17th-Century English Research
Student Notes Class 1

- **Problems – Commonwealth Gap**
- **Migrants to the Americas**

For anyone who has been lucky enough to trace their ancestors back to this period, researching in the era of the English Civil Wars and the subsequent interregnum and commonwealth period (c1650-60), can be beset with problems. There are often gaps in the keeping of records as war and its aftermath had its effects. It is for this reason that the missing entries are said to fall in the "commonwealth gap." Hence genealogists must try to substitute the more commonly used parish registers and try to create a picture of a family before and after the civil wars.

Who governed the lives of our ancestors in the 17th century?
The course sessions will focus on the following themes for records of this 17th century

- The Parish, Vestry, and Parish Officials – Parish Registers and other parish records generated by the incumbent, overseers of the poor, churchwardens, constable

- The Diocese and Archdeacon – Prerogative (Archbishops), Consistory (Bishops), and Archdeaconry Church Courts with records created by proctors, summoners, apparators relating to probate, marriage licences, and matters of morality

- Quarter Sessions and Assize Courts – the criminal and administrative courts with records of Judges, Justices of the Peace, and Magistrates

- Manorial Courts – customary lores and laws of the manor; lord of the manor, steward or reeve, jury, constable

- Equity Courts – courts of chancery, exchequer, requests, star chamber, wards, and liveries

- The Crown and Officers of State – State Papers Colonial, State Papers of the Commonwealth period, Parliamentary Committees, etc.

Researching your Colonial English Ancestors

For anyone researching English Ancestors before 1750 and particularly before 1700 it is vital to know as much about the immigrant ancestor as you can: when they arrived, where they and their neighbours and network came from, and when they were likely to be born.

Most of what is available about known 17th and 18th-century colonists is published through local state genealogical and historical societies. Therefore, read all appropriate literature, journals, etc and be aware of current thought and research.

There are very few passenger lists showing emigration from England in the 17th Century and all known are published. Some fragmentary documents survive, giving a glimpse of what there might have been and most of what we know about the migrants are from sources in America rather than in England. The most important survivals are from 1634-5: London Port Books 1635 and Licences to Pass Overseas 1635. These have been published several times including in *The Complete Book of Emigrants 1607-*

1660 etc by Peter Wilson Coldham and *The Original Lists of Persons of Quality* John Camden Hotten, *Planters of the Commonwealth etc.* These are now online through Findmypast and Ancestry.

Many sources have been indexed and published online through the Great Migration study project (AmericanAncestors.org) edited by Robert Charles Anderson, or by Peter Wilson Coldham (Ancestry and FindmyPast). Also review:

1. Price Genealogy offers their [Immigrant Servants Database](#) for free. It includes over 20,000 indentured servants who immigrated to America between 1607 and 1820

2. Virtual Jamestown has a searchable database, the [Registers of Servants Sent to Foreign Plantations, 1654-1686](#). It covers about 15,000 people who travelled from Bristol, Middlesex, and London, England to the mid-Atlantic colonies and the West Indies.

3. Dr Carson Gibb and the Maryland State Archive offer [The New Early Settlers of Maryland](#) database, compiled from two texts. Maryland is unique as the colony incorporated a "process of headrights", where a person could be granted 50 acres of land for every additional person that he transported there

4. All available early [passenger lists](#) should be perused, such as the Early Emigration from Britain, 1636-1815 collection on Findmypast: [Early emigration from Britain 1636-1815 browse | findmypast.co.uk](#)

5. The [British Indentured Servitude Project](#) on WikiTree is a valuable online location for sharing research.

Most of these records are indexes only. Few paper records remain. Remember, these are often personal transactions between an individual and a ship captain or private landowner, so finding the actual indenture agreement is rare.

Huge numbers of poor young people were sent to America and were recorded by the London Mayors Courts and local Quarter Sessions, and the Bristol Port Books.

The most important survival covering the year 1634-5 is a fragment from London Port Books 1635. This was not the only year and not the only port of emigration, but I know whenever I hear the year 1635 in the enquiry this is probably the source. Additionally, the Licences to Pass Overseas 1635 – TNA E 157 and are known correctly as the *Registers of licences to pass beyond the seas, 1573-1677* original images on Findmypast.

A good proportion of these are soldiers, including mercenaries, taking the oath of allegiance before departing English shores to serve in the Low Countries with the Protestant side during the Dutch Revolt. However, others are unemployed or under-employed artisans looking for work (for example, weavers), or people visiting family and friends, or simply travelling for the pleasures of touring itself. Others are Protestant refugees from the Low Countries visiting relatives.

After 1609, all travelers over the age of 18 had to take an oath of allegiance to the monarch, which was registered by the Clerk of the Passes and led to the issuing of a licence. There was an expectation that the licence would be used quickly and, indeed, some were time-limited and required return to England within a specific period. The dates shown in the records are the date of the oath or the date of issue of the licence—not the date of actual departure.

These records showing more than 5,000 passengers licensed to embark to the Americas are tremendously rare early survivals. We see parties bound, for example, for Barbados; Bermuda; Boston, New England (Boston, MA); Charles Town, New England (Charlestown, MA); New England, Providence Island Colony; Salem, New England (Salem, MA); St Kitt's (St Christopher); Maryland; and Virginia, mostly within the 1630s but with some outliers such as 1677.

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Any breakthrough towards new discoveries will come from greater access to previously uncatalogued and/or unindexed sources such as Chancery and other Equity Courts, Tax records, Manorial and Ecclesiastical Courts. Make regular visits to TNA Discovery catalogue and the websites/catalogue of the appropriate local English County Record Office.

Manage your expectations

You are SO lucky to know anything about your 17th-century English ancestor. Remember the 17th Century is one of the greatest periods of upheaval in English history including religious and political schism; the English Civil Wars (1642-9); the execution of a King resulting in the period of the Commonwealth and Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell; the first steps to creating an empire; and tremendous developments in transportation, literature, trade, technology, and science.

Identify your 17th–century ancestor by answering the key questions:

- Who?

- What?

- When?

- Where?

✓ Search FamilySearch and other major online sites with British records and Trees

✓ Try localisation techniques

✓ Establish if any research been done before? As well as trawling through online published pedigrees be aware of major bibliographies that will lead to published research in monographs, journals etc.