Session Laws of North Carolina

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Years covered by this guide: 1819-1999

The North Carolina State Government Publications Collection has the digital versions of the Session Laws of North Carolina from 1817 to 2000. They were digitized as part of the Ensuring Democracy through Digital Access grant. The Session Laws from 2001 forward are available on the General Assembly’s web site. The print versions of the Session Laws are also available for use at the Government and Heritage Library, call number Z2 1:

What are the Session Laws? They are all the ratified (agreed upon) bills and resolutions in a given session of the North Carolina General Assembly, which is our state legislature, arranged in the order in which they became law. They are published in the official Session Laws of North Carolina volumes. From 1975-2005, Executive Orders from the Governor were also included in each volume. Each volume has a subject index.

How are they different from the General Statutes? The General Statutes are a subject-arranged collection of the codified forms of selected Session Laws. The General Statutes of North Carolina is the official North Carolina legal code, a collection of the statewide laws in force at the time of publication regardless of when they originally became law. The publication includes detailed indexing, annotations to court cases and attorney general opinions, official comments and cross-references.

Why would I want to search the Session Laws? The Session Laws offer a window into history, giving us a look at the laws that shaped North Carolina and affected the daily life of citizens from our early history to the present. In addition, the Session Laws contain many laws not included in the General Statutes, such as local laws and appropriations bills.

Genealogists may find the Session Laws of interest for a number of reasons. Until the early 19th century (~1820), before they gave the authority to the county courts, the North Carolina legislature had to approve divorces, changes of name, and the freeing of slaves. Well into the 20th century, the General Assembly passed laws naming specific individuals to corporate boards, county and city offices, and even benevolent societies, or providing relief from debts. In addition, Session Laws can have information about the location of specific roads, county, city and even farm property borders, and early industrial works like mills and timber farms.

How are the Session Laws arranged? The General Assembly in North Carolina operates on a biennial (2-year) schedule. Regular (or “long”) sessions begin in odd years, typically starting in January, and lasting several months. Short sessions are held in even years and typically start in May or June and last from a few weeks to a few months. The short session is a continuation of the long session, primarily addressing budget matters and unfinished business. The organization and continuous numbering of Session Laws begun in the long session continue to be followed in the short session. If, for instance, the last law passed in the long session was Chapter 1220, the first law...
passed in the short session would be Chapter 1221. An extra session (or “special session”) may be held if three-fifths of the legislators or the governor calls for one. In an extra session, the Session Laws follow the organization of the previous session, but the numbering of the laws starts over.

Up until 1945, public and private laws were published in separate volumes, and were numbered separately. Thus, there would be a Private Law Chapter 1, and a Public Law Chapter 1. Since 1945, all ratified laws are in a single numeric sequence.

A public law affects the public at large throughout North Carolina, and/or affects at least 15 counties. A private law governs individual persons, property, and relationships (or affects fewer than 15 counties). A local law applies to a limited number of municipalities or counties. From 1903-1943, Private Laws were subdivided into Private Laws—affecting specific individuals or entities—and Public-Local Laws, which affected everyone within a specific jurisdiction, such as a city or county.

**Other titles that may be of interest:**

**Colonial and State Records** – This digital project from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill includes Colonial and State Laws (1670-1790) in 25 volumes. The print is available at the Government and Heritage Library, call number: Z5 2:vol

**General Statutes** – Two published versions are available, one from Lexis Nexis, the other by West. The Lexis version is currently the “official” version of the statutes—that is, it has been approved by the North Carolina Attorney General’s office. Digital versions of the Statutes are available on the General Assembly web site. The print is available at the Government and Heritage Library, call number: Z1: 1