County and the State of North Carolina". There will then follow the consideration, i.e., something of value exchanged for the land, usually a sum of money though possibly (in the case of a relative) "for and in consideration of love and affection". The next name is usually that of the grantee, which may be phrased as "William Jones of the county and state aforesaid". If the researcher is fortunate, he may next find a description of the chain of title (i.e., history of ownership) for the land. Then follows the survey in metes and bounds: something like "a certain tract of land on the waters of Deep River . . . beginning at a black oak on John Jones' line running thence 200 poles 40 degrees to a white pine", etc. After this, you should see the number of acres comprising the grant, usually phrased "containing \_\_\_ acres more or less". Next, you will typically see legalistic language conveying the land to the grantee, such as "his aires and assigns forever", and the date of the conveyance. The deed should be signed by the grantor and two witnesses -- whose signatures were often just marks (x and o being most common), since many of our long dead ancestors were

illiterate. Lastly, you should find the court clerk's signature (hopefully he was literate) and the date of the deed's entry in the court record.

Though the order of the various components of a deed vary -- and chain of title is often left out -- most deeds follow some variation of the above formula.

## Summary

To find a deed: 1) locate the grantor and grantee indices, 2) find the surname key and locate your surname, 3) locate your surname in the grantor and grantee indices, 4) identify the deeds you're interested in, recording book and page numbers, 5) identify the deed reels you need and look up the deeds.

## Addenda

Please be aware of two other important Guilford County land resources. First, the Hughes Historical Map (which we sell behind the desk) identifies mid to late 18th century Guilford landowners, including many receiving State grants, as well as Rowan and Orange deeds, which were not recorded in the County deed books. There is an index to this map on pp. 127-37 of Fred Hughes' Guilford County, N.C. a Map Supplement (NC 975.662 H89). Secondly, there are some excellent deed abstracts for Guilford (NC 929.3 NC Guilford .37 B47 & P97), Rowan (NC 929.3 NC Rowan .37) and Orange (NC 929.3 NC Orange .37).