

Basics of Early New England Research

Class 1: Settlement of New England

David Allen Lambert, Chief Genealogist, dalambert@nehgs.org

Introduction

This handout provides an overview for conducting genealogical research in early New England, beginning with the history and settlement patterns of the area. For purposes of this lecture, the Colonial Period ends in 1777.

Indigenous Groups

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.

King Philip's War in 1675 and 1676 saw communities along coastal Maine, in Rhode Island, and in-land Massachusetts destroyed as native groups sought to halt English expansion. In the 18th century, many tribes allied with the French and fought against the English settlers in Queen Anne's War and the Seven Year's War (also known as the French and Indian War).

Topography

Initial settlement in New England was along the coast, followed by settlements along large rivers such as the Connecticut and Merrimack. 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.

Religion

Most of the settlers who came to New England's shores during the 17th century considered the Church of England to be corrupt. The Pilgrims advocated separation from the Church of England. The Puritans, the settlers of Massachusetts Bay Colony on the other hand, advocated change from within the Church of England. In both cases though, religion dictated the organization of community life and the systems that developed to run communities.

Although settlers were united in their dislike of the Church of England, there was plenty of strife and dissention regarding the degree of church involvement in daily life. Roger Williams left for Rhode Island because neither the Pilgrims nor the Puritans were tolerant of other religious views. Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams also believed that there was no need for an intermediary between a person and God, that is, the church hierarchy should not dictate how a person believes. Settlers of Connecticut, Thomas Hooker, John Davenport and Theophilis Eaton, had visions of community life that differed from the vision of the Puritans. Hooker did not believe church membership was essential to being able to vote on town matters. Davenport and Eaton, settlers of New Haven, thought the Puritan view of community life was not strict enough.



17th-Century Settlement

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
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

The New England Town

During the colonial period, the town was the center of community life, government and religious expression. The dominant pattern for early settlements was a village green with a church, school, and town hall surrounded by houses with farmland providing a buffer between the woods and the settlement. The pattern was to protect inhabitants. Early relations with the indigenous population were tricky.

Town members had certain privileges. First and foremost, town inhabitants had a right to land. They also had right to common land for grazing their cows and sheep. They had fishing and hunting privileges in streams and meadows. And, if due to misfortune or age, if the town member became indigent, they had a right to be cared for by the town. Towns took their responsibilities towards their citizens very seriously and the town fathers were concerned with the common good.

This led to concern about defining who was considered an inhabitant. The rules for town membership date back to the early 1600s. Generally, a person was considered an inhabitant if he was a landowner. His immediate family members were also considered inhabitants. If someone was born in a town, they were an inhabitant. Interestingly apprentices trained in a town were considered inhabitants. Newcomers seeking to establish residency in a community faced some stiff barriers. They needed to prove good character and they

needed to be vouched for by an existing town resident or approved by Selectmen. The goal was to admit only persons who would not become a burden to the Town.

Voting members of the community were known as Freemen. A man had to apply for the privilege of being a Freeman. The specific requirements for Freemen varied by time and colony but generally, you had to be male and over 21. In some colonies you had to be a church member. Generally, you had to own land and you had to be of good character. Being designated a Freeman meant you could participate in the Town Meeting, have a say in Town business, and serve on juries with your peers.

Town government was responsible for assessing and collecting taxes, recording land transactions, building and maintaining roads, maintaining law and order (damage caused by stray animals was a problem) and caring for indigent members of the community.

Earliest roads in New England were mostly native trails and paths. One of the earliest colonial roads was the Boston Post Road from New York City to Boston. Founded in 1673, by 1700 it had three branches. Because of the difficulty of traveling inland, settlement by 1700 was confined to the coast and major waterways.

18th-Century Settlement

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.

The earliest towns in Vermont were along the Connecticut River or along what is now the border of Vermont and New York. Governor Wentworth of New Hampshire issues grants for land in what is now Vermont between 1749 and 1764. The Seven Years War slows settlement of Vermont between 1756 and 1763 so that by the end of 1763 there are only about 300 European settlers in Vermont. In 1764, King George decrees that the Connecticut River is the western boundary of New Hampshire. This leads New York to start issuing grants for land between the Hudson River and the Connecticut River: the same territory already claimed by New Hampshire.

Vermont declares independence in 1777 and becomes the Republic of Vermont. The Europeans who settled Vermont typically sailed up the Connecticut River from Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island or crossed the Connecticut from New Hampshire. Another common migration pathway was down from Quebec via Lake Champlain and Lake Memphremagog.

18th-Century Roads

The 18th century saw the addition of several new roads including the Albany Post Road along the Hudson, the Mohawk Trail from Boston to Utica (approximately present day route 2), the extension of the Boston Post Road to become the Kings Highway, and the Catskill Road west from Springfield, Massachusetts.

The Proclamation of 1763

The end of the Seven Years War in September of 1763 ended French influence in northern New England. England received territory east of the Mississippi and Spain received territory west of the Mississippi. Soon thereafter George III proclaimed the Indian Reserve, setting aside all land west of the Appalachian mountains for native tribes and ordering all European settlers to leave. With the Proclamation the King declared that the Crown, rather than individual colonies, would have the right to negotiate any new settlements.

The impetus for the Proclamation Line was Pontiac's War, a conflict prosecuted by a loose confederation of tribes protesting the new British rule as well as the continuing European encroachment on native lands. A proximal cause of the war was Sir Jeffery Amherst's refusal give gifts to cement relations between tribes and the British.

Learning About the Location

The first resource for learning is the Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research

Resources

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

Location Research

AmericanAncestors.org - New England town guides <https://www.americanancestors.org/tools/town-guides>

FamilySearch.org - Research Wikis for towns, counties and states
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page

MapofUs.org - For changing county boundaries www.mapofus.org

Historical Societies and Libraries

Connecticut State Library - <https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/home>

Maine Historical Society - <https://www.mainehistory.org/>

American Ancestors - <https://www.americanancestors.org/>

New Hampshire Historical Society <https://www.nhhistory.org/>

Rhode Island Historical Society <https://www.rihs.org/>

State	Archive	URL
Maine	DigitalMaine	https://digitalmaine.com/archives/
New Hampshire	New Hampshire Historical Society	https://www.nhhistory.org/Research/Collections-Catalog#/
Vermont	Vermont History	https://vermonthistory.org/digital-resources/

Massachusetts	Massachusetts Archives	https://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arcdigitalrecords/digitalrecordsidx.htm
Massachusetts	American Ancestors Digital Library	https://digital.americanancestors.org/
Connecticut	Connecticut State Library Digital Collections	https://cslib.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/
Rhode Island	Rhode Island State Digital Archives	https://sosri.access.preseuyjjjjjjjjuhjrjvica.com/home/

Guides

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