

DOWER RECORDS ARE NOW AVAILABLE FOR RESEARCH

A unique set of records not often used by researchers is now available: dower and homestead records from Probate Court. Nearly 500 dower case files covering the period 1803-1969 are now open.

Dower and homestead records document the claims widows made on their husbands' estates. Under Tennessee law, for most of this period, the widow had a right of dower, which meant she had a right to one-third of her husband's estate or, at certain times, to one year's support. Application for a dower was made to court (generally county court, which until modern times handled probate cases). In turn, the court appointed a jury of view or committee to determine the exact amount of property (real and/or personal) that would make up the dower amount. That committee then made a report with their findings and recommendations to the court.

These records can be useful to researchers in several ways. This includes determining approximately when the husband died; where the family may have lived in the county; children that may have been living at home; the amount and types of real estate and personal property owned by the family; details on the family's lifestyle and standard of living; details about economic and social life in the county; the evolving status of women through time, etc. In some cases, if the widow remarried, her new surname and husband may be identified.

While a dower was usually just for the widow, there are rare cases found in these records where a homestead or dower was provided to a surviving widower rather than a widow and, in a few instances, even to minor surviving children. Documents may include petitions, court cases, drawings or maps of property divisions, jury reports, court actions, etc. The dower files are arranged in alphabetical order by the name of the widow or claimant.

Many early dowers have been transcribed and published in the following book (a copy of which is located in the archives' Book Collection): *Widow's Dowers of Washington County, Tennessee, 1803-1899* by Gary R. Toms and William R. Gann (2004).

A guide to the dower and homestead records is found as part of the Clerk and Master Records of Chancery Court at the following url: <https://wctnarchives.org/record-groups/>.