Researching Connecticut Ancestors: Four Centuries of History and Genealogy

Class 4: 20th-Century Research

Melanie McComb, Senior Genealogist, melanie.mccomb@americanancestors.org

History

The population of Connecticut nearly quadrupled from approximately 900,000 people in 1900 to over 3.4 million by 2000. Over one quarter of Connecticut's population in 1900 was born outside of the United States, and by 2000 this was just over ten percent. With population growth and standardized records, many records that contained limited information in the nineteenth century showed an increase in detail during this period.

The town of West Haven, created in 1921 from the western part of Orange, is the only new Connecticut town incorporated in the twentieth century. West Haven had its own probate district until the 2011 consolidation when it became part of the New Haven Probate District. No towns have been incorporated in the twenty-first century.

Records

Vital Records

Connecticut mandated vital records at the state level beginning on July 1, 1897. While most towns and cities sent copies as soon as this began, there was some inconsistent recordkeeping in the earliest period, with general compliance after 1915. A state copy of vital records after 1897 is at the Department of Health in Hartford, and the town's copies are at town and city clerks' offices. Marriages, deaths, and births over 100 years old are considered public records. See Statute 7-51 regarding access to births under 100 years. You can access an index of these records for free at https://connecticutgenealogy.org/.

Connecticut General Statutes Section 7-51

Access to and examination and issuance of certified copies of birth and fetal death records or certificates restricted. Access to and disclosure of confidential information restricted. (a)(1) The department and registrars of vital statistics shall restrict access to and issuance of a certified copy of birth and fetal death records and certificates less than one hundred years old, to the following eligible parties: (A) The person whose birth is recorded, if such person is (i) over eighteen years of age, (ii) a certified homeless youth, as defined in section 7-36, or (iii) a minor emancipated pursuant to sections 46b-150 to 46b-150e, inclusive; (B) such person's child, grandchild, spouse, parent, guardian or grandparent; (C) the chief executive officer of the municipality where the birth or fetal death occurred, or the chief executive officer's authorized agent; (D) the local director of health for the town or city where the birth or fetal death occurred or where the mother was a resident at the time of the birth or fetal death, or the director's authorized agent; (E) attorneys-at-law representing such person or such person's parent, guardian, child or surviving spouse; (F) a conservator of

the person appointed for such person; (G) a member of a genealogical society incorporated or authorized by the Secretary of the State to do business or conduct affairs in this state; (H) an agent of a state or federal agency as approved by the department; and (I) a researcher approved by the department pursuant to section 19a-25.

(2) Except as provided in section 7-53 and section 19a-42a, access to confidential files on paternity, adoption, gender change or gestational agreements, or information contained within such files, shall not be released to any party, including the eligible parties listed in subdivision (1) of this subsection, except upon an order of a court of competent jurisdiction.

(b) No person other than the eligible parties listed in subsection (a) of this section shall be entitled to examine or receive a copy of any birth or fetal death record or certificate, access the information contained therein, or disclose any matter contained therein, except upon written order of a court of competent jurisdiction. Nothing in this section shall be construed to permit disclosure to any person, including the eligible parties listed in subsection (a) of this section, of information contained in the "information for health and statistical use only" section or the "administrative purposes only" section of a birth certificate, unless specifically authorized by the department for statistical or research purposes. The Social Security number of the parent or parents listed on any birth certificate shall not be released to any party, except to those persons or entities authorized by state or federal law. Such confidential information, other than the excluded information set forth in this subsection, shall not be subject to subpoena or court order and shall not be admissible before any court or other tribunal.

(c) (1) The registrar of the town in which the birth or fetal death occurred or of the town in which the mother resided at the time of the birth or fetal death, or the department, may issue a certified copy of the certificate of birth or fetal death of any person born in this state that is kept in paper form in the custody of the registrar. Except as provided in subdivision (2) of this subsection, such certificate shall be issued upon the written request of an eligible party listed in subsection (a) of this section. Any registrar of vital statistics in this state with access, as authorized by the department, to the electronic vital records system of the department may issue a certified copy of the electronically filed certificate of birth or fetal death of any person born in this state upon the written request of an eligible party listed in subsection (a) of this section.

(2) In the case of a certified homeless youth, such certified homeless youth and the person who is certifying the certified homeless youth as homeless, as described in section 7-36, shall appear in person when the certified homeless youth is presenting the written request described in subdivision (1) of this subsection at (A) the office of the registrar of the town in which the certified homeless youth was born, (B) the office of the registrar of the town in which the mother of the certified homeless youth resided at the time of the birth, (C) if the birth certificate of the certified homeless youth has been electronically filed, any registrar of vital statistics in the state with access, as authorized by the department, to the electronic vital records system, or (D) the state vital records office of the department. The certified homeless youth shall present to the registrar

or the department information sufficient to identify himself or herself as may be required by regulations adopted by the commissioner pursuant to section 7-41. The person who is certifying the certified homeless youth as homeless shall present to the registrar or the department information sufficient to identify himself or herself as meeting the certification requirements of section 7-36.

(d) The department and each registrar of vital statistics shall issue only certified copies of birth certificates or fetal death certificates, except as provided in sections 7-51a and 7-53.

Connecticut General Statutes Section 7-51a

Copies of vital records. Access to vital records by members of genealogical societies. Marriage and civil union licenses. Death certificates. Issuance of certified copies of electronically filed certificates. (a) Any person eighteen years of age or older may purchase certified copies of marriage and death records, and certified copies of records of births or fetal deaths which are at least one hundred years old, in the custody of any registrar of vital statistics. The department may issue uncertified copies of death certificates for deaths occurring less than one hundred years ago, and uncertified copies of birth, marriage, death and fetal death certificates for births, marriages, deaths and fetal deaths that occurred at least one hundred years ago, to researchers approved by the department pursuant to section 19a-25, and to state and federal agencies approved by the department. During all normal business hours, members of genealogical societies incorporated or authorized by the Secretary of the State to do business or conduct affairs in this state shall (1) have full access to all vital records in the custody of any registrar of vital statistics, including certificates, ledgers, record books, card files, indexes and database printouts, except for those records containing Social Security numbers protected pursuant to 42 USC 405 (c)(2)(C), and confidential files on adoptions, gender change, gestational agreements and paternity, (2) be permitted to make notes from such records, (3) be permitted to purchase certified copies of such records, and (4) be permitted to incorporate statistics derived from such records in the publications of such genealogical societies. For all vital records containing Social Security numbers that are protected from disclosure pursuant to federal law, the Social Security numbers contained on such records shall be redacted from any certified copy of such records issued to a genealogist by a registrar of vital statistics.

(b) For marriage and civil union licenses, the Social Security numbers of the parties to the marriage or civil union shall be recorded in the "administrative purposes" section of the marriage or civil union license and the application for such license. All persons specified on the license, including the parties to the marriage or civil union, officiator and local registrar shall have access to the Social Security numbers specified on the marriage or civil union license and the application for such license for the purpose of processing the license. Only the parties to a marriage or civil union, or entities authorized by state or federal law, may receive a certified copy of a marriage or civil union license with the Social Security numbers included on the license. Any other individual, researcher or state or federal agency requesting a certified or uncertified copy of any marriage or civil union license in accordance with the provisions of this section shall be provided such copy

with such Social Security numbers removed or redacted, or with the "administrative purposes" section omitted.

(c) For deaths occurring on or after July 1, 1997, the Social Security number of the deceased person shall be recorded in the "administrative purposes" section of the death certificate. Such administrative purposes section, and the Social Security number contained therein, shall be restricted and disclosed only to the following eligible parties: (1) All parties specified on the death certificate, including the informant, licensed funeral director, licensed embalmer, conservator, surviving spouse, physician or advanced practice registered nurse and town clerk, for the purpose of processing the certificate, (2) the surviving spouse, (3) the next of kin, or (4) any state and federal agencies authorized by federal law. The department shall provide any other individual, researcher or state or federal agency requesting a certified or uncertified death certificate, or the information contained within such certificate, for a death occurring on or after July 1, 1997, such certificate or information. The decedent's Social Security number shall be removed or redacted from such certificate or information or the administrative purposes section shall be omitted from such certificate.
(d) The registrar of vital statistics of any town or city in this state that has access to an electronic vital records system, as authorized by the department, may use such system to issue certified copies of birth, death, fetal death or marriage certificates that are electronically filed in such system.

Approved Genealogical Societies under the statutes above (with annual individual dues, and/or lifetime membership) - https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/researcher/gensocieties

Connecticut Ancestry Society (Stamford), https://www.connecticutancestry.org/
($25)

Connecticut Professional Genealogists Council, Inc. (Hartford), https://www.ctprofgen.org/ ($25)

Connecticut Society of Genealogists (Glastonbury), https://csginc.org/ ($35, lifetime $700)

Descendants of the Founders of Ancient Windsor, Inc. (Windsor), https://dfaw.org/ ($15, lifetime $225). While this is a hereditary society, membership is not limited to qualified lineal descendants.

French-Canadian Genealogical Society of Connecticut, Inc. (Tolland), https://www.fcgsc.org/ ($35)

Gaelic-American Club, Inc. (Bridgeport), https://gaconline.org/ ($205). This organization is also a social club requiring a $30 application fee and the sponsorship of two existing members.

Godfrey Memorial Library (Middletown), https://godfrey.org/scholar/godfrey-home.html ($45)

Indian & Colonial Research Center, Inc. (Old Mystic History Center), https://indianandcolonial.org/ ($20)

Jewish Genealogical Society of Connecticut, Inc. (Newington), https://www.jgsct.org/ ($25 or $18 if out of state)

Killingly Historical & Genealogical Society (Danielson), https://www.killinglyhistorical.org/ ($10)

Middlesex Genealogical Society, Inc. (Darien), https://mgsdarienct.org/ ($25, $45 for two years)

Polish Genealogical Society of Connecticut and the Northeast, Inc. (New Britain), https://pgsctne.org/ ($15, $27 for two years)

Southern Connecticut Ancestry Network, Inc. (SCAN) (Hamden), https://sites.google.com/site/scancestrynetwork/home ($15)

Southington Genealogical Society (Southington), https://southingtongenealogicalsociety.org/ ($10)

Church and Cemetery

Many twentieth-century church records are still held by the current congregations, and access to these records is often at their discretion. The Congregational Church Records at the Connecticut State Library extend to 1929. Many Catholic churches across Connecticut have had baptism, marriage, and burial records transcribed and published. Many of these records are at the Connecticut State Library and other local repositories. Keep in mind that baptisms of individuals born to unmarried parents are usually not included in these records. Current policy of the Archdiocese of Hartford is very prohibitive for Catholic records to be used for genealogical purposes and recommends contacting the local parish where the sacraments occurred.

Court, Land, and Probate Records

Probate and land records largely remain at the town halls in the vaults where vital records are also kept. The probate records here are the transcribed records, while the dockets themselves will be held by the probate court. Online court information can be found at https://civilinquiry.jud.ct.gov/.

City Directories, Census, and Military Records

City directories continued in the 20th century until the early 1980s when they were largely replaced by phone books. The largest collections of Connecticut city directories are kept at the Connecticut State Library and Connecticut Historical Society. Ancestry has the largest collection available online (https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2469). The FamilySearch Library also has a sizeable collection, although most of these records are not available online (https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/3754697). Many local libraries across Connecticut will have city directories for their own and surrounding towns.

The federal census existed in Connecticut as it did for the rest of the country, with records currently available through 1950. The 1900 and 1910 censuses had "special inquiries relating to Indians," which asked for more specific information for majority Native American households. These records are frequently cited in records submitted to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for federal recognition. The Mashantucket Pequot tribe reformed after the last member died on the remaining 214-acre Pequot Reservation in 1973. Through the Connecticut Indian Land Claims Settlement, the western Pequots were able to reclaim 800 additional acres in Ledyard

that were sold by the state in 1855. By 1982 the tribe had 32 members and today has 1,086, all descending from eleven families enumerated in Ledyard in the 1900 census.

Connecticut never conducted a state census but did conduct a World War I census in 1917. Ordered by the General Assembly, this military census was conducted to assess manpower for war and other resources in the state. The census included surveys on agriculture, factories, and even automobiles. The forms (available online at FamilySearch - https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/3741249 and Ancestry https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2277, and on microfilm at American Ancestors) were filled out by men aged sixteen and over. The form asked the person's name, post office address, trade or profession, age, marital status, number of dependents, citizenship, military service, and if they had any physical disability. The men also reported on various skills, including whether they could ride a horse or handle a team, drive an automobile, ride a motorcycle, understand telegraphy, operate a wireless, if they had any experience with a steam engine or electrical machinery, if they could handle a boat, power or sail, if they had any experience in simple navigation or high-speed marine gasoline engines, and if they were good swimmers.

Newspaper and Funeral Records

Twentieth-century newspapers, especially obituaries, contain many more useful details about the deceased and their surviving relatives. Marriage and birth announcements also appear in various local papers. Funeral homes are often the source of information relayed to the newspapers for obituaries. Some funeral homes have published partial records, and records from many funeral homes in Middletown, Connecticut, are available online at the Godfrey Memorial Library website.

Immigration and Naturalization Records

Twentieth-century passenger lists contained significantly more information than those of the prior century. One significant collection is the St. Albans Border Crossing Index. While named for the crossing point of St. Albans, Vermont, this included passenger lists for U.S. citizens and aliens crossing the U.S.–Canadian border from 1895 to 1960 (https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1075 and https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2185163 (through 1954)). This included crossing points in Vermont and several throughout Maine. Often these were ships originating in Europe. The lists generally contain the passenger's name, date and place of birth, citizenship, other physical characteristics, name and address of their nearest relative in their home country, and whether they are visiting a friend or relative and their name and address.

Naturalization records likewise became more detailed after 1906 when they went under the jurisdiction of federal district courts. In Connecticut, there were federal district courts in Hartford, New Haven, and Bridgeport. An index is available on FamilySearch from 1851–1992 (https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2141008). Records through 1973 were transferred to the National Archives in Waltham, Massachusetts. Records after that date are still kept by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, previously known as the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization.

Tracing Present-Day Descendants

Reasons we may research living individuals can vary, from working on a compiled genealogy of descendants of a family to seeing if distant cousins have any relics of your common ancestors, or even finding descendants needed for a DNA study. While being on the ground in Connecticut can provide the most opportunities in terms of record access, plenty of online options can also be utilized for identifying living individuals.

The final exercise covered in this class involves tracing descendants of an early twentieth-century couple from Woodstock, Connecticut. From the federal census to the online Connecticut Marriage and Death Indexes, you can identify which children of a couple married in Connecticut or died young. Utilizing online newspapers, when available, identifies survivors with their residences at the time. Using various public records online, such as Whitepages, BeenVerified, and FamilyTreeNow, can provide the most promising leads to make contact with individuals who may be of interest to your research.

Bibliography

History

Indigenous People

Richard Andrew Pierce and Henry Bainbridge Hoff, *A New England Native American Reader, Volume 1* (Boston: NEHGS, 2020).

Marcella Houle Pasay, *Full Circle: A Directory of Native and African Americans in Windham* (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, 2002).

Marcella Houle Pasay, *Family Secrets: 18th and 19th Century Birth Records Found in the Windham County, CT Court Records & Files at the CT State Library Archives, Hartford* (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, 2000)

Published Resources

Finding Aids

Rhonda R. McClure, *Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research, 6th Edition* (Boston: NEHGS, 2021).

Thomas Jay Kemp, *Connecticut Researcher's Handbook* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1981).

Useful Links and Databases

Connecticut General Statutes Section 7-51 – https://www.cga.ct.gov/current/pub/chap_093.htm#sec_7-51

Approved Genealogical Societies in Connecticut - libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/researcher/gensocieties

Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Hartford, Office of the Archdiocesan Archives, Sacramental Records and Genealogy Guidelines – https://cdn.diocesanweb.org/beacon/diocesehartford/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/DOC.17.pdf

Connecticut Naturalization Records - https://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/naturalization

Online Directories – www.familytreenow.com, www.whitepages.com

Dead Fred, Genealogy Photo Detective – https://www.deadfred.com/

U.S. School Yearbooks, 1900-1999 (Ancestry.com)

The Collections Research Center at Mystic Seaport - https://research.mysticseaport.org/