

## BEYOND THE CENSUS: FLESHING OUT THE FAMILIES OF 1790 NEW ENGLAND

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Research during the 1790 time period can be incredibly frustrating for the genealogist. Identifying family members is a tedious, painstaking process. Although vital records were maintained in many towns from the first days of settlement, other towns made no effort to record the births, deaths and marriages of inhabitants until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Don't give up! A wealth of sources is readily available to aid the researcher in fleshing out those families. Assuming that extant vital records, basic probate and land records, as well as military pension records from the Revolutionary War and War of 1812, have been explored, this lecture takes the quest to the next level, leading the researcher through a number of often-neglected sources that hold solutions to many genealogical mysteries.

### 1790 Families Publications

Researchers with roots in Maine, Vermont, and (soon) New Hampshire will want to take advantage of these volumes documenting the families of 1790. *Even if your ancestors are not included, these publications can still serve as an excellent research tool.* The bibliographies itemize the enormous number of sources used to identify family members and learn of their lives together. The bibliography for the upcoming New Hampshire volume exceeds 50 pages!

**New Hampshire** – Available through New Hampshire Society of Genealogists (<http://www.nhsog.org/>).

**Maine** – 9 volumes; available through the Maine Genealogical Society (<http://www.rootsweb.com/~megs/index.htm>).

**Vermont** – First volume out-of-print; second volume available through Genealogical Society of Vermont (<http://www.rootsweb.com/~vtgsv/>).

## **Town Records**

Town records are perhaps the richest source of information on New England families of 1790. Not only do these records identify inhabitants of significant social stature; the information to be found on the poor and the landless is unequalled in other sources. Each community felt great responsibility for the welfare of its people. "Overseers of the Poor" were charged with supervising the needs of those who were unable to properly care for themselves, and the overseer was required to report his activities to town officials. Town records may also include records of schools, churches, land grants, town meetings, military units and bounty payments, manumissions, and many other items of genealogical value. Ann Smith Lainhart's book, *Digging for Genealogical Treasure in New England Town Records*, is an excellent guide to locating and using these records.

Before beginning the search, it is important to determine the date that your ancestors' town was established and the parent town from which it was taken. This will enable you to locate earlier records. Marcia Melnyk's book, *Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research*, is an excellent tool for this purpose.

Town records explored in this lecture include:

Family Records  
Town Charters  
Land Grants

Proprietors' Records  
Indentures  
Records of the Poor

Many of the early town records are still maintained by local town clerks. Some records may be found at the State Archives. The publications mentioned above are very helpful for locating town records. The Family History Library ([www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)) has microfilmed many records, which are available through their local Family History Centers.

- A word of caution with respect to the "Every-Name Index" to early town records at the State Library and available through the Family History Library. Among other errors and omissions, seventeen town are not included in the index: Brookline, Dover, Dublin, Exeter, Fitzwilliam, Goffstown, Keene, Litchfield, Lyndeborough, Manchester, Marlborough, Merrimack, Milan, Nashua, New Boston, Pembroke, Swanzey and Tamworth.<sup>1</sup>

## **Church Records**

Many church records from this time period have survived, but locating them may be challenging. The novice researcher, believing that church records are merely a source for baptisms, marriages and deaths, often misses the rich biographical information that may lie in the church record books. Disciplinary actions were common, and sometimes included a written confession from the accused. Non-members who

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<sup>1</sup> Edward F. Holden, "Early New Hampshire Town Records;" online at New England Historical Genealogical Society ([www.newenglandancestors.org](http://www.newenglandancestors.org)).

were seriously ill sometimes requested baptism in their homes, which were also recorded in the church record books. Letters of recommendation from prior parishes may also be extant.

Church records may be scattered and difficult to find. A thorough search should include:

- The local church, if it still exists.
- Denominational archives. See the chapter on Church Records in *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy* edited by Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking.
- Minister's personal papers, if extant.
- Historical societies
- Church-affiliated university libraries
- Family History Library ([www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org))
- NUCMC – National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections ([www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc](http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc)). This site, maintained by the Library of Congress, allows the researcher to explore catalogs of archival and manuscript collections throughout the United States and its territories. Before searching the RLG and OCLC Catalogs, *carefully read the instructions provided for each catalog* if you want your search to be successful.

### **Diaries and Personal Papers**

Diaries and personal papers are one of the most valuable tools available for genealogical research. They offer eyewitness accounts of events and personal information not found in other sources. If you've been frustrated by fruitless searches for family diaries and papers, perhaps you haven't looked far enough. You must expand the search! Look for manuscripts of friends and neighbors, those who signed important documents in your ancestor's life. ***Try searching for manuscripts by location, rather than surname.*** Any diary from the community in which your ancestor lived may prove to be enormously valuable in your search.

Records of **justices of the peace** are one of the richest, and most under-utilized, sources for genealogical research. The justices often performed marriage ceremonies, which may not have been recorded elsewhere. He conducted hearings in civil and criminal matters, some of which were pending in the area courts. His notes and decisions were not always incorporated into the court records. He also administered oaths to military officers. These records are scattered and can be difficult to find, but they are worth the extra effort!

**Family papers** are another often-neglected source, primarily because they can be very difficult to locate. The *search should not be limited to known ancestors*; instead, it should include collateral lines, friends and neighbors. As with diaries, try searching by location, rather than surname.

Locating these records can be very challenging, but the rewards can be substantial. Your search should include the following:

- NUCMC (discussed above)
- Family History Library (www.familysearch.org)
- Local and state libraries
- Academic libraries
- Church archives
- Local, state and regional historical societies
- State and/or county archives, especially for justice of the peace records
- National archives, especially for those who served the federal government

### **Account Books**

Another under-utilized source, account books can be very helpful in determining family relationships. For example, most localities had a general store. You may find that the store that served your ancestors was actually located in a neighboring town, rather than in the town where the family resided. These records can be particularly helpful in identifying women if her purchases were recorded under the same account number as her husband or father. Many of these old account books have survived, and can be found in a variety of repositories.

Locating these records requires a search similar to that described in “Diaries and Personal Papers” above.

### **Probate Record Books**

A good genealogist always includes probate records in the search for elusive ancestors. But if the decedent did not leave a will and the estate was not administered by the court, the search often ends, leaving a wealth of information untapped. In some instances, the court file may have been lost or damaged. Probate record books contain transcriptions of all significant documents, including wills, from every case pending in that court. Although a page-by-page search of these volumes is tedious and very time-consuming, the likelihood of finding unknown ancestors with clearly-defined relationships is significant. This technique may be particularly useful when researching female ancestors.

These volumes may be maintained by the current clerk of court, or they may have been moved to the state archives. Many have been filmed by the Family History Library. Diane Rapaport’s book, *New England Court Records: A Research Guide for Genealogists and Historians*, is an excellent guide that will lead the diligent researcher to court records throughout New England, state by state.

### **Court Records**

Our ancestors often appealed to the Courts to resolve very personal issues: e.g., unpaid debts between friends or relatives; land ownership disputes; and even establishment of the paternity of an unwed

mother's child. Court records, however, may be incomplete or scattered, requiring the researcher to pursue other sources to supplement the record, including journals of local Justices of the Peace and other public officials. Again, Diane Rapaport's book is an invaluable tool for understanding and locating court records in the region.

### **Tax Records: A Brief Case Study**

Tax records can be intimidating, but when land and probate records are insufficient to determine an ancestral connection, tax records may be the key to solving the mystery. Tracing the land over a number of years may reveal the death of a patriarch and probable birth order of his children. The enactment of the poll tax brought young men into the tax rolls, typically at the age of 18. New Hampshire's poll tax applied to men between the ages of 18 and 70. The tax rolls may enable you to discern the approximate year of birth by determining when the tax was first applied to your ancestor, *or* when the tax no longer applied. State statutes (which are usually indexed) should be consulted to learn if and how the poll tax applied during the time of your search.

Tax records may be included in the town record books maintained by the local clerk. The records may have been maintained in separate tax books. If not found with the local town clerk, they may be at the state archives. In early New England, taxes were often assessed for payment of the local minister. Those records may be found at the church, if it still exists, or at the denominational archives (see Church Records above).

### **Published Genealogies; Local and County Histories**

These publications, *if well-researched and documented*, can be an excellent source in the search for ancestors. Local and county histories are particularly helpful in providing the historical context in which our ancestors lived. However, the reader must be cautioned that undocumented publications may contain much "wishful thinking," perpetuating myths with little or no basis in fact. Be careful! ***All undocumented information should be used only as clues to direct your search to credible sources.***

### **Finding the Sources**

A common stumbling block in genealogical research is the failure to fully explore (and exploit) the catalogs of libraries and other repositories. ***The search must not end with the surname!*** Look for records and manuscripts of neighbors and friends.

Also, search for manuscripts by locale, rather than surname. An unrelated person may have kept a diary that includes your ancestors. Remember that library catalogs were created over a number of years, with many different people entering data. Be creative in your search. When searching for records for a town, enter the state in every possible way it might appear in the catalog (e.g., New Hampshire, NH, and N.H.). You may be amazed at the difference in the results.

Search the online catalogs of local libraries, historical societies and academic libraries. Use the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (<http://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/>). You may find your ancestors' records in a part of the country where they never lived!

### ***Recommended Publications:***

- Benton, Josiah Henry Benton. *Warning Out in New England*. 1911. Reprint, Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, 1992.
- Bockstruck, Lloyd D. *Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants Awarded by State Governments*. Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1996.
- Bolton, Charles Knowles. *Marriage Notices, 1785-1794, for the Whole United States from the Massachusetts Centinel and the Columbian Centinel*. 1900. Reprint, Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1985.
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- Lainhart, Ann Smith. *Digging for Genealogical Treasure in New England Town Records*. Boston, Massachusetts: New England Historical Genealogical Society, 1996.
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- Rapaport, Diane. *New England Court Records: A Research Guide for Genealogists and Historians*. Burlington, Massachusetts: Quill Pen Press, 2006.
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- Salls, Timothy. *Guide to the Manuscript Collections of the New England Historic Genealogical Society*. Boston: NEHGS, 2002.
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- Taylor, Maureen A., and Henry B. Hoff. *Guide to the Library of the New England Historic Genealogical Society*. Boston: NEHGS, 2004.

### **State-Specific Publications**

The website of the New England Historic Genealogical Society ([www.newenglandancestors.org](http://www.newenglandancestors.org)) is an excellent source of articles on genealogical research and methodology. The articles are available free-of-charge. Just click on the "Education" tab.

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- Roger Parks, editor. *Connecticut: A Bibliography of its History*. Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1986.
- Pendery, Joyce S. "A Guide to Genealogical Research in Connecticut." *New England Ancestors* 3 (Summer 2002); also online at New England Historic Genealogical Society ([www.newenglandancestors.org](http://www.newenglandancestors.org)).
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- Roberts, Gary Boyd, ed. *Genealogies of Connecticut Families from the NEHGR*. Baltimore, Maryland: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1968.
- Ullmann, Helen S. *Nutmegger Index: an Index to Non-alphabetical Articles and a Subject Index to the Connecticut Nutmegger, Volumes 1-28, 1968-1996*. Camden, Maine, Picton Press, 1996.

### Maine

- Anderson, Joseph C., II. *York County, Maine, Will Abstracts 1801-1858*. Camden, Maine: Picton Press, 1997.
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- Galvin, William Francis. *Historical Data Relating to Counties, Cities and Towns in Massachusetts*. Boston, Massachusetts: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1997.
- Hanson, Edward W., and Homer Vincent Rutherford. "Genealogical Research in Massachusetts: A Survey and Bibliographical Guide." *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 135 (July 1981).
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