

Heirs' Property Glossary

The following definitions are from multiple sources and are not specific to any particular state statute. Of course, any statutory definitions (terms defined in the laws of a particular state) would overrule these definitions in any legal proceeding.

Adverse possession

A legal doctrine that describes when someone occupies property for a period of time and then claims legal rights to it.

Ancestor

A person from whom someone is descended; a direct blood relative. Clearing title The legal process of proving and obtaining a deed for the current owners of heirs' property.

Condemnation/eminent domain

The right of a government or its agent to take private property for a public purpose, with compensation to the property owner (such as a public utility taking land so they can build power lines).

Co-tenants

Those who own heirs' property with others. In a partition action under the Uniform Partition of Heirs' Property Act, the co-tenants are all the co-owners of heirs' property, regardless of the size of the fractional interest owned. See the definition of tenants in common, below.

Decedent

A person who has died; decedent is also often referred to as "the deceased."

Deed

A legal document, usually recorded in the office of a town or county that keeps land records, often used to show the legal owner(s) of a piece of property.

Descendant

A person related to someone who has died, either directly (parent, child, grandchild) or indirectly (aunts and uncles, cousins). This includes anyone legally adopted.

Estate

The real property (land and buildings) and personal property (clothing, furniture, cars, and so on) of a person who has died. In probate settings, the "estate" includes the total assets (things one owns) and liabilities (debts) of a person who has died.

Heirs

People who are entitled under state "intestate" law to inherit property from someone who has died.

Intestate

A person dies "intestate" when they die without a valid will.

Intestate real estate

Land and other property (such as houses or buildings) owned by the decedent when they died and not addressed in a will, and which does not pass to anyone based on language in the deed itself (such as a joint survivorship clause).

Intestate succession

State laws addressing who inherits property from someone who dies without a will (or when a will is found to be invalid), or any property that was not included in the decedent's will.

Joint tenants

Two or more owners of equal shares of property who have a right of survivorship, meaning that if one joint tenant dies their share goes to the other joint tenant(s) in equal shares.

Probate

The legal process of proving the validity of a will in court, and handling the estate of a decedent whether there is a will or not.

Tax lien

A state or local government's right to keep real estate for payment of some debt or obligation.

Tax sale

A legal process used by a county or town to take the property of a landowner who has not paid their property taxes in full and sell it to recover the unpaid taxes.

Tenants in common

People who each own an individual, undivided interest in property (also known as "cotenants"), but not necessarily equal interests. See the definition of co-tenants, above.

Testate

A person dies "testate" when they have a valid will.

Title

Refers to ownership rights in land. As a legal concept, title exists even without any documents, but a deed is the most common way to determine who has title in land. (See definition of deed, above.) Sometimes a will or an affidavit may be used to document ownership rights.

Undivided interest

An interest in property that is held in common with others in a single property. These interests can be unequal; that is, the value of each interest can vary.