

Basics of Early New England Research

Class 3: Working in and Understanding Original Records

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Introduction

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.

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>

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 (https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page) 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. Three major online repositories with robust collections of New England vital records:

- AmericanAncestors.org
- FamilySearch.org
- Ancestry.com

See below for general and state specific resources.

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. Check the collection of digitized church record manuscripts:

<https://digital.americanancestors.org/digital/collection/p15869coll34> And be sure to also browse our [church databases](#).

Both FamilySearch and Ancestry have strong collections of church records. Start by searching their catalogs for specific collections:

- Ancestry.com Card Catalog:
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog/>?
- At FamilySearch.org, search by your ancestor's town:
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>

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 Connecticut uses the **probate district** system. Colonial Vermont probate records probably do not exist, but if they do, they might be in New York or New Hampshire. 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.

See below for general and state specific resources.

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. Connecticut and Rhode Island keep land records at the **town** level. Colonial Vermont land records may be found in New Hampshire, New York, 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.”

See below for general and state specific resources.

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).

Records

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

- [AmericanAncestors.org](#) (some collections are free; many require a membership (\$)) - see each state below for collections)
- [FamilySearch.org](#) - Use the general search or use the catalog, searching by state, county, town name
- [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)

Also view the Yale Law Library’s “Colonial Charters, Grants, and Related Documents,” https://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/statech.asp

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:

<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>

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 • Use FamilySearch.org catalog to search for your ancestor’s town.

Colonial Connecticut

Type of Record	Resource
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) 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

Colonial Maine

Type of Record	Resource
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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). 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 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>Essex</i>: 1638-1881 <i>Hampshire</i>: 1660-1889 <i>Middlesex</i>: 1648-1871 <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.
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 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

Colonial Rhode Island

Type of Record	Resource
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>