

# Massachusetts Research: Four Centuries of History and Genealogy

## *Class 4: 20th Century Research*

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*(original text created by Danielle Cournoyer)*

### **Context: Massachusetts in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The changing tides of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration characterized much of 20<sup>th</sup> century Massachusetts. In many ways, Massachusetts was at the forefront of innovation and modernization at the start of the century and would reinvent itself time and time again over the next 100 years.

#### **I. Years of Economic Prosperity: 1900 – 1917**

1. At the turn of the century, Massachusetts factories led the nation in the production of goods varying from paper and textiles to metals and other raw building materials.
2. Immigration: Ethnicities and origins of Massachusetts' foreign-born population shifted in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although the Irish continued to be the largest foreign-born group, by the early 1900s Canadians, Italians, Portuguese, Poles, Russian Jews, and other Eastern Europeans all formed large communities across the state.
  - Immigrant men and women found jobs in local factories making shoes, garments, textiles, rubber goods, chemicals, candy, and other products.
3. Abuses and corruption caused hardship for many American immigrants and laborers in Massachusetts and led to some of the largest movements for progressive labor laws and regulation in the county such as Lawrence's "Bread and Roses Strike" in 1912.

#### **II. New Immigration Restriction & Industrial Decline: 1918 – 1929**

1. Record levels of immigration sparked rising backlash. Organizations like The Immigration Restriction League lobbied for federal legislation to curb immigration.
  - Immigration Act of 1917: Enacted new literacy tests intended to reduce European immigration as well as establishing an "Asiatic Barred Zone," effectively outlawing nearly all immigration from Asia.

- National Origins Act of 1924: Limited immigration through a national origins quota. Outlined new funding and enforcement rules to limit legal immigration.
2. By World War I, industry accounted for a larger share of total economic activity in New England than in any other part of the country.
  3. The industrial economy of Massachusetts faltered due to a lack of industrial diversity.
    - Competition from the South and Midwest, followed by the Great Depression, led to the almost complete collapse of the 3 main industries in Massachusetts: textiles, shoemaking, and mechanized transportation.

### III. The Great Depression & World War II: 1929 – 1945

1. The Great Depression sent Massachusetts into a deeper and more prolonged crisis as workers faced staggering job losses and business failures.
  - By 1934 roughly a quarter of the state's workers were unemployed.
2. World War II revived Massachusetts's economy, at least temporarily. Federal contracts for shipbuilding, munitions, and other military goods got many factories running again.

### IV. Post-War Massachusetts: Challenges & Reinvention

1. The deterioration of industry underlined problems facing urban centers. Declining population, middle-class flight, high unemployment, rising taxes, low property values all exasperated competition and conflict among ethnic and racial groups.
  - Eastern-Massachusetts: Economy transformed from one based primarily in manufacturing into a service and technology-based economy.
  - Western-Massachusetts: Struggled to build new economy as it de-industrialized in the last 40 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Closure of The Springfield Armory, in 1968 spurred exodus of high-paying jobs.
2. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965: eliminated the old quotas of the 1920s and raised the cap on immigration.
  - Global conflicts also led to the arrival of immigrants from Southeast Asia and Central America which further changed the demographic make-up of the State which continues to shift today.
3. In the last 30 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Massachusetts has established itself as a center of education, technology, and medicine.

## Massachusetts Government Records

When searching for 20<sup>th</sup> century Massachusetts government records, such as vital and probate records, it is important to consider who created the original record: the Local, State, or Federal government. Making this determination will help you determine where to look for the record. Confidentiality restrictions may limit what records can be accessed and by whom and sometimes require court intervention.

### I. Where to find 20<sup>th</sup> Century Vital Records

In Massachusetts, Vital Records are unrestricted, meaning there is no time or legal limitations for obtaining vital records for events that occurred in the State.

The only vital records closed to the public are the original copies of birth records that were later amended—which can be accessed by those named on the record. The most common instance for this restriction is in the case of adoptions. Twentieth century Massachusetts Vital Records are maintained at two levels:

- First, by the clerk of the town the event occurred in
- Second, the town would report the event to the State

#### Vital Records at the Massachusetts Archives (1841 – 1930)

1. Massachusetts Archives holds the original manuscript state vital records up to 1930.
  - Certified copies can be ordered for \$3 by mailing/emailing the application form.  
[https://www.sec.state.ma.us/divisions/archives/download/Application for Certified Vital Records 1841-1935 .pdf](https://www.sec.state.ma.us/divisions/archives/download/Application%20for%20Certified%20Vital%20Records%201841-1935.pdf)
2. Most vital records are digitized and available online via FamilySearch.
3. 1921 to 1927\* (*except for Boston*) currently searchable or browsable in 3 separate FamilySearch databases. Records are not yet text searchable. Use index to determine volume and page.
  - Births: [www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2859768](http://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/2859768)
  - Marriages: [www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/3010705](http://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/3010705)
  - Deaths: [www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1463156](http://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1463156)
4. Records that have yet to be digitized (contact reference archivist to access):
  - All Massachusetts vital records for 1927 to 1935
  - Boston vital records for 1921 to 1935

### ***Important Note: Switch from Register to Certificate Format***

1. Modern-day practice of issuing a single page certificate for a birth, marriage, or death did not begin in Massachusetts until (for all towns except Boston):
  - May 1903: Death Certificates
  - January 1818: Birth & Marriage Certificates
2. Boston Vital Records inconsistently recorded in both Register & Certificate formats:

#### **Boston Death Records**

Before 1904: Register  
1904 to 1914: Certificate  
1915 to 1918: Register  
1919 to 1920: Certificate  
1921 to 1925: Register (Not Digitized)

#### **Boston Birth & Marriage Records**

Before 1918: Register  
1919: Certificate  
1920: Register  
1921 to 1925: Register (Not Digitized)

### **Vital Records at the Massachusetts Registry of Vital Records and Statistics (1936 – present)**

1. Registry offers only physical certified copies of a record at cost and will not provide uncertified photocopies or emailed scans. Records can be purchased in person for \$20.
2. Submit a record request via mail for \$32 per record using the application.
3. Requests can be made over the phone and online through the 3<sup>rd</sup> party service VitalChek.com. Processing fees apply, making the cost \$51 a record.
4. Public research room visitors can pay by the hour to view and transcribe original records. No photography is allowed. (Appointment needed.)

## II. Record Collections at the Massachusetts Archives

The Massachusetts Archives mainly collects 20<sup>th</sup>-century materials produced by state agencies.

1. Records of the State Medical Examiner for 1885 to 1960
  - If a death certificate says “Medical Examiner” at the top, you can request a copy of the corresponding Medical Examiner’s return.
2. State Prison Records
  - Open upon the death of the individual, but medical and mental health info remains restricted, so any reference is redacted.
3. State Hospital Records
  - Archives maintain hospital records (inpatient admission registers & case files) of state facilities that have closed.
  - May be able to request a copy of these records for someone who is deceased

## III. Massachusetts Court Records

State Court Records in Massachusetts are widely maintained at the county level. To locate a specific court record you need to determine where the case was handled.

1. Divorce Records
  - 1887 to 1922: Divorces handled by the Massachusetts Superior Court are still maintained at the county level by the superior court today.
  - 1922: The Probate & Family Court was also granted jurisdiction over divorce and since then has heard the majority of divorces in the state.
2. Probate Records
  - Depending on the record’s age, the probate may be at the Judicial Court Archives or at the Probate & Family Court where the record was originally filed.
  - Mass.gov – historic court record [“decision tree”](#)
  - [Massachusetts Trial Court Electronic Case Look-Up](#)
3. Naturalization Records
  - The Judicial Archives holds naturalizations records, for anyone who was naturalized in the state Superior Courts after September 26, 1906.
  - The Northeast Regional Branch of the National Archives in Waltham houses naturalization records filed with the Federal Courts in Massachusetts:
    - U.S. District Court naturalization records (1790-1991)
    - U.S. Circuit Court naturalization records (1845-1911)

## IV. Massachusetts Land Records

Massachusetts Land Deeds maintained at a county level and divided into 21 registry districts with an elected Register of Deeds responsible for each office. The Registries of Deeds record and maintain every land transaction in each county.

Most 20<sup>th</sup> century deeds can be accessed on the Massachusetts Land Records website at [www.masslandrecords.com](http://www.masslandrecords.com).

## Massachusetts Military Records

### I. Massachusetts National Guard Service Records

1. Massachusetts Archives holds National Guard Service Records up to 1940.
2. Military Records Branch in Milton maintains copies of all discharged Massachusetts Army and Air National Guard personnel from 1941 to present.

### II. National Personnel Records Center, Military Personnel Records or (NPRC)

1. National Archives repository of military personnel, health, and medical records of discharged and deceased veterans from all services from the Spanish American War to about the year 2000.
2. Records lost in the 1973 National Personnel Records Center Fire:
  - About 80% loss to records of Army personnel discharged between November 1, 1912, and January 1, 1960
  - About 75% of Air Force personnel discharged between September 25, 1947 and January 1, 1964, with those whose names alphabetically after Hubbard, James E.
  - Some U.S. Army Reserve personnel who performed their initial active duty for training in the late 1950s but who received final discharge as late as 1964.

## Useful Resources: Finding your Ancestors at Home

### I. Newspapers

Advancements in printing and communication technologies led to the rise of newspapers published daily. Today historic newspapers have been widely digitized and are often text searchable.

1. Some of the most popular large national databases are:
  - [Genealogybank.com](http://Genealogybank.com) (\$\$), [Newspapers.com](http://Newspapers.com) (\$\$), [newspaperarchive.com](http://newspaperarchive.com) (\$\$), [Chronicling America - Library of Congress](http://Chronicling America - Library of Congress) (FREE)
2. Summary of Massachusetts newspapers accessible online is available at [theancestorhunt.com](http://theancestorhunt.com).

3. Always check local library and university libraries for local newspaper collections.

## II. City & Business Directories

1. Published annually or semi-annually in both large and small urban areas. Allows you to fill in the gaps between census years.
2. Alphabetically list individual with their occupation, work address and/or home address.
  - Wives were often included in parenthesis in the entry for their spouse.
  - Include entries for widows and individuals who moved away from the city
3. Only included people with an occupation. Would not typically include individuals working in a home (such as domestics servants), unmarried women, or the unemployed.
4. Directories include a wealth of other unique information which may point in direction of where else to find family records.
  - Lists of churches, hospitals, school and government officials.
5. Reverse Directory (also called Street Guides or “Criss-Cross” Directories) lists individuals by street address instead of alphabetically.
  - Can be used to identify friends, associates, and neighbors and to pinpoint all individuals who resided at a certain address.
  - Generally, record the name of the homeowner of each address – helpful if you are doing property research.
6. Where to find them online:
  - [Ancestry](#) (\$\$), [Fold3](#) (\$\$), [FamilySearch](#) (FREE) [Google Books](#) (FREE), & [Internet Archive](#) (FREE).
7. Where to find them in person:
  - Massachusetts State Library, Public Libraries, University Collections.

## III. City and Town Annual Reports:

1. Contain detailed information for the given town or city over a one-year period.
2. Published by local governments and include:
  - Vital statistics, budget information, local schools (listing teachers and their salaries; sometimes student lists), cemetery reports, road and public works projects.
3. Not as frequently digitized as City Directories but often found in collections of local libraries – some have made their annual report collections available at [Internet Archive](#).