

Researching in Colonial New England

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Introduction

This handout provides an overview for conducting genealogical research in Colonial New England, beginning with the history and settlement patterns of the area, followed by a review of the unique resources for the colonial period. We then discuss the major record groups for New England research: vital records, church and cemetery records, probate, and land records, concluding with town records. The final portion of the lecture focuses on strategies for conducting research in Colonial New England. For purposes of this lecture, the Colonial Period ends in 1777.

History and Settlement

The original inhabitants of New England were members of the Algonquin Linguistic Group and included tribes known as the Massachusett, the Pennacook, the Abenaki, the Wampanoag, and Narragansett. When Europeans arrived, they confronted a densely forested landscape without roads and bridges; vastly different from the country they had left.

Initial settlement followed large rivers such as the Connecticut and Merrimack as traveling by water was much easier than hauling possessions over narrow forest tracks. By 1650, settlements had been established in all regions except Vermont. Vermont remained controlled by indigenous people and sparsely settled by the French. King Philip's War in 1675 and 1676 decimated the populations of Maine and the Connecticut River valley.

The 1700s saw New Hampshire, New York, and Massachusetts vie for the right to claim Vermont. The end of the Seven Years War in 1763 ushered an influx of settlers to Vermont as the territory became firmly English. Vermont became an independent Republic in 1777 and became a state in 1791. New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts became states in 1788, Rhode Island in 1790 and Maine in 1820.

Key dates for Colonial New England are shown below.

Date	Event
1620	Pilgrims land in Plymouth
1622	Province of Maine granted to Mason and Gorges
1629	Province of New Hampshire formed as Maine split between Mason and Gorges
1630	Winthrop Fleet lands
1620-1640	Great Migration
1633	Windsor and Wethersfield Connecticut founded
1636	Roger Williams to Rhode Island
1652	Massachusetts asserts control of Maine
1675-1676	King Philip's War
1677	Massachusetts buys out Gorges heirs
1691	Plymouth Colony merges with Massachusetts Bay Colony to become the Province of Massachusetts Bay



Date	Event
1749	First New Hampshire land grant in Vermont
1756-1763	Seven Years War
1764	Connecticut River declared boundary of New Hampshire and New York
1765	First New York land grant in Vermont
1755-1783	Revolutionary War
1777	Republic of Vermont established

Researching in the Colonial Period

Because Colonial New England records may not have survived, family historians need to consult a variety of published sources for information about family. For the 17th century, the *Great Migration* series of biographies for settlers arriving between 1620 and 1635 and Torrey’s *New England Marriages Before 1700* are among the best-known published materials. See **Resources** section below for a list of resources.

For the 18th century, Town Records will be a major source of information, but don’t forget finding aids such as local histories (town and county).

Records

Key records for New England research include Vital Records, Church and Cemetery Records, Land and Probate Records, Court and Town Records.

A successful search for records begins with understanding the location of the ancestor, especially the town. Most New England records began at the town level and knowing *when* the town was settled and later incorporated helps identify whether records exist for a given time period. The 6th edition of the *Genealogist’s Handbook for New England Research* released in the Fall of 2021, includes these important details. Also check out the *FamilySearch.org* Research Wiki’s for detailed information about your ancestor’s town.

Vital Records

All New England states began keeping vital records at the town level as soon as the town was incorporated or formed. Record loss does exist, so researchers need to check dates of availability. The table below identifies the jurisdiction which holds the different records, by location.

Table 1: Record Jurisdictions for Colonial New England

State	Vital Records	Land	Probate
Connecticut	Town	Town	Probate Districts
Maine	Town	County	County
Massachusetts	Town	County	County
New Hampshire	Town	County	County

Rhode Island	Town	Town	Town
Vermont	Town	<i>It is complicated</i>	<i>It is complicated</i>

Three major online repositories—AmericanAncestors.org, FamilySearch.org and Ancestry.com—all have robust collections of New England vital records.

Church and Cemetery Records

Start your search for church records at *AmericanAncestors.org* using the online catalog for church records in manuscript, microfilm, and published format. Both FamilySearch and Ancestry have strong collections of church records. At FamilySearch.org, search by your ancestor’s town. Since many New Englanders were Congregationalists, consider the Congregational Library and Archives:

<http://www.congregationallibrary.org/digital-collections> .

Probate Records

Probate records are at the **county** level in Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts. Rhode Island probate records may be found at the **town** level, while both Connecticut and Vermont use the **probate district** system. Colonial Vermont probate records may not exist. The 6th Edition of the *Genealogist’s Handbook for New England Research* will provide the family historian with information on which district contains an ancestor’s records.

Check the FamilySearch.org catalog for county or town records. Go to Search > Catalog and in the Place search box type the state and county or state, county, and town. At the results page, select “Probate Records” to begin searching for records

Land Records

The first transfer of land from the Crown to a grantee, such as to John Mason for New Hampshire or Fernando Gorges for Maine, or from the Crown to a group of settlers known as proprietors, are usually found in published compilations.

Subsequent land records in New England are kept at the **county** level in Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts. The Connecticut and Rhode Island keep land records at the **town** level. Colonial Vermont land records may be found in New Hampshire, New York records or at the colonial Vermont town.

Once you know the county or town where your ancestor lived, you may begin searching for land records. FamilySearch.org Land Records are located through their online Catalog. Choose Search > Catalog and type the location into the place box. At the results page, select “Land and Property” to begin searching through the indexes.

The Ancestry Catalog also includes land records. Choose Search > Card Catalog and type the location into the title box. Add keyword, “Land” or “Deeds.”

Town Records

Early town records include land records, vital records, selectmen's meeting minutes, tax rolls, warnings out, and a treasure trove of information about the town. If you can't find your ancestor in a census or a church record, you might find him in the town records being elected as fence viewer or a hog reeve.

The most straightforward way to search for Town Records is through FamilySearch.org. Go to the main page and click "Search." Select "Catalog." At the next page, in the Place box, enter the state, county, and town you wish to find, in that order. When the search results appear, scroll through the alphabetical list until you find "Town Records." Click to expand and view the collections.

Resources

- ✓ Rhonda R. McClure, ed, *Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research*, 6th edition (Boston: NEHGS, 2022).

General Colonial New England Resources

- Anderson, Robert Charles. *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England, 1620-1633* (Boston, MA: NEHGS, 1995).
- Anderson, Robert Charles. *The Great Migrations: Immigrants to New England 1634-1635* (Boston, MA: NEHGS, 1999-2011).
- Anderson, Robert Charles. *The Great Migration Directory* (Boston: NEHGS, 2015).
- Anderson, Robert Charles. *The Pilgrim Migration: Immigrants to Plymouth Colony 1620-1633* (Boston, MA: NEHGS, 2004).
- Anderson, Robert Charles. *The Winthrop Fleet: Massachusetts Bay Company Immigrants to New England 1629-1630* (Boston, MA: NEHGS, 2012).
- Austin, John Osburne. *The genealogical dictionary of Rhode Island : comprising three generations of settlers who came before 1690* (Baltimore, MD : Reprinted by Genealogical Publishing Co., 2008).
- Bangs, Jeremy Dupertuis. *Indian Deeds: Land Transactions in Plymouth Colony, 1620-1691* (Boston, MA: NEHGS, 2002).
- Bodge, George M. *Soldiers in King Philip's War* (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1976). See <https://archive.org/details/soldiersinkingph00bodg>.
- Colket, Meredith B. *Founders of early American families: emigrants from Europe, 1607-1657* (Cleveland, Ohio : General Court of the Order of Founders and Patriots of America, 1985).
- Farmer, John. *A Genealogical Register of the First Settlers of New England* (1829, reprint ed., Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1964). See also below Savage.

General Society of Mayflower Descendants: <https://thamayflowersociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/REFERENCE-GUIDE-TO-THE-GSMD-SILVER-BOOK-SERIES.pdf>

Goodwin, Nathaniel. *Genealogical notes or contributions to the family history of some of the first settlers of Connecticut and Massachusetts* (reprint - Boston, Massachusetts: New England Historic Genealogical Society, c2012)

Hollick, Martin E. *New Englanders in the 1600s: A Guide to Genealogical Research Published Between 1980 and 2010* (expanded edition; Boston: NEHGS, 2012).

Pope, Charles Henry. *The Pioneers of Massachusetts: a descriptive list, drawn from the records of the colonies, towns and churches, and other contemporaneous documents* (Boston, Mass.: NEHGS, 2013).

Pope, Charles Henry. *The Pioneers of Maine and New Hampshire, 1623 to 1660: a descriptive list, drawn from records of the colonies, towns, and churches, and other contemporaneous* (reprint - Boston, Massachusetts: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2013).

Roser, Susan E. *Mayflower Marriages* (Baltimore, Md. : Genealogical Publishing Co., 1990)

Roser, Susan E. *Mayflower Births & Deaths* (Baltimore, Md. : Genealogical Publishing Co., 1992)

Roser, Susan E. *Mayflower Deeds & Probates* (Baltimore, Md. : Genealogical Publishing Co., 1994)

Savage, James. *A Genealogical Dictionary of the First Settlers of New England, Showing Three Generations of Those Who Came Before May 1692, on the Basis of Farmer's Register* (Boston: Little, Brown 1860-62).

Shurtleff, Nathaniel B. *Records of the governor and company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England* (Boston: W. White, 1853-54). See <https://archive.org/details/recordsofgoverno01mass>.

Stoddard, David. "Land System of the New England Colonial Colonies," *Connecticut Nutmegger* (1979) 11: 556-564.

Torrey, Clarence Almon. *New England Marriages Prior to 1700* (Baltimore, Md. : Genealogical Pub. Co., c1992).

Records

The three major online repositories all have robust collections of colonial New England records:

- [AmericanAncestors.org](https://www.americanancestors.org) (some collections are free; many require a membership (\$) - see each state below for collections)
- [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) – Use the general search or use the catalog, searching by state, county, town name
- [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) (\$)

Land Records

The initial transfer of land from the Crown to a group of proprietors may be found in the following locations. If a published version of these records exists for your state, it will be listed below under the state-specific resources.

- Town Halls: Town clerk, tax office or assessor
- County Registry of Deeds
- Libraries and local historical Societies
- FamilySearch.org microfilm or online
- Published transcriptions of Proprietor records (see below for state-specific resources)

Town Records

Ann Lainhart, *Digging for Genealogical Treasure in New England Town Records* (Boston, NEHGS, 1966).

Use the FamilySearch.org catalog to find records for your ancestor's town.

State Specific Resources

The list of resources below is intentionally not exhaustive. The list highlights the essential sources of information for each state.

Colonial Connecticut

Type of Record	Resource
Vital Records	<p>The Barbour Collection is available at:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• American Ancestor's Research Center in book form• Online at AmericanAncestors.org (Connecticut: Vital Records (The Barbour Collection), 1630-1870 - https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databasesearch/414/connecticut-vital-records-the-barbour-collection-1630-1870)• Online at FamilySearch.org at a Family History Center (https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/295370?availability=Family%20History%20Library)• Online at Ancestry.com (Connecticut, U.S., Town Birth Records, pre-1870 (Barbour Collection) - https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1034/)
Church Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Connecticut State Library has originals or copies of records for more than 600 churches in Connecticut. About one quarter of the records have been indexed. https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/genealogyindexes
Probate Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Connecticut probate is held by a probate district. See the 6th Edition of the <i>Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research</i> to determine your ancestor's probate district. You could also search the card index available at FamilySearch.org (General index to probate records: all districts in Connecticut 1641-1948) https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/354857?availability=Family%20History%20Library

Colonial Connecticut

Type of Record	Resource
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use FamilySearch.org catalog to search for your ancestor's town.
Land Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Town and city clerks are responsible for maintaining records of land transactions in Connecticut. Use the FamilySearch.org catalog to find Connecticut land records for your ancestor's town.

Colonial Maine

Type of Record	Resource
Vital Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Maine Towns with Vital Records,” https://maineroots.org/research/44-uncategorised/research-links/541-maine-towns-with-vital-records FamilySearch.org: “Maine vital records: COLLECTION RECORD, 1670-1921,” https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/1803978
Church Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maine Historical Survey Project’s <i>Directory of Churches and Religious Organizations</i> (1940). Online edition at https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/records/item/252106-directory-of-churches-and-religious-organizations-in-maine?offset=2
Probate Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cumberland County Maine probate was lost to fire in 1907. Records begin in 1908 AmericanAncestors.org, “Maine: Early Wills and Deeds, 1640-1760,” online database. https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databasesearch/84/maine-early-wills-and-deeds-1640-1760 FamilySearch.org: “Maine, county probate records: COLLECTION RECORD, 1760-1979,” https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2040534 Ancestry.com: “Maine, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1584-1999,” https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8994/ William M. Sargent, <i>Maine Wills, 1640–1760</i> (Portland: Brown Thurston, 1887). John E. Frost, <i>Maine Probate Abstracts 1687-1800</i> (Camden, ME: 1991) William D. Patterson, <i>The Probate Records of Lincoln County, Maine, 1760 to 1800</i> (Portland: Maine Genealogical Society, 1895). Use FamilySearch.org catalog to search your ancestor’s county.
Land Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial land grants and early deed transfer are found in York Deeds. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Land: Vol 1-11, Maine Historical Society, <i>York Deeds</i> (Portland: J.T. Hull, 1887) Online at HathiTrust.org https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008696697 Vol 12-18, E.C. Bowler, <i>York Deeds</i> (Portland: J.T. Hull, 1887) Online at HathiTrust.org https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008696697 Some early grant records are at the Massachusetts State Archives and have been abstracted in volumes 4 – 8 of the <i>Maine Historical and Genealogical Recorder</i> (see https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/318894?availability=Family%20History%20Library).

Colonial Maine

Type of Record	Resource
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AmericanAncestors.org, “Maine: Early Wills and Deeds, 1640-1760,” online database. https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databaserecord/84/maine-early-wills-and-deeds-1640-1760 Use FamilySearch.org catalog to search your ancestor’s county.

Colonial Massachusetts

Type of Record	Resource
Vital Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free database at AmericanAncestors.org: Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1620-1850 AmericanAncestors.org: “Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1841-1910,” https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databaserecord/191/massachusetts-vital-records-1841-1910 AmericanAncestors.org: “Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1911-1915,” https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databaserecord/192/massachusetts-vital-records-1911-1915 AmericanAncestors.org: “Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1916-1920,” https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databaserecord/2738/massachusetts-vital-records-1916-1920 FamilySearch.org: “Massachusetts, Town Clerk, Vital and Town Records, 1626-2001,” https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2061550 Ancestry.com (\$): “Massachusetts, U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988,” https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2495/
Probate Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AmericanAncestors.org: Probate materials are available for the following counties and time periods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Barnstable</i>: 1685-1789 <i>Berkshire</i>: 1781-1917 <i>Bristol</i>: 1868-1880 <i>Essex</i>: 1638-1881 <i>Franklin</i>: 1812-1915 <i>Hampshire</i>: 1660-1889 <i>Middlesex</i>: 1648-1871 <i>Norfolk</i>: 1793-1900 <i>Plymouth</i>: 1686-1881 <i>Suffolk</i>: 1630-1841 <i>Worcester</i>: 1731-1881 Ancestry.com: “Massachusetts, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1635-1991,” https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9069/ Use FamilySearch.org catalog to search your ancestor’s county.

Colonial Massachusetts

Type of Record	Resource
Land Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FamilySearch.org: “Massachusetts land records : COLLECTION RECORD, 1620-1986,” https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2106411

Colonial New Hampshire

Record Type	Resource
Vital Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AmericanAncestors.org: “New Hampshire: Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1654-1969,” https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databasesearch/516/new-hampshire-births-deaths-and-marriages-1654-1969 FamilySearch.org: “New Hampshire, Town Clerk, vital and town records: COLLECTION RECORD, 1636-1947,” https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/1987741
Probate Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Probate records for the province of New Hampshire, spanning 1635 to 1771, are transcribed and available within the New Hampshire State Papers series, volumes 31 to 39 https://sos.nh.gov/archives-vital-records-records-management/archives/publications-collections/new-hampshire-state-papers/ FamilySearch.org: “New Hampshire, county probate records: COLLECTION RECORD, 1660-1973,” https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2040537 Ancestry.com: “New Hampshire, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1643-1982,” https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8996/ Use FamilySearch.org catalog to search your ancestor’s county.
Land Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial land grants made for the Masonian Patent are transcribed and available as part of the New Hampshire State Papers services, volumes 26 to 29 https://sos.nh.gov/archives-vital-records-records-management/archives/publications-collections/new-hampshire-state-papers/ Use FamilySearch.org catalog to search your ancestor’s county.

Colonial Rhode Island

Type of Record	Resource
Vital Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AmericanAncestors.org: “Rhode Island: Vital Records, 1636-1850,” https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databasesearch/532/rhode-island-vital-records-1636-1850 FamilySearch.org: “Vital record of Rhode Island, 1636-1850 : first series: births, marriages, and deaths; a family register for the people,” https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/297884?availability=Family%20History%20Library

Colonial Rhode Island

Type of Record	Resource
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ancestry.com: “Rhode Island, U.S., Vital Extracts, 1636-1899,” https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3897/
Church and Cemetery Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AmericanAncestors.org: “Rhode Island: Historical Cemeteries, 1647-2000.” https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databasesearch/2732/rhode-island-historical-cemeteries-1647-2000
Probate Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ancestry.com: “Rhode Island, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1582-1932,” https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9079/ Use the FamilySearch.org catalog to find records for your ancestor’s town.
Land Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initial land grants are in <i>Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, in New England</i> - https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008376811 Use the FamilySearch.org catalog to find land records for your ancestor’s town

Colonial Vermont

Type of Record	Resource
Vital Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AmericanAncestors.org: “Vermont: Births, Marriages and Deaths, 1700-2008,” https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databasesearch/500/vermont-births-marriages-and-deaths-1700-2008 FamilySearch.org: “Vermont vital records: COLLECTION RECORD, 1760-2008,” https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2075288 Ancestry.com: “Vermont, U.S., Vital Records, 1720-1908,” https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/4661/
Probate Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ancestry.com: “Vermont, U.S., Wills and Probate Records, 1749-1999,” https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9084/
Land Records	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> New Hampshire and New York Grants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New Hampshire Land Grants 1749-1764 - <i>New Hampshire Provincial & State Papers, Volume 26</i> New York Land Patents 1688-1786 – <i>State Papers of Vermont, v. 7</i>