



# AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL  
AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER STUDIES

**Family History Unit**

Freecall: 1800 352 553

Fax: 02 6261 4287

Email: [familyhistory@aiatsis.gov.au](mailto:familyhistory@aiatsis.gov.au)

## Sources – police gazettes, court and gaol records

Legal records, including records created by the police, courts and gaols, can be useful for locating information about your ancestors. In fact, these records might be the only official mention of particular Aboriginal people.

During the early periods of white settlement, police officers in isolated regions often took on the role of local magistrate and sometimes became 'Protectors' of Aborigines, distributing rations and carrying out government policies.

Aboriginal people also worked with the police as trackers, sometimes in special 'native' police units.

### What are police, court and gaol records?

Police, court and gaol records are a diverse range of records that date from the early decades of white settlement. They include records like:

- police station journals, occurrence books and charge books
- records about members of the police force
- judges' bench books and court case files
- photographs and registers of prisoners

These records can provide many details about people's lives.

Police gazettes were publications circulated to police stations and contained lists of crimes committed, escaped prisoners, warrants issued and court reports. Not all the people mentioned were on the wrong side of the law – information was published about the victims of crimes, too, and about missing persons. Children and young people who absconded from institutions were sometimes listed in gazettes.

### What information do you need to look for these records?

You may need to search using a combination of:

- the name of the person you are researching
- the place they lived
- the dates they lived there

You can find useful information about police and court matters – such as newsworthy incidents, police arrests, court hearings and legal trials – in historical newspapers. It is worthwhile doing



searches on [Trove Digitised Newspapers](https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/) first to see what you can find.

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/>

Sometimes newspaper accounts are the only remaining record of events, since not all police, court and gaol records have been kept.

## Where do you find police, court and gaol records?

The police, courts and gaols were run by colonial governments, then state and territory governments after 1901. This means that you will find the records in the state or territory archive for where your ancestor lived.

Family history websites like [Ancestry https://www.ancestry.com.au/](https://www.ancestry.com.au/) and [Find My Past https://www.findmypast.com.au/](https://www.findmypast.com.au/) provide access to some police, court and gaol records, but you will find these records and more through government archives. Remember that later records may be restricted from public access. Reference Archivists can assist you with information about access.

The [Centre for Indigenous Family History](#) also includes many police records, the majority of which are held in State/Territory Archives. Remember you will need to type the phrase “site:cifhs” into Google along with the name you are searching for in “quotation marks”.

These websites are useful for checking but because they only have a selection of records, for more in-depth research you should visit or send a research query to your state/territory archives. Reference archivists will be able to help you to identify records that might be useful in your research.

### New South Wales

See these resources from State Records NSW:

- [A guide to New South Wales State archives relating to Aboriginal people](#) – has chapters listing records relating to the police, courts of petty sessions and Supreme Court - <https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/archives/collections-and-research/guides-and-indexes/aboriginal-resources-guide-nsw-state-archives>
- Index to Aboriginal colonial court cases, 1788–1838  
<https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/archives/collections-and-research/guides-and-indexes/indigenous-colonial-court-cases>
- [Police service records](#) – has information on records about Aboriginal trackers who worked with the police  
<https://www.records.nsw.gov.au/archives/collections-and-research/guides-and-indexes/police-service-guide>

## Northern Territory

From 1863 to 1910 the Northern Territory was part of South Australia. From 1911 it came under the control of the Commonwealth government until the Territory won self-government in 1978.

See these resources:

- Researching your Aboriginal Family History from Northern Territory Archives Service - - <https://dtc.nt.gov.au/arts-and-museums/northern-territory-archives-service/archives-information-leaflets>
- Information about the Northern Territory Archives Services in the National Archives of Australia's: *Tracking Family*: a guide to Aboriginal records relating to the Northern Territory - <http://guides.naa.gov.au/tracking-family/chapter5/5.17.aspx>

## Queensland

See these resources from Queensland State Archives:

- Records relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples - <https://www.qld.gov.au/recreation/arts/heritage/archives/atsi> and <https://publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/brief-guides-at-qlsa/resource/3a08df52-1b0e-4bbd-957a-c948a0712612>
- Police gazettes - <https://publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/brief-guides-at-qlsa/resource/d9a557b5-7286-4064-b067-c79d6520f064>
- Court records - <https://www.qld.gov.au/recreation/arts/heritage/archives/courts> and <https://publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/brief-guides-at-qlsa/resource/98e44d9d-483f-4321-a187-20a985f52a17>
- Murder files - <https://publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/brief-guides-at-qlsa/resource/363d1757-83c9-4904-aef6-84a40b853f44>
- Complete list of [Brief guides](#) from Queensland State Archives <https://publications.qld.gov.au/dataset/brief-guides-at-qlsa>

You might also find information at the Queensland Police Museum, which has material about the native mounted police and Aboriginal trackers.

<https://www.police.qld.gov.au/aboutUs/facilities/museum/default.htm>

## South Australia

See these resources from State Records of South Australia:

- Finding your Aboriginal history - <https://www.archives.sa.gov.au/content/finding-aboriginal-history>
- Courts - <https://www.archives.sa.gov.au/content/courts-0>
- Gaols - <https://www.archives.sa.gov.au/content/gaols>

You may also find information at the South Australia Police Historical Society.

<http://www.sapolicehistory.org/>

## Tasmania

See these resources from LINC Tasmania:

- Tasmanian court records - <https://www.linc.tas.gov.au/family-history/Pages/Court.aspx>
- Tasmanian prison records - <https://www.linc.tas.gov.au/family-history/Pages/Prison.aspx>

## Victoria

See these resources from the Public Record Office of Victoria:

- Koorie heritage: Aboriginal records at PROV – includes links to an exhibition about the native police and to other articles of interest - <https://prov.vic.gov.au/explore-collection/explore-topic/aboriginal-victorians-1830s-1970s>
- walata tyamateetj: A guide to government records about Aboriginal people in Victoria – includes a section on legal, police and prison records <https://prov.vic.gov.au/walata-tyamateetj-research-guide>
- Court records - <https://prov.vic.gov.au/explore-collection/explore-topic/justice-crime-and-law>
- Prison records - <https://prov.vic.gov.au/explore-collection/explore-topic/justice-crime-and-law>
- Police records - <https://prov.vic.gov.au/explore-collection/explore-topic/justice-crime-and-law/police-correspondence-records-1853-1920>

You might also find information at the Victoria Police Museum and Historical Services Unit -

<http://www.policemuseum.vic.gov.au/>

## Western Australia

See these resources from the State Records Office of WA:

- Aboriginal records – lists police, court and prison records relating to Aboriginal people <http://www.sro.wa.gov.au/archive-collection/collection/aboriginal-records>
- Court records - <http://www.sro.wa.gov.au/archive-collection/collection/court-records>
- Police records - <http://www.sro.wa.gov.au/archive-collection/collection/police-records>
- Prison and gaol records - <http://www.sro.wa.gov.au/archive-collection/collection/prison-and-gaol-records>