

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

Class 3: The Foundations of Using Financial Records in New England Research

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“Follow the Money Approach”

- When vital records do not exist or have significant gaps, we turn to financial records to learn more about our ancestors
- This approach can be used to track an individual’s movements through a country or overseas
- It can help clarify relationships between families

Why use Land Records?

- In some cases, a land record may be the only documented source you can locate.
- Land records can often trace generations of ownership of a single parcel of land.
- Using land records will help you determine the site of our ancestors’ house or farm today.

TIP: Remember not all deeds were recorded at the date of the sale.

Native American Deeds

Jeremy Bangs transcribed Indian land deeds of Plymouth Colony (1620-1691) – listed under Publications

TIP: Native American deeds were not always recorded before legal settlement occurred by the Colonists.

Proprietor Records

- During the 17th-18th centuries, the General Court of the colony assigned grants of land to groups of settlers
- These settlers formed Proprietorship Committees to distribute land to settle towns

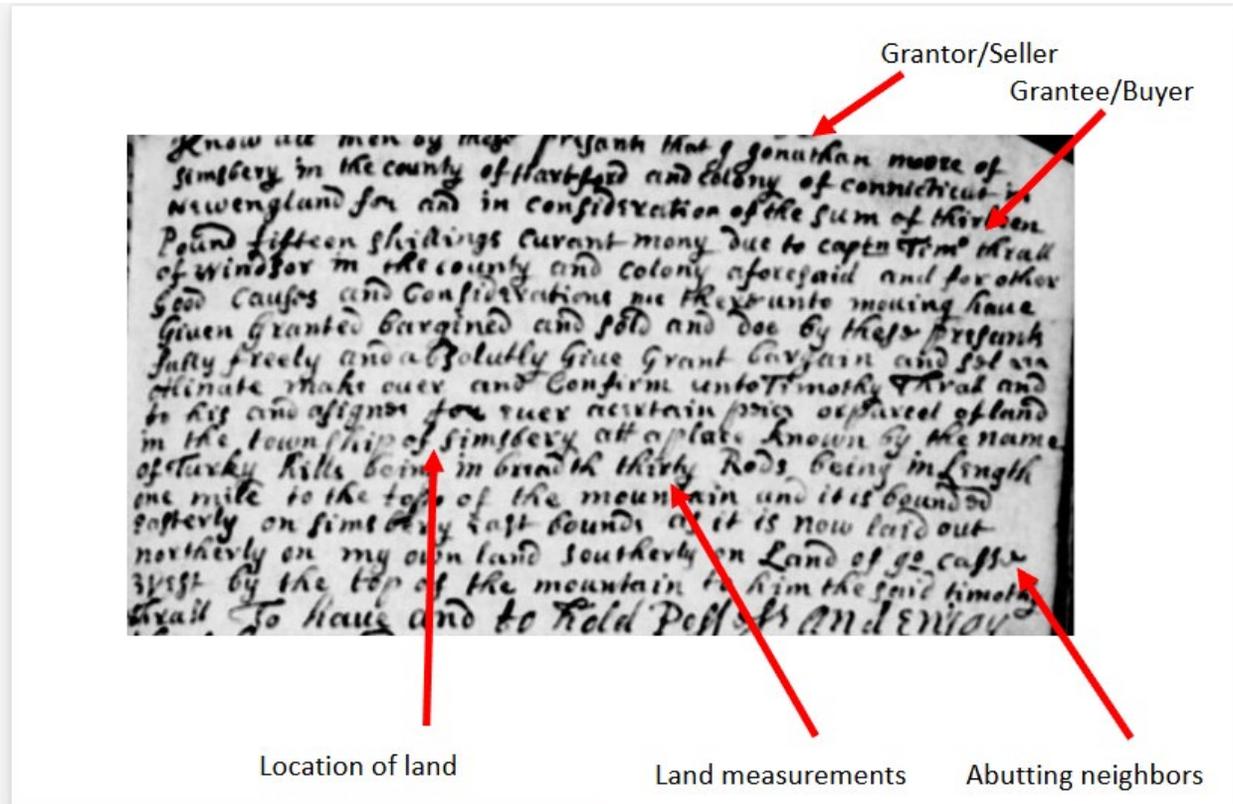
Where to locate Proprietor Records

- Town Halls. Town clerk, tax office or assessor
- County Registry of Deeds.
- Libraries and local historical Societies
- FamilySearch Library microfilm
 - FamilySearch catalogue>Search by name of town>Land and Property category
- Published transcriptions of Proprietor records.

Tips:

- Tax records can indicate when your ancestor was paying Real estate tax.
- Your ancestor did not need to reside in a community to own land there.
- Use Proprietor records to determine the earliest date of settlement for your family in the 17th and 18th century.

Introduction of the Land Deed



Followed by terms of land sale

shall to have and to hold Poss^{on} and enjoy
the above said parcels of land with all the rights
thereunto belonging to the said Timothy Thrall and to his heirs and assigns for
ever and the said Jonathan Moore do hereby
sane covenant promise and grant to and with the
Timothy Thrall his heirs and assigns forever that a
the enforcing and delivery hereof I am lawful
and sole friend of so parcels of land in a good state
of quietness in fee simple and that by force and
virtue hereof he the aforesaid Timothy Thrall his
heirs and assigns may at all times and from time
to time forever hereafter lawfully and peaceably
have hold use occupy enjoy and possess the above
granted parcels of land free and clear and freely
clearly acquitted and discharged from all former
other gifts grants sales mortgages or or any
incumbrances what soever
the condition of the above written deed or abination
is such that in case of the above named Jonathan
Moore my heirs executors administrators or assigns do
well and truly pay or cause to be paid
to the said Timothy Thrall his heirs executors admin-
istrators or assigns the above sum of thirteen pounds
fifteen shillings of current and lawful money of
this colony within four years after the date hereof
and paying the lawful interest for the said thirteen
pounds and fifteen shillings yearly then the above
written deed to be void and of none effect otherwise
to stand in full force and virtue as witness my
hand and seal this fourth day of February in the
year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and
thirteen or fourteen

Signed, Sealed, and Delivered, and Appearing Before the Court

Signed sealed and delivered Jonathan Moore
in presence of us
John Thrall
Josiah Moore
The above named Jonathan Moore
personally appeared in Windsor 4th of
February 1713-14 and acknowledged the above
written instrument to be his free act and deed
before me John Moore Justice
entered verbatim 1-6th of 2nd 1713-14
lost John Slater clerk

Land Measurements:

- 1 mile: 80 chains, 320 poles, rods or perches = 5,280 ft.
- 1 chain: 4 poles, rods perches is 66 ft., or 100 links.
- 1 pole, rod or perch: 25 links, 16 ½ ft.
- 1 link: 7.92 inches

Tips for Analyzing Land Deeds:

- Note where the buyer and seller's residence are at the time of the sale. This is a key clue for identifying migration.
- Look for deeds where a husband is selling property. If his wife is living, first name will be referenced in the deed and/or the court inquiry to release her dower.
- Note the deed witnesses and abutting neighbors. They may be relatives of either party.
- Look for phrases like "in consideration of natural affection" to identify family members, including in-laws.
- Quit claim and power of attorney deeds are useful for documenting the children of a deceased parent.

Land Records by State:

1. Massachusetts
 - Earliest landowners were proprietors
 - County-level registration started in 1640, managed by county court clerks
 - 1715 – legislature mandated a Register of Deeds per county to be elected
2. Connecticut
 - Earliest landowners were proprietors
 - Records are held on town level. Many of these were microfilmed and are available through FamilySearch.
 - Exception: Border towns of Woodstock and Suffield, which were part of Massachusetts
 - Note: No statewide or county index to deeds
3. New Hampshire
 - Masonian Proprietary Period 1629-1641 New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers (Vols. 29).
 - Original Town charters from the 17th and 18th century can be found in the New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers (Vols. 27-28).
 - New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers Online <http://sos.nh.gov/Papers.aspx>
 - Massachusetts Era 1641-1679

- Post-1679, New Hampshire was a royal province. Deeds could be recorded at the town or county level
 - 1769 - Rockingham County Registry of Deeds was created – deeds would continue to be registered at the county level as each county was created.
4. Rhode Island
- The earliest land grants were made by the colony. The records of these grants are known as "land evidences". They are located at the Rhode Island State Archives.
 - The Rhode Island General Assembly granted land to groups who in turn became Proprietors of the towns.
 - Some early grants and land transfers were recorded in *Proceedings of the General Assembly, 1646 to 1851*, located at the Rhode Island State Archives.
 - Rhode Island Deeds are recorded on the town level.
5. Vermont
- Earliest landowners were proprietors.
 - Some early Vermont land recorded 1688-1786 appears in Secretary of State. *New York Land Patents 1688–1786: Covering Land Included in the State of Vermont* (Vol. 7).
 - Land Grants 1778-1881 were published in Secretary of State, *Petitions for Grants of Land 1778–1881*. State Papers of Vermont, (Vol. 5). The petitions list the location, property, and the reason purpose for the petition.
 - Vermont land deeds are recorded at the town level.
6. Maine
- Maine deeds are recorded on the county level by the Registrar of Deeds
 - Cumberland Co. Land records were not destroyed.
 - First 18 vols. York County Deeds covering all Maine to 1736 were published by the state from 1887-1910 on AmericanAncestors.org
 - Some land dealt with through the Land Office in Maine after 1820, when Maine was created as a state.

Tax Records

Why Use Tax Records?

- Identifies your ancestor at a specific place and time
- Provides information about occupation and housing status not found in other records
- Overlooked source in early published genealogies
- Adds to the life story of your ancestor

Challenges of Tax Records

- Not all towns/counties/states' tax records survive
- Records are often not indexed
- Records are not always easy to understand and require some historical context
- Separate repositories for each level of taxation (federal, state, local)

Locations for Tax Records

- Tax Assessor's Office
- Historical Societies
- City or State Archives
- Genealogy Web Sites
 - FamilySearch Catalogue>Town Records or Taxation categories
- Newspapers
- Published Records
- University/College Collections

Town Taxes

- When towns were first incorporated, they were responsible for electing or appointing a tax collector.
- The town would collect taxes to repair roads, build schools, etc.
- Ministerial Tax
 - Also known as the religious tax or rate
 - Mandatory tax to support the local congregational church
 - Collected and enforced by colonial governments from settlement until the American Revolution
- Revolutionary War Supply Taxes
 - Congress had no authority to levy taxes. Money and supplies were requested from the states.
 - Taxes went towards raising supplies, paying troops, building ships, providing clothing, raising bounty money, providing relief for families of soldiers in service.
 - Ex. Beef Tax
 - Each state has different tax assessments that were levied. Consult the DAR and SAR guides for more information.
 - Reports of the Subcommittee on Revolutionary Taxes, National Society SAR Genealogy Committee (22 Dec. 2013) - <https://www.sar.org/wp->

[content/uploads/2019/06/Revolutionary-War-Tax-Law-Records-Multiple-States.pdf](https://www.dar.org/national-society/accepted-revolutionary-war-service)

- Daughters of the American Revolution – Accepted Revolutionary War Service - <https://www.dar.org/national-society/accepted-revolutionary-war-service>
- Poll Tax
 - Required as a prerequisite to vote
 - Massachusetts first enacted poll tax in 1646, followed by New Haven colony in 1649
 - Typically assessed on males 16 years and older
 - The following groups were often exempt from paying poll tax:
 - Clergy
 - Public officials
 - Impoverished
 - Sick/Disabled/Elderly
 - Enslaved Persons
 - Women
 - Taxes on Real and Personal Estates
 - Tax rolls may detail the type of structures they have on the estate (house, farm, mill, etc.)
 - Census alternative

TIP: Search for tax records where your ancestor may have owned property outside of their primary residence.

Probate Records

- Probate records are created from the court process that disposes of a deceased person's estate
- Probate records describe how the estate will be distributed, who will administer the estate, and contain a list of property/possessions owned by the deceased.

Why Use Probate Records?

- Provide an approximate death date for the deceased
- Verify family relationships
- Married daughters may be listed with their husband's surname
- Wills and inventories offer a glimpse into the personal belongings of an ancestor and how they were distributed
- Context of an ancestor's life

Challenges of Probate Records

- Not everyone left a probate record (i.e. women)
- Deceased may have had multiple marriages
- Not all children are listed
- No uniformity
- Difficult to read

Common Probate Terms

- Testate: dies with a Last Will & Testament.
- Intestate / Administration: dies without a will.
- File Papers: the original documents associated with the probate file.
- Record Books / Copy Books: copies of certain probate files copied into bound record volumes.

Documents Found in Probate Records

- Will
- Codicil
- Letters of Administration & Letters of Testamentary
- Inventory
- Accounts
- Distributions
- Guardianship Records
- Miscellaneous Probate Papers (examples below):
 - Dower Records
 - Bill of Sales
 - Receipts

Finding Probate Records

- Most probate records are found at the county level since they were handled by county courts
- Exceptions:
 - Rhode Island – town level
 - Early Connecticut and Massachusetts town councils had jurisdiction over probate matters

Publications

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