

Massachusetts Research: Four Centuries of History and Genealogy

Class 1: 17th-Century Massachusetts Research

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Brief History

- Native Nations of New England: <https://www.americanancestors.org/education/learning-resources/read/native-nations-of-new-england>
- Plymouth Colony
 - Established 1620
 - Encompasses SE Mass., Cape & Islands
 - Core group were Separatists who had first fled to Leiden, Holland
 - Small in population and grew slowly
 - Friendly relations with Mass. Bay
 - Emigration to Berkshire Co., MA; Dutchess Co., NY; Cape May, NJ; coastal Maine
- Massachusetts Bay Colony
 - 1620s scattered settlements on Cape Ann
 - 1628 Endicott group to Salem
 - 1630 Winthrop Fleet to Boston
 - Established and led by Puritans
 - By far the most populous and influential colony in New England
 - Dissidents soon founded NH, Providence, Conn., and New Haven Colonies
- History of Colonization
 - Plymouth Colony and Massachusetts Bay Colony merge in 1691
 - Always the largest and most influential New England colony
 - Maine part of Mass. until 1820
 - Major location point for migration north, west, and south

Published Guides and Resources *(see bibliography at end)*

The settlers who came to New England in the 17th century are some of the most researched and written about people in history. Don't reinvent the wheel! Familiarize yourself with published sources:

- How-to guides
- Finding aids
- Study projects
- Record compilations
- Genealogies
- Local histories
- Journals and periodicals

Learn to critique published resources you encounter. Are they reliable? Archived webinar: “Using and Evaluating Published Genealogies”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnBx3V4PpIA>

Records

- Early Massachusetts Records
 - Vital and church records: birth, baptism, marriage, death, burial, divorce, gravestone
 - Land records: grants, deeds, mortgages, gifts
 - Probate records: will, inventory, guardianship
 - Civil records: lawsuits, individual vs individual
 - Criminal records: prosecution by authorities
 - Military records: Colony, town militia
- Colonial Government
 - Colony – Records of General Court, laws, appeals, border disputes, diplomacy, war
 - County or Jurisdictional Courts – Criminal and Civil actions
 - Towns – Selectmen, elected officers (Town Clerk), vital records, town grants of land
- Access to 17th century original records
 - Originals not often available to the public
 - Microfilm images
 - Digital images online – replacing microfilm
 - ✓ AmericanAncestors.org
 - ✓ Ancestry.com
 - ✓ FamilySearch.org

Reference Wright, Carroll D., *A Guide to Massachusetts Public Records: parishes, towns and counties* (Boston: NEHGS, 2004 reprint of 1889 edition) to see what existed as of 1884.

Also review the Massachusetts Town Guide to understand when a town was established. The records for that area may be under a parent town: <https://www.americanancestors.org/browse/town-guides/massachusetts>

Vital Records

- Mass. has the most complete set in the nation
- Kept by towns beginning in 1620s
- Generally are well-kept, but not always complete
- VRs up to 1850 published for over 200 towns, the majority in eastern Massachusetts
- For other towns, use the Corbin Collection, Rollin H. Cooke Collection, Holbrook microfiche, or manuscripts (all available at NEHGS)
- Vital Records to 1850
 - Systematic History Fund series = “Tan Books”
 - Births, marriages, deaths arranged alphabetically
 - May include VRs from church, cemetery, Bible, or private records
 - Most online at AmericanAncestors.org

- Vital Records Pitfalls
 - Not all VRs were recorded
 - Events may have occurred in one town, but were recorded in another
 - Don't assume that if you can't find a VR, that the event happened in a different town
 - Event may not have been recorded at all

Church Records

- Baptisms, deaths, and burials
- Admissions of church members
- Disciplinary records
- Letters of dismissal

Town Records

- Comprised of many different types of records: town meeting, selectmen's records, tax rolls, proprietors' records, cattle marks, warnings out, pauper records, etc.
- Where are they located?
- Often not indexed and occasionally in print
- Local town & city clerk's offices, or historical societies have originals
- Some have been imaged on microfilm or digitally from the FamilySearch Library

Freeman Lists

- Lists establish date of residence
- Free of indenture
- Church membership required prior to freemanship in Massachusetts Bay
- Freeman were allowed to vote for colony officers
- Abstracted in Great Migration series
- Massachusetts Bay
 - Colonial Freeman Lists
 - Massachusetts Bay Colony
 - Records started May 19, 1631
- Plymouth Colony
 - Part of Colony Court proceedings
 - Surviving lists are from: 1633, 1637, 1639, 1658, 1670, 1684

Proprietors' Records

- Proprietors were responsible for the improvement of the land and were required to enlist settlers and newcomers, assigning lots, building highways, and subdividing land/meadow/forest
- Early record of community
- Can include land grants and early deeds
- Where to locate Proprietor Records
 - Town Halls: Town clerk, tax office or assessor
 - County Registry of Deeds
 - Libraries and local historical Societies

- FamilySearch.org microfilm and online
- Published transcriptions of Proprietor records

Massachusetts Land Deeds

- Organized by county
- Berkshire, Bristol, Essex, Middlesex, and Worcester have multiple deeds registries
- American Ancestors has microfilm for some counties to 1800s or later
- For married male grantors, wife usually signs as well
- Usually lists occupations
- Barnstable County deeds burned in 1827 (only partially reconstructed)
- Be aware of changing county boundaries

Massachusetts Probate Records

- Proof of death (between date of will and probate)
- Family relationships, widow, legatees
- Personal bequests
- Financial status, land ownership
- Be sure to confirm the accuracy and completeness of published records
- Massachusetts Probate on AmericanAncestors.org for the 17th century
 - Barnstable 1685-1789
 - Bristol 1686-1880
 - Essex 1638-1881
 - Hampshire 1660-1889
 - Middlesex 1648-1871
 - Plymouth 1686-1881
 - Suffolk 1630-1841 *
 - Other counties available for later year

Court Records

- Criminal activity by or against an ancestor
- Infractions against town or colony rules
- Civil actions by or against ancestor
- Property, real, animal
- Relations with neighbors
- Social and financial status
- Few images available; FHL Microfilm
- Criminal and Civil Abstracts
- Divorce Records
 - 1639-1692: County Courts, General Court, Court of Assistants
 - 1692-1786: Governor & Council

Massachusetts Archives Collection: 1629-1799

- 328 volumes about early Massachusetts history (also called the Felt Collection)
- Access the collection at the Massachusetts Archive or browse on FamilySearch.org
- Some volumes pertaining to the 17th century:
 - Vol. 9: Domestic Relations, 1643-1774
 - Vol. 10: Ecclesiastical, 1637-1679
 - Vol. 11: Ecclesiastical, 1679-1739

- Vol. 15A: Emigrants, 1651-1774
- Vol. 30: Indian, 1603-1705
- Vol. 112: Towns, 1632-1693
- Vol. 113: Towns, 1693-1729
- Vol. 303: Petitions, 1659-1786

Military Records

- Few details for 17th century muster rolls
- Mostly colony records, original at Mass. State Archives
- Town records – local militia
- Military history chapters appear in many published town histories.
- Mostly Colony records, originals at State Archives

Earliest Passenger Lists to Massachusetts

- *Mayflower* from Bradford's account 30 years later
- *Fortune* (1621), *Anne* and *Little James* (1623) from land records.
- Surviving London Port book 1632-1635
- Post-1636 are very limited
- Rely on published sources (*see bibliography*)

Strategies

- Common Challenges
 - Distinguishing between people of the same name in the same community
 - Determining parentage when multiple marriages are involved
 - Finding women's maiden names
 - Origins
- General Considerations and Suggestions
 - You may not find one “smoking-gun” record; you may need to rely on a number of records to build a case
 - Some records may be less reliable than others
 - May have several working theories
 - Know when a town was established; parent/daughter towns may affect record keeping
 - Create a complete timeline with probate, land records, military, or any possible record
 - While not culturally consistent, some families used naming patterns
 - Surnames as first names or less common first names can be clues of earlier kinships
 - Do not assume a woman's name at marriage is her maiden name
- Remember:
 - Terms of kinship may have different meanings in 17th century Massachusetts:
 - Nephew and nieces may be referred to as “cousins”
 - “Brother” or “sister” can be indications of brothers and sisters within a faith
 - “Father” and “Mother” could refer to in-laws
 - Use of “Jr” and “Sr” don't necessarily mean kinship

- Summary
 - Don't rely on just one record set
 - Don't reinvent the wheel! Look at published sources in combination with originals
 - Keep up with scholarly publications
 - More and more records are being indexed and digitized everyday!

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