Early Land Distribution in Georgia: Who got it and why?

In Georgia, land was distributed by the state, rather than the federal government. Georgia used two methods of distributing land, the Headright and Bounty System and the Land Lotteries.

Land Distribution under the Headright and Bounty System, 1756-1909

- To obtain a land grant, a settler visited the land court where the land was located, verified his qualifications by swearing an oath or presenting a certificate for military service or other qualification. The court then issued a warrant of survey.

- Once a warrant was issued, the land was surveyed. Surveyors used trees, rocks, and other markers for boundaries. The applicant might accompany the surveyor and act as a chain carrier, showing the surveyor where he wanted the lot bounds. Land plots could be any shape.

- After the settler lived on the land for at least a year and paid the grant fees, he could apply to the Governor for a grant. Grants transfer the ownership of the land from the state to the individual.

- Because of widespread fraud and land speculation, Georgia switched to a lottery system to distribute land west of the Oconee River.

Headright grants: Available to heads of household; 200 acres plus 50 more for each household member (wife, children, and slaves) up to 1000 acres.

Bounty grants: Available to veterans, refugee citizens, and those who "could not be convicted of plundering or distressing the country" during the Revolutionary War; generally for 287 ½ acres.

Land distribution under the Land Lotteries, 1805-1833

- After an Act of Legislature authorized each lottery, the land to be distributed was surveyed and laid out in districts and lots. Surveyors sent the district and lot numbers to the state capital.

- Citizens of Georgia then registered in their respective counties of residence if they were eligible. A list of qualified drawers was sent to the state capital.

- Commissioners appointed by the Governor drew the names and the lot numbers from two separate drums.

- Some persons drew a blank ticket. If there were, for example, 1000 land lots and 2000 persons registered to draw, there would be 1000 blank tickets added so that the tickets would equal the number of persons drawing. With the exception of the 1805 Land Lottery, the State has no record of those who drew blank tickets.

- Those who won lots could then take out a grant to the lot, after paying a grant fee. If the winner did not take out a grant, the lot reverted to the State and was sold to the highest bidder.

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Georgia Land Records FAQs

Q: Can I find the original grant and plat (sketch of the land) for my property at the Georgia Archives?
A: Yes, the Georgia Archives holds Georgia's original land grants and plats. If your property is located in the part of Georgia that was distributed by land lottery (west of the Oconee River), you will need the land lot number, district number, and for original Cherokee County, section number. You can find this information on your deed or in many cases, listed on your county tax assessor's website.

In contrast, Headright and Bounty grants can only be accessed by the name of the original grantee. If your property is in the part of Georgia distributed under the Headright system (east of the Oconee River), then you will need to do a title search (chain of deeds tracking ownership) back to the name of the original grantee. Once you have the name of the grantee, you can find indexes by name, telling you where the grant or plat was recorded.

Keep in mind that modern property has usually been subdivide into smaller parcels from the original lot.

Q: What kind of information will I find on a land grant and plat?
A: Both Headright and Lottery grants and plats bring together the name of the grantee plus some variation of legal description of the location of the land. In a Headright grant the legal description consists of the county, acreage, names of neighbors (if any), and any geographic land marks such as streams or roads, if present. In a Lottery grant this description consists of the original county, land district and lot number. Land Lottery grants also list a fortunate drawers' county and district of residence.

Q: How do I prove a grantee's military service using land records?
A: Military service may be indicated in certificates for bounty grants. These were obtained from an applicant's commanding officer or for qualified citizens who did not serve in the military, from the commanding officer of the district. Certificates are located in RG 3-4-5 and online at www.familysearch.org in the collection, "Georgia, Headright and Bounty Land Records, 1783-1909". Not all bounty grants were issued for military service.

Q: When a grantee made an oral oath verifying his military service or the number of people in his family, did he list member of his family or give details about his military service? Was the oath recorded?
A: The oral oath to be made by a veteran of the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, or Indian Wars did not require a detailed statement of his service. The oral oath made by any other person did not require a detailed statement about his family. If, by any chance, any such oath may have been written or transcribed, it could be found only in the Minutes of the Inferior Court in the county where the oath was made.

Q: Who was qualified to be included in the land lottery drawings?
A: Qualifications varied by lottery. For more information about specific lotteries visit, www.GeorgiaArchives.org and click on the "Research" tab, and select "Research Help" from the dropdown. Under Georgia Land Research – Research Guides, click "Land Lottery Records."

Q: Where can I find more information on the land distribution and surveying in early Georgia?
A: *Georgia Land Surveying History and Law*, by Farris Cadle. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991) and *The Georgia Surveyor General Department*, by Marion Hemperley. (Atlanta: Georgia Secretary of State, 1982).