

# Researching Colonial New England Ancestors

## *Class 2: Using Town and Church Records in Colonial New England*

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### Review – Context

The earliest English settlement of New England reflected the religious values of Puritanism adapted to support the formation of new churches and towns as each colony expanded.

The local, established Puritan or Congregational Church remained a political and governmental force within most towns until the nineteenth century.

Rhode Island was an early exception. The colony was founded on principles of religious toleration that prevented the development of a state-sponsored religion.

While we are most familiar with the vital records recorded in town and church records, we often overlook the range of genealogical material found in town and church administrative records.

### Town Records

#### Review

Origins:

1. Groups of settlers receive land grants from a colonial authority; settlers established as the new town's proprietors.
2. Groups of settlers distant from the economic and religious center of their town petition to form a new town.

The administrative records of a town, often not transcribed or indexed, may include mentions of ancestors who served in a political office, who paid taxes, were part of the town militia, or who required the town's assistance. These records help to pin our ancestors to a particular time and place and provide contextual evidence of their lives beyond a birth, marriage, and death date.

Efforts in the late-nineteenth century and early twentieth century produced excellent indexes of vital records found in town record books:

**Massachusetts:** The Vital Records to 1850 series (also known as the “Tan Books”) includes birth, marriage, and death records for more than 200 Massachusetts towns. Most will include an introductory section detailing all the town and church record books used to prepare the index. Most books can be viewed for free through Hathi Trust or Archive.org. Databases with transcriptions can be found at [AmericanAncestors.org](http://AmericanAncestors.org) and many other genealogical websites.

**Connecticut:** The Barbour Collection of Connecticut Vital Records captures transcriptions of 136 Connecticut towns to about 1850. Originally deposited with the Connecticut State Library and prepared into a statewide index, the collection is also available as town-specific publications and searchable at [AmericanAncestors.org](http://AmericanAncestors.org) and many other genealogical websites. Check the database description for exact coverage.

**Rhode Island:** Twenty-one volumes of indexed vital, church and newspaper records were created by genealogist James N. Arnold and cover the period 1636 to 1850. Volumes organized by locality. Databases with transcriptions found at AmericanAncestors.org (vol. 1-12) and many other genealogical websites. The complete series is also available at American Ancestors’ Brim-DeForest Library in Boston.

**New Hampshire\*:** In 1905, a card index was created for early vital records found within town records. Searchable indexes can be found at FamilySearch.org, divided into [birth](#), [marriage](#), and [death](#) databases.

**Vermont\*:** An alphabetical card index of early Vermont vital records to 1870 was prepared by the Office of the Secretary of State. Searchable at [AmericanAncestors.org](http://AmericanAncestors.org) and other genealogical websites.

**Maine:** Part of Massachusetts until 1820. Published vital record indexes from 80 Maine towns from their founding to 1892. Searchable at [FamilySearch.org](http://FamilySearch.org).

\* These card indexes should be checked against the original records. Placed on standardized forms, the indexed information may not match the entirety of the original record. Most cards were prepared by town clerks with varying degrees of competency in reading older records.

## Common types of town records:

**Town meeting minutes:** These records will detail the day-to-day governance of the town, including appropriating money, setting an agenda for town meetings, and recording the opinions of residents.

**Elected offices:** Found within town meeting minutes, an ancestor might have served in a civic position like town clerk, selectman, or juror.

**Land records:** In Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Vermont, land records were maintained by each town. In most cases, these records will be indexed at the front or back of the record book.

**Earmarks:** Town clerks recorded descriptions of each farmer or family's earmark to distinguish sheep or cattle separated from the rest of their herd or flock.

**Poverty:** Town records will often include instances of town support for the poor including payments made to residents and physicians for support of indigent families. Non-residents who required town assistance might be *warned out* to leave town and settle elsewhere.

## Church Records

### Review

For most of the colonial period, New England was dominated by the Congregational Church, which remained a state-supported church in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut until the early nineteenth century.

Anglican, Baptist, and Quaker (Society of Friends) churches formed religious minorities throughout New England.

Besides the baptismal, marriage, and death/burial records that are commonly used by genealogists, churches also created administrative records that may name your ancestor. Membership lists document the arrival and departure of families in a religious community and meeting minutes detail the day-to-day running of the church. If your ancestor transgressed, they may have been disciplined by the church. The personal papers of a church's minister provide valuable context to the religious concerns of a wider community.

### Published Sources

Note: The sources below will only reflect the condition of records at the time of publication.

**Massachusetts:** Carroll D. Wright, *Report on the Custody and Condition of the Public Records of Parishes, Towns, and Counties* (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Co., 1889). Includes summaries of town and church records by town and denomination. Available at [Archive.org](https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSK3-3?i=10&cc=1).

**Connecticut:** Connecticut State Library, *List of Church Records in the Connecticut State Library* (Hartford: Connecticut State Library, 1976). Digitized through the [Connecticut State Library](https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSK3-3?i=10&cc=1).

**New Hampshire:** New Hampshire Historical Records Survey (WPA), *Guide to Church Vital Statistics Records in New Hampshire* (Manchester: New Hampshire Historical Records Survey, 1942). Digitized at [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSK3-3?i=10&cc=1).

## Repositories by denomination:

Note: Not all church records have been centralized into local or regional archives. If the church still exists (or was absorbed by another, existing church), consider contacting a church administrator and inquiring about what records survive and if they are accessible. Consider contacting a local historical society or archive for assistance tracking down the records of a particular church.

**Congregational:** Records for churches around New England digitized as part of New England's Hidden Histories, hosted by the Congregational Library & Archives:

<https://congregationallibrary.quartexcollections.com/projects/new-englands-hidden-histories>

**Quaker/Society of Friends:** Rhode Island Historical Society. Finding aid:

[https://www.neym.org/GuideToRecordsRSOF\\_1997.pdf](https://www.neym.org/GuideToRecordsRSOF_1997.pdf)

## General Resources

**FamilySearch.org:** Massive microfilm collection of New England town and church records digitized through their [catalog](#). Must register to access materials. Some collections will only be visible from a FamilySearch center or [FamilySearch affiliate library](#).

**ArchiveGrid** (<https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/>): Centralized database of over 7 million archival collections from over 1400 archival institutions across the United States.

**FamilySearch.org Wiki** ([https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Main_Page)): Helpful articles across a range of genealogical topics. Excellent summaries of town and church record databases on FamilySearch and elsewhere.

**FamilySearch.org Full-Text Search** (<https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/full-text>): This experimental feature from FamilySearch uses Artificial Intelligence to transcribe and make searchable digitized materials, including many unindexed church and town record collections.

**AmericanAncestors.org Research Guides** (<https://www.americanancestors.org/tools/research-guides>): Guides for genealogy in each New England state, 17<sup>th</sup> century New England research, Quaker genealogy, and many more!

Rhonda R. McClure, ed., *Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2021). Includes helpful charts that summarize the parent and daughter towns within each New England state and locations of many town and church records.