

# Colonial New England Research Using Town Records Wisely

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Prior to the Revolutionary War many immigrants, mainly English, settled in New England. These immigrants established hundreds of new towns in New England and the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Connecticut Colony, Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, and Province of New Hampshire. These early settlers kept many different types of records: records of town meetings, meeting house records, school records, and town records such as birth, death, marriage, taxes, and poor records. To trace your ancestors back to colonial times you need to know what records were created, what information they contained, and where the records were created and curated.

## Colonial New England Town Records

### Towns

Elected town officials  
Appointed town officials  
All records written in Town Book by the Town Clerk

### Annual Town Meetings

Attendees – freemen or inhabitant  
Election records (usually 3-7 Selectmen or Councilmen)  
Choice of a Town Clerk

Freemen or inhabitants were males, usually 21 years of age, could vote, and members of church congregation.

Apprentices, servants and women could not vote

### Appointed Town Officials

Town Assessor  
Town Collector of Taxes  
Constable  
Town Treasurer  
Surveyor of Highways  
School Committee  
Overseer of the Poor

## **Tithingman**

Sees that everyone make proper contribution to the meeting house and minister's salary  
Ensure church attendance by all inhabitants  
Inspect rooms in licensed houses on the Sabbath and the evening preceding and following the Sabbath

## **Tax Lists**

Taxpayer name and their real estate and livestock owned.  
List of abatements - Widow with the year husband died, poverty, debility/disability, and service in War

## **School Records**

Finding, hiring, and paying of school teachers  
Minutes of school committee meetings  
Upkeep of the school house

## **Military Records**

Town militia rolls and rosters  
Payment for serving as a "minet man"  
Depositions concerning service  
Payment for supplies

## **Church Records**

Sale of Pews  
Payment for upkeep of the meeting house  
List of church members including "dead," "removed," or "returned."

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## **Some Unique Notes on Town Books**

- No Index
- No organization of records
- Not necessarily in chronological order
- No standard format for deeds, wills, ...
- At end of the Town Book, turn it upside down and use back side of pages.
- Maine – warrants and town minutes always started on a new page.

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## Strategy for Colonial New England Research

Almost all of the records will be town records – you will not find federal, state or county records -- except for county probate records for Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Very few original records are available. Most colonial New England records have been transcribed and printed.

Many of the books printed with genealogical records have been transcribed or scanned and are now available on the internet.

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## Using Google to Find New England Colonial Records on the Internet

Search by:

state and colony

state and town name

colony

colony and town name

examples:

massachusetts “plymouth colony”

massachusetts “plimoth colony”

massachusetts “east bridgewater”

“new haven colony” derby

Add the keyword **history**

Add the record type: **town records, birth, death, or marriage**

Filter search by date range, example: 1630..1710

## Examples of Results Using Google Search Techniques

### Google Keywords : Massachusetts town records 1625..1700

The above search results listed 15 different town record collections in the first 25 results. One of the results was the “Massachusetts Vital Records Project” with over 1,500,000 records from over 150 towns-- indexed and searchable by town or surname.

<http://ma-vitalrecords.org>

### Google Keywords: bridgewater town records 1625..1700

“Vital Records of Bridgewater, Massachusetts to the Year 1850, Volume I, Births and Volume II, Marriages and Deaths”. You can search online by name or download a free copy of the book in PDF, Kindle, EPub, or Full Text.

<http://archive.org/details/vitalrecordsofbr021916brid>

### Google Keywords: "new haven colony" town derby history 1625..1700

“History of the Old Town of Derby, Connecticut”. Includes complete transcription of births, deaths, marriages, biographies, and genealogies of inhabitants of Old Town of Derby, Connecticut.

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ctcderby/books/hotod000.html>

## Using Digital Books to Find New England Colonial Records on the Internet

### Family History Library Books [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org) (Click on Books tab)

Over 150,000 books from the family history book collection at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Houston Public Library – Clayton Library Center for Genealogical Research, Allen County Public Library, Mid-Continent Public Library, Onondaga Public Library, and Pennsylvania Historical Society... Excellent source for searching by name.

### Heritage Quest

Over 28,000 family history books. Heritage Quest is available through most public libraries in Texas. Excellent search engine for searching by names of individuals.

**Google Books**    <http://books.google.com/>

Over 20 million digital books. A large number of books are copyright protected or publisher controlled and only the title or a few sentences are available when searching. Also, only a small percentage of the books are relative to genealogy.

**Hathi Trust**    [www.hathitrust.org](http://www.hathitrust.org)

Over 13 million searchable volumes from over 70 university and public libraries. High percentage of the books are copyright protected.

**Internet Archives**    [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)

Very difficult to search. If you know the title of the book you are looking for and can't find it on a digital books website, try searching on the Internet Archives website.

### **Using FamilySearch.org to Find Colonial New England Records**

Family Search Historical Record collections consist of 2 types of records: (1) Indexed records that are searchable by name, and (2) Browsable images that are grouped by type of book, rough alphabetical list of surnames, or chronological sequence. Both indexed records and browsable images of record collections present challenges for the genealogists when searching for colonial New England records.

An example of indexed records is:

Rhode Island Marriages 1724-1916          209,502 records

- The main problem with indexed records is the integrity of the data. Many duplicate records are in the collection, many transcription errors are present, and user submitted records are many times totally inaccurate. If you use these records it is suggested that you use multiple sources to verify the information.
- The records are very brief, so it is easy to confuse individuals in the index. In addition, an individual may be listed multiple times with slight spelling variations of their name.
- You may need to compare the information of more than one family or person to determine if any of the individuals in this collection are part of your family.
- Additional searches of the index may be necessary to identify children, siblings, parents, and other relatives.
- When looking for a person who had a common name, look at all the entries for the name before deciding which is correct.

- Be aware that, as with any index, transcription errors may occur.

An example of a browsable record collection is:

Massachusetts, Land Records, 1620-1986

[Browse Images](#)

The main problem with browsable images is that very few colonial records are included in the collection and you will find large gaps in both the early dates and in the locations. Only a few towns in the colony may be included in the record collection and only a few records for a town are included. You must thoroughly understand how the records are organized or you will miss the records you want to find.

When using the records, look at the images one by one comparing the information with what you already know about your ancestors to determine if the image relates to them. You may need to look at several images and compare the information about the individuals listed in those images to your ancestors to make this determination. Keep in mind:

- There may be more than one person in the records with the same name.
- You may not be sure of your own ancestor's name.
- Your ancestor may have used different names or variations of their name throughout their life.