

Beyond the Vitals: Using New England Town Records

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Why are they so important?

1. Provide unique information
2. Track movements and migrations
3. Important source for female ancestors
4. Best source for impoverished ancestors
5. Help distinguish individuals with same name
6. Give context to your ancestor's life
7. Provide insight into community

Challenges

1. Time consuming
2. Usually, unindexed
3. Poor handwriting
4. Different formats
5. Recorded in random order
6. Difficult to access

Town Meeting

- Notice posted to townspeople
- Led by moderator
- Often required attendance
- Election of town officials
- General town business

Elected Officials

- Town Clerk: Keeper of vital records, recorded meeting proceedings, administered oaths and affidavits, certified licenses
- Selectmen: Elected to one year term, managed affairs of town
- Treasurer: Managed town's finances, presided over reimbursements (military service, care of poor, services by townspeople)
- Constable: Posted notice for town meetings, "policeman" of the town, warned out strangers, could act as tax collector if position did not exist
- Tithingmen: Ensured that townspeople made contributions to meetinghouse and salary of minister, monitored church attendance, observed conduct of townspeople
- Fence Viewers: Reviewed fences and property boundaries, moderated boundary disputes
- Surveyor of Highways: Inspected town roads, determined when and where new road would be constructed
- Hogreeves: Caught stray livestock, find owners for straying animals



Types of Town Records

Proprietors' Records: Proprietors were the original settlers of a new community. These records provide important founding information and can include land grants and deeds to early settlers.

Vital Records: Always examine original vital records – accurate information, can supply information omitted from transcribed copy, may confirm family group, can provide new information

Important questions to ask when examining vital records:

1. Are there contemporaries of my ancestor?
 - a. Marrying at the same time?
2. What other families are having children?
 - a. Recorded at same time as my ancestor?
 - b. Same surname?
 - c. Allied family?

Land Grants: Can be found in proprietors' records and town records. The Proprietors' of the community would grant property to new settlers.

Tip: Read the first pages!

- Always read the first pages of the earliest town records books
- These first pages hold information about **WHO** settled the town and **When** the town was found
- New communities founded with neighbors

Ear Marks: Cattle and sheep were grazed on common lands, each animal had identifying mark, marks recorded by town clerk (transfer of ear marks from person to person can depict relationship)

Tax Records: Recorded by Assessor or Tax Collector, format differs in each town, can help determine age, can serve as vital record substitute

Treasurer's Records: Reimbursements to townspeople for services, payment to soldiers for service, best sources for the poor and women

Tip: Not everything has been microfilmed

Works Progress Administration sponsored Historical Records Survey in some communities. Goal was to survey and index historical records in local, state, and county repositories. Provide detailed breakdown of town records. See Appendix.

Understand the collections – Call the Town Clerk or visit Town Hall

Warnings Out Records: Inhabitants of a community were responsibly for each other (conduct, financial support). Warnings Out were a method of pressuring outsiders to leave town and settle elsewhere (practical, did not want to support outsiders)

Military Records: Militia Rolls, payment for military service, patriotic service, can provide insight into service (company, regiment, battles)

Poor Records: Towns earmarked funds for the care of the poor, townspeople reimbursed for care, communities created Overseers of the Poor (almshouses, town farms)

Further Reading

Ann Smith Lainhart, *Digging for Genealogical Treasure in New England Town Records*, (Boston: NEHGS, 1996)

Loretta L. Hefner, *The WPA Historical Records Survey: A Guide to the Unpublished Inventories, Indexes, and Transcripts*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980). Available at HathiTrust.org
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015021534733&view=2up&seq=3&skin=2021>

“Public Archives of Connecticut” *Annual report of the American Historical Association* - 1906 v. 2; pages 53-127 [**Detailed town by town listing of available records**]
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3478764&view=1up&seq=59&skin=2021>

“Report on the Archives of the State of Maine,” American Historical Association., *Annual report of the American Historical Association*, 1908 volume 1 (Washington: G.P.O.) pages 304-318 [**Detailed town by town listing of available records**] Viewed at HathiTrust.org
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3478767&view=1up&seq=261&skin=2021>

“Report on the Archives of Rhode Island,” American Historical Association., *Annual report of the American Historical Association*, 1903 volume 1 (Washington: G.P.O.) pages 574-644 [**Detailed town by town listing of available records**] Viewed at HathiTrust.org
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044032311839&view=1up&seq=549&skin=2021>

Final report and inventory of the Vermont Historical records survey, W. P. A.,
<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001596659> For towns without published inventories, this document catalogs progress towards creating an inventory. See appendix for towns with published inventories.

Appendix

Historical Record Surveys for New England States – Many of these surveys are available at hathitrust.org

Historical Record Surveys for New England

- Connecticut
 - Avon
 - Berlin
 - Bloomfield
 - North Branford
 - North Haven
 - Orange
 - Oxford
 - Prospect
 - Seymour
 - Southbury
 - Weston
- Maine
 - Avon
 - Bar Harbor
 - Berlin
 - Brownsville
 - Chesterville
 - Coplin
 - Cranberry Isles
 - Dallas
 - Eustis
 - Kennebunkport
 - Mt. Desert
 - Seaville
 - Southwest Harbor
 - Tremont
- Massachusetts
 - Agawam
 - Ashfield
 - Athol
 - Auburn
 - Avon
 - Ayer
 - Barre
 - Bellingham
 - Berlin
 - Bernardston
 - Brookline
 - Buckland
 - Chicopee
 - Clinton
 - Hampden
 - Holbrook
 - Maynard
 - Warwick
- New Hampshire
 - Atkinson
 - Auburn
 - Bedford
 - Candia
 - Canterbury
 - Chester
 - Exeter
 - Greenland
 - New Hampton
 - Sanbornton
- Rhode Island
 - North Providence
 - West Greenwich
- Vermont
 - Albany
 - Grand Isle County
 - Hubbardston

Winter Research Stay-at-Home 2022

- Benson
- Bolton
- Bridgport
- Brookline
- Cambridge
- Castleon
- Cavendish
- Charlotte
- Clarendon
- Coventry
- Danby
- Derby
- Eden
- Elmore
- Essex
- Fairfax
- Grafton
- Hyde Park
- Jamaica
- Johnson
- Mansfield
- Morristown
- Plymouth
- Shrewsbury
- Stow
- Tinmouth
- Wallingford
- Waterville
- Wolcott