

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

## *Class 4: Diving Deeper: More New England Financial Records*

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When it comes to New England research, town records offer a lot of information about the lives of our ancestors—if we take the time to examine the usually unindexed items found in the town records, especially some of the financial lists.

### **Treasurer's Accounts**

The treasurer was appointed during the town meeting. The treasurer's job was to manage the town's finances. As a result, you often find a lot of information about taxes being collected, but you will also find information about reimbursements paid out to various inhabitants of the town. These can include:

- Military service – local militia to protect the town
- Care for the poor:
  - Payments made for those who house the poor
  - Reimbursements for those supplying items to the poor
  - Reimbursements for medical care by the town doctor
- Services by the townspeople:
  - Construction and repair of roads
  - Payment for supplies for communal buildings
  - Payment for the minister and the schoolteacher

Like most of the entries in the town records, the account items are often spaced throughout the town record volumes. At the very least they will include the name of the person receiving or paying money and the amount. Some treasurers would also include the reason for payment from the town's funds. You may even find that the treasurer has entered wording of receipts within the town records. Later years when printing was easier, you may find a lot of information in the published town treasurer's reports.

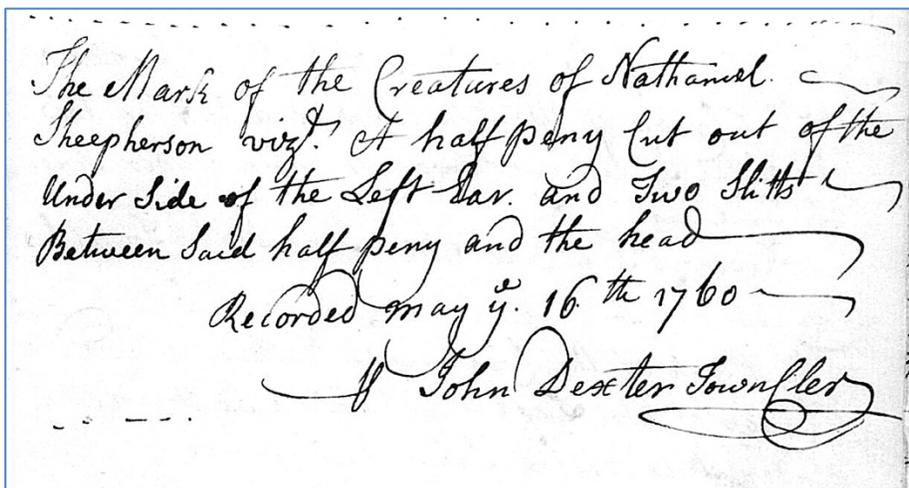
### **Earmarks**

One of the more interesting items often found within the town records are "earmarks." As the name implies, these are markings on the ears of the cattle that was communally grazed in an area set off by the town. New England towns had *commons* which were large areas of land in which the animals stayed all summer. As such, it was important to be able to identify each farmer's livestock from those of the other

farmers. This was done by making notches, clips and holes in the ears of the livestock, thus the name, though sometimes also referred to as cattle marks.

Each animal owner's mark had to differ from the other owners of livestock, thus why they were recorded by the town clerk. Because the marks were recorded in the town records they can be used to prove residency of your ancestors. Likewise, you may be able to show—with the support of other records, like probate—that an earmark is being transferred from father to son or grandson. It is important though not to assume that the transfer is always within the family.

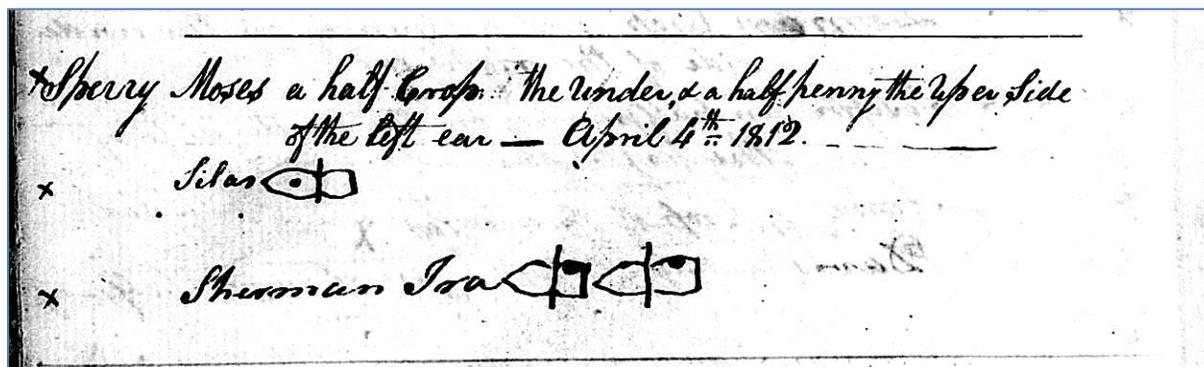
In addition to locating these records within the town record volumes, you will also want to research the volumes created by the original proprietors of a town. This volume or volumes were often separate from the town records begun once the town was established or incorporated.



The Mark of the Creatures of Nathaniel Shepherson viz: A half penny cut out of the Under Side of the Left Ear. and Two Slits Between said half penny and the head  
Recorded May y. 16<sup>th</sup> 1760  
J<sup>n</sup> John Dexter Town Clerk

Cumberland, R.I. Earmarks

Earmarks are often described in writing, and in some instances the town clerk would also draw the ears and what the mark looked like.



\* Sperry Moses a half penny the under, & a half penny the upper side of the left ear — April 4<sup>th</sup> 1812.  
x Silas   
x Shuman Isaac 

Oxford, Mass. Earmarks

Earmarks also inform us of the fact that our ancestor had cattle, and likely more than a single animal, such that they required the space afforded for grazing in the common. Generally, these marks carried a date of

entry in the town records, allowing us further proof that our ancestor was a resident of that town in a specific year.

## Warnings Out

Another valuable record set within early New England town records are the warnings out of a person or family from a town. This was done throughout New England and was a carryover from the laws and systems they brought with them from England.

The method of land ownership, especially once it got to the proprietors, plays a role in the understanding of how residents within a town had land to begin with. While all of the land was begun under the grant or charter by the British monarch, eventually it filtered down to those first individuals who created the new town, known as proprietors. These individuals had been given the land and permission to create a new town. One of their jobs was to divide the land into lots, designate the land for the common and where the church and school would be, etc. At that point they would then begin to give lots of land to those men and families they wanted to live in the town. These would have been upstanding individuals who attended church and were respected by the communities in which they presently resided. This system was to ensure that those first settlers within the town had a manner in which to support themselves. And such giving of lots would continue until there was no more unowned land within the town.

Land meant support for a family. Of course, families or individuals did fall on hard times, and it was the responsibility of the town to take care of those residents who could no longer support themselves. Sometimes this meant ensuring they had food and other sundries. Sometimes it required another resident to open their home to an indigent individual. The town's finances included funds for reimbursing such care.

As a result, if a family arrived in the town who could not purchase land or have a way to support themselves, the selectmen of the town would issue a warning out. This required the constable of the town to read the warrant of warning out to the family and they were then given a set amount of time to remove themselves back to the town that they were considered true inhabitants of.

Within the New England colonies, warning out laws were passed in the 17th and 18th centuries:

- 1671 – First Plymouth Warning Out Law
- 1673 – First Connecticut Warning Out Law
- 1692 – First Massachusetts Warning Out Law
- 1718 – First Warning Out Act of New Hampshire
- 1787 – First Warning Out Act of Vermont

Warnings Out records are found among the pages of the town records. They usually include the names of those individuals whom the constable is to warn out and the name of the town they are being told to leave. Very often if the warrant has just the names, it will list a man, a woman, and then males and females who share the same surname. Though this is likely a father, mother, and their children, you will want to ensure you find other records to support this theory. Assumption is never recommended when tracing your ancestry!

*Tip: When viewing these records online, always review at least one image to the right to ensure you have the complete document.*

You may find other information included either within the warrant itself or within the information returned by the constable (usually found on the back side of the warrant if the record is a single piece of paper or below the warrant if the town clerk has entered it into his records). Such information may include:

- Relationships of individuals named
- Name of town they came from
- Date of arrival in town they are being warned out of
- Date of warrant
- Date warrant was served

While such a system may seem harsh, it was designed to ensure that the town could take care of its own inhabitants who may have required assistance.

As mentioned, these records are most often found scattered within the pages of the town records. New Hampshire has a collection of warnings out for all the towns accompanied by an index that is found on FamilySearch.org at the state level, “Warnings out of town, early to 1800 approx.”

(<https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/catalog/koha:312238>).

## **Pew Deeds**

In today’s religious institutions it is unheard of to “own” the pew in which you sit when attending services. However, many churches relied on the money made from selling their pews or operating expenses during the 1600s to the 1800s.

Because pew deeds are usually found among the town records, as long as you know a town in which your ancestor lived in New England, you may be able to determine the religious denomination of your ancestor. You should not assume that the family was a member of the Congregational Church, though this was the most popular denomination in New England.

Pew deeds read similar to a land deed, though they are generally found within the town records as opposed to land deeds, which may be found at the town or county level depending on the New England state. The record will include:

- Grantor – person selling the pew
- Grantee – person buying the pew
- Cost – amount of money exchanging hands
- Description – the number and location of the pew within the building and some identifying information about the meeting house (name of minister, faith, etc.)
- May identify family relationships between grantor and grantee

If, when locating an inventory or a will for your ancestors in which a pew is mentioned, you will want to turn to the town records for more information about how your ancestor acquired that pew. And of course, additional information may be found in the records of the church itself.

*Tip: Look for period-specific pew maps.*

Early church records may have been deposited with a historical society if the church doesn't have enough room to store all their records. The pew deed is just one piece to the puzzle, but is one that may be found without necessarily knowing the religious denomination.

## Review

Though seldom indexed, the myriad of financial records found among the volumes of town records offer a variety of insights into our ancestors. With the artificial intelligence (AI) search capabilities of records on FamilySearch.org, you may discover much about your ancestors hidden in the town records.

When working with any of the town record volumes, be sure to pay attention to the front of the volume to see if what you are looking in is a recreated volume copied from older, perhaps disintegrating, volumes. Sometimes the format of such entries is different from the originals.

While financial details are often dismissed as dry facts that will not assist you in your genealogy, the financial dealings found in town record volumes in New England may hold the only clues to familial connections.

## Suggested Bibliography

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