



In Memoriam:
Robert Charles Anderson (1944–2025)

David Curtis Dearborn

It is with the deepest sorrow that the genealogical community learned of the death of Robert Charles Anderson, director of the Great Migration Study Project, at Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, New Hampshire, on February 17, 2025, at the age of 80 years. With his passing, the genealogical world has lost its premier expert on colonial New England genealogy. His most lasting achievement is his two Great Migration series: *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England, 1620–1633*, 3 vols. (Boston: NEHGS, 1995) and *The Great Migration: Immigrants to New England, 1634–1635*, 7 vols. (Boston: NEHGS, 1999–2011).

When Mr. Anderson first proposed the Great Migration Study Project to the New England Historic Genealogical Society (now American Ancestors) in 1988, its stated purpose was to “provide a concise, reliable summary of past research on the early immigrants to New England, which will reduce the amount of time which must be spent in discovering this past work, and will

therefore serve as a foundation for future research.” Previously, researchers had to rely on James Savage’s *Genealogical Dictionary of New England*, compiled during the Civil War, and a hodgepodge of print sources produced over the next century. Learning what research had already been undertaken and published on any specific individual or family required time-consuming effort.

As early as 1976, Mr. Anderson began thinking of how this vast store of knowledge could be codified and assembled. Realizing the project’s vast potential for advancing scholarship, the society quickly approved, and he set to work. Starting with the entries in Savage and other colony-oriented volumes, Mr. Anderson combed through a long list of print sources to construct sketches of individual colonists and their families using a standardized template to record vital events. Additionally, he conducted extensive research in archives both in England and New England. The result is a series of volumes that are magisterial in scope and are universally recognized as setting a new benchmark for the study of seventeenth-century New England families. Over the past three decades, the Great Migration volumes have been cited innumerable times by genealogists in books and articles. It was also Mr. Anderson’s hope that the series would serve as a foundation for future research. Indeed, this has been the case as others have built on his research to make new discoveries. It is fair to say that the Great Migration series will be consulted and cited for generations to come.

An important component of the project was the twenty-five volumes of the *Great Migration Newsletter*. Here, Mr. Anderson prepared indispensable essays on New England towns settled during the Great Migration period, as well as methodological articles, analyses of lists of names such as tax lists or lists of freemen, book reviews, and surveys of recent literature.

In addition, he was the author of several volumes related to the project, including *The Pilgrim Migration: Immigrants to Plymouth Colony, 1620–1633* (2004); *The Winthrop Fleet: Massachusetts Bay Company Immigrants to New England, 1629–1630* (2012); *The Mayflower Migration: Immigrants to Plymouth, 1620* (2020); *Puritan Pedigrees: The Deep Roots of the Great Migration to New England* (2018); and *The Great Migration Directory: Immigrants to New England, 1620–1640, A Concise Compendium* (2015).

While Mr. Anderson will be remembered mainly for the Great Migration Study Project, he also authored over one hundred genealogical articles, most of which deal with seventeenth-century New England families or their English origins. Many appeared in *The American Genealogist* (TAG), for which he served as a contributing editor 1979–85 and 2014–25, associate editor 1985–93, and co–editor 1993–2012. He was also a long-time consulting editor for the *Register* and was a contributing editor to the *National Genealogical Society Quarterly*.

An imposing man with a shock of red hair and a full beard (turned white in later years), and carrying a natural air of authority, he was a commanding presence on the stage. He was a popular speaker, and for many years he was a regular presence on the podium at national and local genealogical conferences. He served as director of the National Institute on Genealogical Research (now

the Genealogical Institute on Federal Records) which holds a week-long series of lectures and studies in Washington, D.C. in conjunction with the National Archives. Last September, he co-led a panel discussion and gave a presentation on the medieval Marmion family of England (ancestral to Great Migration immigrant Thomas¹ Bradbury of Maine and Salisbury, Massachusetts) at the 36th International Congress of Genealogical and Heraldic Sciences, hosted in Boston by American Ancestors. Bradbury was long the object of his study. One of his first articles discussed Bradbury's English ancestors and appeared in *TAG* in 1976.

Mr. Anderson's scholarship as well as his personality earned him a devoted following. With the success of the Great Migration series, he led a number of sold-out Great Migration-themed tours to England sponsored by the New England Historic Genealogical Society. Participants enthused about the camaraderie as much as about the learning experience.

His leadership skills were recognized early on. Elected a Fellow of the American Society of Genealogists in 1977 (secretary 1979–83, president 1989–92), he also served as a board member or trustee of the National Genealogical Society, the Federation of Genealogical Societies, the Board for Certification of Genealogists, and the International Society for British Genealogy and Family History. He also served as a trustee, vice president/North America, and later acting president of the Association of Professional Genealogists. He was one of the founding members of the Massachusetts Genealogical Council and served as its first vice president. He was also one of the founders and leaders of the Genealogical Coordinating Committee, which arose in 1980 out of the alphabet soup of national genealogical organizations and in opposition to proposed unwelcome changes at the National Archives, and which later evolved to coordinate the activities of the member groups. It disbanded in 1995, having fulfilled its mission.

Another important aspect of Mr. Anderson's life was his desire to elevate the study of genealogy as a respected academic discipline. He was part of the bridge generation that learned their craft under the tutelage of already-recognized giants in the field such as John Insley Coddington, Winifred Lovering Holman, Meredith Colket, Milton Rubincam, and others. Mr. Anderson was one of the few if not the only American genealogist solicited to write biographical sketches for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004). It is a testament to his success in elevating genealogy's reputation among scholars that historians of colonial New England have cited and continue to cite the Great Migration series in their own works.

A native of Bellows Falls, Vermont, where his maternal grandfather was a prominent civic leader, businessman, and funeral director, Robert Charles Anderson was born May 24, 1944, the first of seven children of Albert Ernest and Frances Ellen (Hennessey) Anderson. His father had a mixture of Swedish, Scottish, and New England ancestry, while his mother's grandparents were 19th-century immigrants from County Cork, Ireland. Raised in Townsend, Pepperell, Harvard, and Groton, Massachusetts, Mr. Anderson enrolled at Harvard College with the Class of 1965. By his own account he was a poor student and dropped out prior to completing his coursework. Enlisting in

the Army in 1965, he spent nearly two years learning Russian at the Army Language School in Monterey, California, after which he was posted to West Berlin where he worked as an Intelligence Analyst, listening to Red Army radio relay networks and parsing the results. This was during the height of the Cold War, and his position gave him a front-row seat to the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968. He summed up his Army experience thusly: “I found military intelligence work intellectually satisfying, and might have remained in that field, but I learned that I do not take orders well.”

Returning to Harvard, he completed his coursework and received an AB degree in biochemical sciences in 1971, after which he earned an MS in biochemistry from the California Institute of Technology in 1973. Like his experience in the Army, he relished the intellectual stimulation but came to the realization that the field wasn't for him. “Though I loved the subject, I was hopeless in the laboratory. Instead of valleys and peaks on research graphs, my analyses were straight lines showing no information whatsoever,” he recalled in an interview published in the September 1995 issue of the Association of Professional Genealogists' *APG Quarterly*. It was during his last semester at Caltech that Mr. Anderson discovered his true calling.

Returning to Massachusetts for a family visit, he learned that his father's aunt was in possession of a family Bible and other papers that showed that his paternal grandmother, Prince Edward Island native Katherine (Gay) Anderson, was not of purely Scottish ancestry, as the family had long believed. She was, in fact, a descendant in the male line of John¹ Gay (ca.1613–1688/9), an early settler of Dedham, Massachusetts. As Mr. Anderson noted in his Harvard 25th Anniversary Class Report, “this led me to the study of genealogy, which, to my total surprise, is exactly what my mind was intended to do.” For the rest of his career, he immersed himself in the study of history, law, geography, paleography, and any number of other skills necessary to genealogical work. Returning to school, he earned an MA degree in history from UMass/Amherst, submitting for his master's thesis an analysis of the early settlement of Lebanon, Connecticut, which demonstrated that the earliest planters were a mixture of families from Norwich, Connecticut and Northampton, Massachusetts, with a smaller cohort from Duxbury, Massachusetts.

Known to his many friends as “Bob” or “RCA” (which was also his car's license plate number), Mr. Anderson's interests were by no means limited to genealogy. He read voraciously, and every room in his house (plus two rented storage units) teemed with books on many subjects, including evolutionary biology, science fiction, mystery, Asian history, Shakespeare, philosophy, and religion. He was an avid follower of sports, particularly professional baseball. Not surprisingly, he was a Red Sox fan, but during his frequent travels he always made time to take in a game if he was in a Major League city when their team was playing at home. As a longtime member of the Biographical Committee of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR), he was able to combine his love for both the sport and genealogy. The committee's goal is to collect basic vital data on each of the 13,000 men who have played in the major leagues since 1871. In an article entitled “Baseball Genealogy” that appeared in the Fall 1991 issue of the *APG Quarterly*, he presented his effort



(L-R) John Insley Coddington, David Curtis Dearborn, Clifford Coddington, Robert Charles Anderson, and Gary Boyd Roberts in 1977, celebrating John Coddington's 75th birthday.

to flesh out the life of a man known simply as Stedronsky, forename unknown, who played just four games for the Chicago National League team in 1879.

He was particularly attached to the town of Harvard, Massachusetts and its environs, and he served as a trustee and president of Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, which occupies the site of the short-lived utopian community of Fruitlands, inspired by Transcendentalism and Amos Bronson Alcott's ideas of societal reform. He was also commissioned by the town to write a history, *Directions of a Town: A History of Harvard, Massachusetts* (1976).

Mr. Anderson's love of genealogy and problem-solving extended to his friends as well. He was generous with his time and expertise, and he took a deep interest in his colleagues' research projects, offering sage advice or hands-on help. In his younger days, he enjoyed taking long solo car trips around the country that sometimes lasted for weeks, stopping at courthouses and libraries along the way to do research, and visiting old friends, former classmates, and Army buddies. He was happy to do lookups in obscure places if he was in the area, and this writer is forever grateful for work done on his behalf in courthouses in Iowa, Montana, and Oregon, to name just a few places (not necessarily on the same trip). He was a great travel companion, having no complaints about staying in two-star motels or eating mediocre road food.

American Ancestors named the new Robert Charles Anderson Center for Scholarly Publications at 97 Newbury Street in his honor.

His marriage to Robin Cecilia Wilson at Harvard, Massachusetts, on June 10, 1978 ended in divorce. He was predeceased by his parents and brother Bruce, and is survived by five siblings and eleven nieces and nephews, to whom American Ancestors extends its deepest condolences.

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