

PUBLISHED COLONY AND STATE PAPERS

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

In *A COLONIAL RECORD ODYSSEY*, I mentioned what we call the published “New Jersey Archives.” Our editor, Juliana Szucs Smith, tried to add a citation and found out it wasn’t a straightforward matter. After a telephone conversation in which I explained some of the vagaries of such publications, we added an explanatory sentence, but she suggested a fuller treatment of this type of publication in a future article.

Before the American Revolution, a wide variety of records were kept at the colony, rather than the county, level, especially during the early years. The division between the legislative, executive, and judicial branches that are the foundation of the federal period (after the Revolution) did not exist during the colonial period. In general, in the earliest years these functions were largely combined in one body. Counties were not created until the workload became too great. Over time, most, but not all, of the administrative (executive) and court (judicial) functions moved to the lower jurisdictional level.

During the Revolutionary War we faced sort of a Catch 22. We had been England, but now we were declaring that we weren’t. We were not yet, however, a United States (in fact, we were very different colonies). Therefore, the focus of government during the Revolution was at the colony level.

This means that in colonial and Revolutionary-era research, you will need to tap into records that are colony-centric. The bad news is that such records vary greatly from colony to colony. The good news is that they are usually in print. But be forewarned—you will find great variety in the content and organization of these records and in the tools you use to access them.

Publications of these records may be a long series of volumes that include records of the federal period in addition to colonial and Revolutionary records. In fact, they may even include nongovernmental and semigovernmental papers such as newspaper abstracts, marriages, and papers of important persons.

The terminology varies greatly. New Hampshire has “provincial and state papers,” while North Carolina has “colonial records.” Often the name of a series reflects where the records were deposited or the sponsor of the publication. Thus, New Jersey and Pennsylvania have published “archives,” while in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maine, the state historical society has published “collections.” Or they may be split. Delaware has both a short series of “archives” and one of “court records.”

Finding the publications in catalogs is almost impossible, even if you know they exist. I check at the state level for all of the above topics, plus the unobvious one “serials.” (Because they were usually published over many decades, this is how a library cataloger views them.) I must admit that I usually tend to hunt for them by self-browsing in a large library looking for a long series of

short, fat, old-looking books. But even this method can be tricky.

The series is often subdivided. For example, the first series of the “New Jersey Archives” is 42 volumes. (There was a second series, but it seems to have fizzled out quickly.) Of these, 17 volumes relate to the government or the proprietors, 13 relate to probates, 11 are newspaper abstracts, and 1 is marriages. In many libraries these volumes are shelved by topic. To complicate matters, they were not neatly organized to begin with. The newspaper abstracts are in volumes 11–12, 19–20, 24–29, and 31, while the probate volumes are 23, 30, and 32–42. You had best be prepared to make your own checklist based on the library you are using.

The problem is similar with the “New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers.” Its 40 volumes jump back and forth between the provincial (colonial), Revolutionary, and federal periods. It, too, has subseries. One of my favorite (or unfavorite) volumes in this respect says on its title page “Volume XXVII. [of the 40-volume series] / Town Charters, Volume IV. / Masonian Papers, Volume I.” In other words, even the subseries has a subseries! But my ancestors’ names are in there, so I will deal with it.

Many of the most name-intensive volumes have been reprinted, very often under completely different titles. These include such things as probates (often called simply “wills”), muster rolls, oaths of allegiance and tax rolls (sometimes called “census” or “residents”), and marriage records. In some cases the original title page has been dropped from the photoduplication, but the “old” style of the type is the giveaway. Occasionally, the page numbering has been changed, which can cause all sorts of headaches if you are trying to backtrack a citation. Electronic versions may have been created of all or part of a series. These allow libraries and individuals to own the series or a subset at a reasonable cost.

How do you find your ancestors in these? Checking the index to every volume is one way. Often, however, they were printed with indexes that only contained subjects and major personages. Look to see what is available in merged indexes. New Jersey has a separate merged index for volumes 1–10. New Hampshire has a merged index done by Mevers for all volumes. Merged, every-name indexes may have been created later. In the Pennsylvania Archives, which has nine series, several of the every-name indexes are part of a later series. (Libraries often put the word “index” on the spine of the index volumes, so search for that first.)

Some electronic versions are text searchable (although with spelling vagaries this isn’t as wonderful as it might seem), but many are simply pdf images.

Additionally, topic-specific abstracts or indexes may have been created. Examples of these are land records extracted from South Carolina journals or name changes

and other petitions that have been published for many colonies in books or in periodicals.

This is definitely a bad news/good news column. The bad news is that this type of resource isn't easy to define,

and I've only given you a tiny taste. The good news is that these publications may be the best way to find your ancestors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.