

Researching in New England Town Records: 17th through 19th Centuries

Class 1: Introduction to the New England Town Meeting and Record Keeping

David Allen Lambert, david.lambert@americanancestors.org

Why are town records so important?

New England town records represent a unique resource for Family Historians. Early settlers from England brought their notions of town governance to the new world, including their ideas of legal matters and record keeping. The result is a treasure trove of documents that capture aspects of our ancestors lives as they went about their day-to-day business. These records are especially valuable for the 17th and 18th century time period as other records may not have survived.

Town records can be used to track much more than vital events. For example, town records may be used to document your ancestor's movements and migrations from location to location. Your female ancestor may appear in the town records under her maiden name. If your ancestor was destitute, one of the few places where he or she might be mentioned is the town records.

Town records help solve genealogical problems such as helping to distinguish individuals with the same name. They also provide context for your ancestor's life and give insight into the communities in which they lived.

Family historians may be familiar with town vital records but less acquainted with other forms of New England town record keeping. Records from the Town Treasurer, the Overseers of the Poor, and the Selectmen may mention your ancestor.

Anatomy of a New England Town

What did it mean to be a resident of a town in Colonial New England? First and foremost, town inhabitants had a right to own 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.

Who Is a Member of a Town?

The rules for town membership date back to the 1600s when New England was settled by the English. 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. 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.

Freemen

Freeman was the title given to recognized town members. Not all male residents were considered Freemen. A Freeman had to apply for the privilege. The specific requirements for Freeman 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. Lists of acknowledged Freemen are usually embedded in town records.

Town Functions

Towns were responsible for many functions such as distributing land, building and maintaining roads, keeping law and order, running schools, and assessing and collecting taxes. The cornerstone of town governance was the annual meeting to elect officials and conduct the regular business. The town meetings were recorded by the Town Clerk and provide an excellent source of information about a town. The town meeting was announced by the town constable (and sometimes labeled as a warning) a few days ahead of the meeting date. The warrant articles (i.e., agenda items) to be considered at the meeting were also published. Attendance at the meeting was generally required for male citizens. The meeting was led by a moderator and included the election of town officials and the consideration of different agenda items.

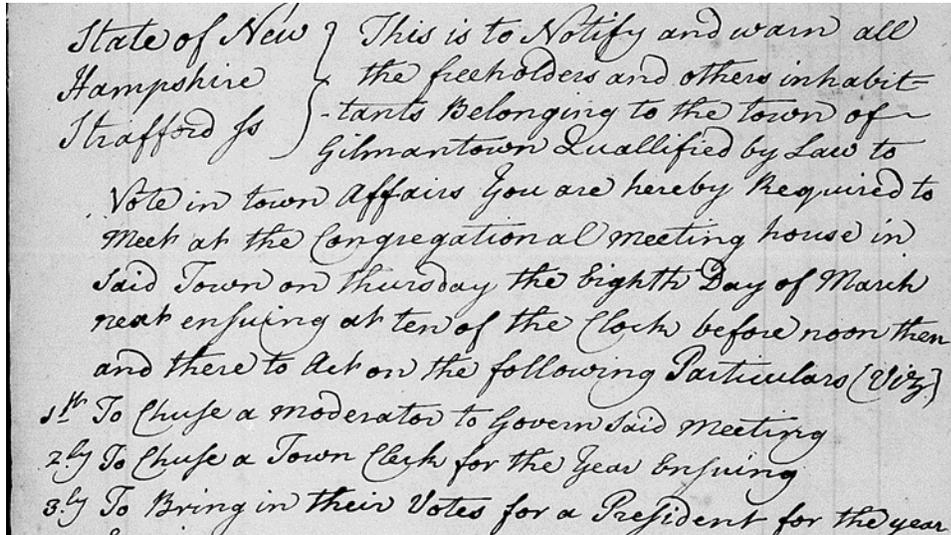
Tip: Read the first pages of the Town Book!

- Always read the first pages of the earliest town record books
- These first pages hold information about **WHO** settled the town and **WHEN** the town was found

Using Town Records

Successfully mining town records does present challenges. First, is the problem of finding them. They may not have survived, or they may be in hard copy format only. Second, the records are often unindexed

Figure 1: Town Meeting Warrant, Gilmartin, New Hampshire, 1787



so using them requires paging through material with poor or faded handwriting. Each town kept records differently so there are multiple formats to negotiate. Finally, the recording of material tended to random. Often if blank space was found at the end of a

page, it would be filled in with notes at a later date when the Town Clerk needed room to record new material.

The Town Meeting

Public notice would be posted to townspeople before the occurrence of a town meeting. The town meeting is generally led by a town moderator. The selectmen were to control the agenda and prevent long, needless discussion on a matter. These meetings often required attendance of town meeting members, or a vast majority of the population. At town meetings the appointment and election of town officers is held.

Benefit for researching Town Meeting minutes.

- Learn about various offenses, charges and praise given the various community inhabitants.
- From Town Meeting records you can learn various details on the social structure of the community.
- Understand the detailed history of a community when a town history has not been compiled.

Examples of various town meetings in New England, some examples appearing in Ann Smith Lainhart, *Digging For Genealogical Treasure in New England Town Records* (Boston: NEHGS, 1996). Note: See lecture slides for specific examples discussed.

Tip: Look at multiple town meetings for context

The table below displays some of the more common categories of elected officials of a New England town.

Who's Who in the Town—Elected Town Officers

The table below displays some of the more common categories of elected officials of a New England Town.

Table 1: Types of New England Town Officials

Office	Description
Town Clerk	Keeper of vital records, recorded meeting proceedings, administered oaths and affidavits, certified licenses.
Selectmen	Elected to one year term, managed affairs of town. Known as Town Councilors in Rhode Island.
Treasurer	Managed town's finances, presided over reimbursements (military service, care of poor, services by townspeople).
Constable	Posted notice for town meetings, "policeman" of the town, warned out strangers, could act as tax collector if position did not exist.
Tithingmen	Ensured that townspeople made contributions to meetinghouse and salary of minister, monitored church attendance, observed conduct of townspeople.
Overseers of the Poor	Charged with using town funds to support town inhabitants who were unable to support themselves. Support took the form of supplies, services, or money.
Surveyor of Highways	Inspected town roads, determined when and where new roads would be constructed.
Assessor	Responsible for listing the names of property owners (real and personal property) and determining how much tax they should pay.
Tax Collector	Collected the assessed taxes.
Fence Viewers	Reviewed fences and property boundaries, moderated boundary disputes.
Hogreeves	Caught stray livestock, fined owners for straying animals.

Overview of various town records

The types of records one may find in a town varies from community to community. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) sponsored an Historical Records Survey in some communities to survey and index historical records as held by local, state, and county repositories. These surveys provide a detailed breakdown of available town records.

The best way to understand a town collection is to call the Town Clerk or visit the Town Hall.

Table 2: Alphabetical List of Typical Town Records

Record Type	Description
Ear Marks	Cattle and sheep were grazed on common lands, each animal had identifying mark, marks recorded by town clerk (transfer of ear marks from person to person can depict relationship)
Land Grants	Can be found in proprietors' records and town records. The Proprietors' of the community would grant property to new settlers. And subsequent land transactions were recorded by the town.
Licenses	Towns issued licenses to run taverns and to sell "strong liquors."
Military Records	Militia Rolls, payment for military service, patriotic service, can provide insight into service (company, regiment, battles)
Poor Records	Towns earmarked funds for the care of the poor, townspeople reimbursed for care, communities created Overseers of the Poor (almshouses, town farms)
Proprietors' Records	Proprietors were the original settlers of a new community. These records provide important founding information and can include land grants and deeds to early settlers.
Tax Records	Recorded by Assessor or Tax Collector, format differs in each town, can help determine age, can serve as vital record substitute
Treasurer's Records	Reimbursements to townspeople for services, payment to soldiers for service, best sources for the poor and women
Vital Records	Birth, marriage, and death information. Earliest birth record may only mention the father. The maiden name of the mother on a birth record was not regularly included until the 19 th century. Early marriage records only named the couple and contained no information about the parents. Names of the parents of the couple began to be regularly mentioned beginning in the mid to late 19 th century.
Warnings Out Records	Inhabitants of a community were responsibly for each other (conduct, financial support). Warnings Out were a method of pressuring outsiders to leave town and settle elsewhere (this was for practical reasons as the town did not want to support outsiders).

Locating Records

Although many town records have been microfilmed and now digitized, many more are still only available in hard copy form at the Town Hall. Other locations for town records include:

- County Registry of Deeds
- Libraries and local historical societies
- Family Search online (see below)
- Published transcriptions of town records (check HathiTrust.org and Archive.org)

The *FamilySearch.org* website may be the first place to check for town records. From the main page, select “Search” and then click “Catalog” from the drop-down box. At the next screen enter the [STATE] [COUNTY] and [TOWN] in the Place search box. With the Full Text search option on FamilySearch unindexed Town Records, and Town Meeting minutes are more accessible than ever before.

Digital Town Records and Resources

American Ancestors.org, “Town Guides” <https://www.americanancestors.org/tools/town-guides>

Connecticut

For town records examine the FamilySearch.org catalog but the individual town name and select the category “Town Records” *FamilySearch.org*. Viewable at a Family History Center or Affiliate library.

Maine

“Digital Maine”, a partnership between the Maine State Library, other Maine libraries, historical societies,

For town records examine the FamilySearch.org catalog but the individual town name and select the category “Town Records” *FamilySearch.org*. Viewable at a Family History Center or Affiliate library.

“Digital Maine”, a partnership between the Maine State Library, other Maine libraries, historical societies, museums, and other local organizations, makes available digital town reports and other materials.

<https://digitalmaine.com/>

“*Town government in Maine*,” Works Progress Administration, digital book at *FamilySearch.org*.

<https://www.familysearch.org/library/books/records/item/257385-redirect>

“*Report on the Archives of the State of Maine*,” American Historical Association., Annual report of the American Historical Association, 1908 volume 1 (Washington: G.P.O.) pages 304-318. This resource includes a detailed town by town listing of available records. Viewed at HathiTrust.org.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.b3478767&view=1up&seq=261&skin=2021>

“*Maine, pauper accounts by town, 1863-1907*,” *FamilySearch.org*.

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/1881494?availability=Family%20History%20Library>

Massachusetts

Digital Commonwealth, a statewide consortium of libraries, museums, archives, and historical societies from across Massachusetts, makes available digital items from their collections. Many town records will appear in a search of this site. <https://www.digitalcommonwealth.org/>

“Massachusetts, Town Clerk, Vital and Town Records, 1626-2001” *FamilySearch.org*.
<https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2061550>

“Massachusetts, U.S., Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988” *Ancestry.com* (\$).
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2495/>

New Hampshire

“Index to early town records, New Hampshire, early to 1850,” *FamilySearch.org*.
<https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/koha:310817>

After using this index go to the individual town records at New Hampshire, “Town Clerk, Vital and Town Records, 1636-1947,” *FamilySearch.org*. <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1987741>

“Warnings out of town, early to 1800 approx.” *FamilySearch.org*. Viewable at a Family History Center or Affiliate library. <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/312238>

Rhode Island

“Report on the Archives of Rhode Island,” American Historical Association., Annual report of the American Historical Association, 1903 volume 1 (Washington: G.P.O.) pages 574-644 [Detailed town by town listing of available records] Viewed at *HathiTrust.org*.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044032311839&view=1up&seq=549&skin=2021>

Early Records of the Town of Providence. This is a set of twenty-one volumes of early Providence Rhode Records. The link takes you to a page that describes the contents of each volume and then links you to the appropriate *Archive.org* volume. <https://onerhodeislandfamily.com/free-rhode-island-resources/early-records-of-the-town-of-providence/>

“Certificates for deputies and freemen of Rhode Island towns, 1663-1778,” *FamilySearch.org*., Viewable at Family History Centers or Affiliate libraries.
<https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/280366>

Vermont

Digital Vermont, is a partnership between the Vermont Historical Society and other institutions, includes town records. <https://digitalvermont.org/>

For other town records examine the FamilySearch.org catalog but the individual town name and select the category “Town Records” *FamilySearch.org*. Viewable at a Family History Center or Affiliate library.

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<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001596659>

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Manchester, MA. *Town Records of Manchester ... 1636-1736* (Salem: Salem Press, 1889).

Manchester, NH. *Early Records of the Town of Manchester (Formerly Derryfield), 1751-1835* (Manchester Historical Assoc. Collections, vols. 8-12 [1905-10]).

Newcastle, ME. *Early Town Records of Newcastle, Maine from June 24, 1756 to January 6, 1779* (Damariscotta, ME, 1914).

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Wenham, MA. *Wenham Town Records, 1642-1775* (3 vols., Wenham: Wenham Historical Soc., 1930-40).

Worcester, MA. *Early Records of the Town of Worcester [1722-1848]* (Worcester Soc. of Antiquity, vols. 2, 4, 8, 10, 11, 15 [1881-95]).

New England Towns in the Historical Records Survey

State	Town		
Connecticut	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avon • Berlin • Bloomfield • North Branford 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Haven • Orange • Oxford • Prospect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seymour • Southbury • Weston
Maine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avon • Bar Harbor • Berlin • Brownsville • Chesterville 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coplin • Cranberry Isles • Dallas • Eustis • Kennebunkport 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mt. Desert • Seaville • Southwest Harbor • Tremont
Massachusetts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agawam • Ashfield • Athol • Auburn • Avon • Ayer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barre • Bellingham • Berlin • Bernardston • Brookline • Buckland 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chicopee • Clinton • Hampden • Holbrook • Maynard • Warwick
New Hampshire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Atkinson • Auburn • Bedford • Candia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canterbury • Chester • Exeter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greenland • New Hampton • Sanbornton
Rhode Island	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Providence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West Greenwich 	
Vermont	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vermont • Albany • Benson • Bolton • Bridgport • Brookline • Cambridge • Castleon • Cavendish • Charlotte • Clarendon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coventry • Danby • Derby • Eden • Elmore • Essex • Fairfax • Grafton • Grand Isle County • Hubbardston • Hyde Park 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jamaica • Johnson • Mansfield • Morristown • Plymouth • Shrewsbury • Stow • Tinmouth • Wallingford • Waterville • Wolcott