

EARLY AMERICAN LIFE

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Each Early American Life article has presented a detailed look at a tiny piece of our ancestors' lives. Each investigation to research the article revealed that there was far more to a simple topic than expected. Juliana has been generous about letting me write long articles, but I've still had to leave out many things I learned during the research, including alternative information (especially when I felt it was somewhat inaccurate). The material I most often omitted tended to be not quite general enough, given the wide diversity of the interests of the readers of Ancestry Daily News.

Readers have occasionally told me of interesting tidbits that I failed to discover or hadn't considered, which indicates that there is always more for us to learn. This doesn't surprise me at all.

One thing that has been highlighted in comments from readers is that although I've been writing about an amorphous time period that I have been calling "early America," many of the things I've written about continued into the twentieth century. They just aren't widely known.

RESEARCHING ON YOUR OWN

This will be my last Ancestry Daily News column on Early American Life, so I want to give you some tips on continuing the exploration on your own.

Unlike genealogical research, where we are looking for one definitive source, for research on history, material culture, and social history it is better to get viewpoints from many different sources. I begin with a dictionary, followed by my ancient *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (it has more in-depth, scholarly articles than modern encyclopedias).

I explore the Internet, visiting many sites (as with genealogy, there is plenty of misinformation available on early American life) to learn about tools or specific trades.

I search online catalogs for library books at both public and college libraries. Once I've identified the call numbers for books of interest, I browse nearby shelves for additional books that I hadn't found in searching the catalog. In any book, I check bibliographies and footnotes and often seek out books mentioned there. As I've mentioned before, Interlibrary Loan is very helpful, allowing access to books in institutions far distant from where we live.

Like many researchers, I haunt used-book stores and library deaccessioning sales, building my personal inventory of books for "background reading." Gift shops at

historical sites, national parks, state parks, and museums are great places to find a broad range of books on the daily lives of our ancestors, ranging from simple publications for children to scholarly tomes.

Living history sites and museums are wonderful opportunities. Many are on the east coast, such as Plimoth Plantation [Massachusetts], Old Sturbridge Village [Massachusetts], Colonial Williamsburg [Virginia], and the Shelburne Museum [Vermont]. There are others around the country, such as Pioneer Village in Minden, Nebraska, which I visited with my parents many decades ago.

Don't neglect smaller places, such as a Colorado silver mine, a historic farm, or one of the many preserved mills around the country that were used for everything from grinding grain to running manufacturing equipment.

Some locations let you try your hand at the tasks they are demonstrating. I suspect that many farm tasks, such as milking cows by hand, are rapidly entering the realm of "early America."

Craft guilds are active in many communities and may sponsor exhibits and demonstrations. Several of my friends have looms set up in their living rooms, and at least one friend can spin with a hand spindle. I still treasure the Christmas-tree ornament she made, with its tiny baskets of wool, a miniature spindle, and the resulting ball of yarn.

When museums stage special exhibits, they often publish accompanying catalogs or articles related to the topic. You may find some of them on-line. One example is the Museum of Early Trades and Crafts. It has a virtual museum, with images of some of their holdings with explanatory notes, and a section on special exhibits.

Conferences in fields other than genealogy offer another path for learning. One of these is the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife, under the auspices of Boston University. Each year it focuses on a single topic, such as tombstones, textiles, foodways, speech, children, furniture, and public gatherings. The papers presented each year are then published as the "Annual Proceedings." I attended one of the textile seminars and found it very interesting. This year's topic is "In Our Own Words: New England Diaries, 1600 to the Present."

There are many opportunities for you to do your own explorations of the details of the everyday lives of your ancestors. Good luck!