More than Just a Bunch of Names

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It is easy to overlook lists as a source because they are often part of a larger record group, rather than being a group unto themselves. Yet they are valuable tools for learning exactly where our ancestors were at a particular moment, who their neighbors and associates were, and a bit about their daily lives. Lists may help you discover that there were two men with the same name. Examples of lists you might use are:

Local Officers and Appointees

These varied by locality. The main town officers in New England were called selectmen. A number of other appointments, usually chosen annually and rotating among the established citizens of the town, were made. These can be a rich resource, even if your ancestor is not named. Understanding why the town had to appoint fence viewers, a hog reeve, a pound keeper, or men to walk the bounds provides insight into the lives of your ancestors.

In Virginia the vestrymen oversaw activities such as caring for the indigent and appointing processioners to view property bounds. These lists are found in the vestry minutes.

Officers of the Colony, State, or County

Officials such as constables, jail keepers, tax collectors, and coroners were generally appointed each year. These are often found in court records. Magistrates sat at each court and ran it. At the beginning of any court session, there is usually a list of the magistrates present at that session.

Representatives

We have been electing representatives from lower jurisdictions to higher jurisdictions since colonial times. Occasionally, in addition to the list of representatives, you may find a list of voters—including for whom they voted.

Freemen

An inhabitant who could vote was called a freeman. In colonial New England, a freeman of the colony had to be a church member, although Connecticut gave the franchise for town elections to nonchurchmembers. Lists of existing and new freemen may be found in both town and colony records.

Professions and Businesses

Certain professions and occupations, such as justices of the peace, notaries public, medical practitioners, lawyers, and sometimes clergy had to be approved. Many types of businesses had to have a business license, or at least permission, to operate, usually on an annual basis. Approvals such as these are often grouped together in town, county, state, or colony records.

Inn Keepers and Tavern Operators

In the colonial period—and later in some locations—one couldn't just open a pub because it was a good business opportunity. Permission was required. Often need also had to be shown—on the part of the operator and of the potential customers. Preference was sometimes given to men who were disabled in a military conflict or widows. You may find that your ancestor signed a petition describing the need for a tavern in his neighborhood.

Surveyors and Road Crews

There was no Department of Public Works to build and maintain roads and bridges in early America. This duty fell on the citizens. In this context, the "surveyor" sometimes can be interpreted to mean supervisor of a project. One of the immense values of these lists is that if the appointment is for a project in a particular area, the men named were usually from that same geographical area. This was a practical approach–the men who built or maintained a road or bridge would be the ones using it.

Juries

These show that an individual was adult and had franchise (voting rights). Land ownership was often a prerequisite for voting and for serving on a jury. Grand juries and petit juries refer to the size of the jury (each of which heard certain types of cases), but there was no differentiation among who was appointed to which.

Oaths of Allegiance

These are most commonly found if there had recently been a change of ruler, if there was potential of conflict over rule, or if the person taking the oath was changing the ruler to whom he was pledging allegiance. A related type of list, which is less common, is one of abjuration, in which the individual renounces allegiance to a ruler, either civil or religious—as with the so-called passenger lists for colonial Philadelphia, which included an abjuration of allegiance to the Pope.

Taxation

These lists can yield invaluable information on individuals, their personal property, and their real property. But there are other types of assessments—usually specific to time and place—such as quitrent rolls or funds to pay the minister.

Military Lists

Military preparedness and service prompted a variety of lists: militia lists (who was available), muster rolls (who showed up), absentee and sick lists (who didn't show up), pay lists, accounts, reimbursement for items lost in battles, officer appointments, and so on. These lists are found in county records, in colony and state records, and even in private hands.

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For example, the 1746 muster rolls of Capt. Ephraim Williams' Company and a list of men that went up to Otter Creek in 1747 are at Massachusetts Historical Society in the papers of Israel Williams, who was the commander of the Hampshire County, Massachusetts, regiment during the French and Indian War.

Petitions

People petitioned for a variety of reasons. They asked for bridges and roads, for changes in jurisdictional boundaries or the creation of new jurisdictions, for taverns, for midwives, and for relief from a variety of taxes and duties. Often the original petition survives, with signatures—although the names may have been written down by a person organizing the petition, so compare the handwriting.

In the colonial period, Virginia had an established (state) church. During the years leading up to the Revolution, there emerged widespread opposition, particularly among Baptists. This culminated in the so-called Ten-Thousand-Name Petition, presented to the General Convention in Virginia in October of 1776, to disestablish the Anglican church. You may remember learning in school that *antidisestablishmentarianism* was the longest word in English. That referred to the movement against the people who signed this petition. You can view this petition (it is one long roll) and several similar ones in the custody of the Library of Virginia on Library of Congress's American Memory website. There is a background explanation—search for "Early Virginia Religious Petitions." The names of the signers—in the original spelling—were published beginning in 1997 in the Magazine of Virginia Genealogy, which is an Ancestry.com database (labeled as Virginia Genealogical Society Bulletin).

Membership

Lists of church members are important, but can occasionally be difficult to interpret, since new members were often added to the lists without any indication of the date. Newspapers often published lists of letters left at the post office (the early equivalent of "You've got mail!"). You may find lists of school children or members of fraternal organizations.

You will also find lists related to ordinary, everyday life, such as estray lists (livestock found wandering loose either taken home by the finder or placed in the local pound), marks and brands (to help identify the aforementioned wandering livestock), and bounties (to control the unwanted native animals).

How do you find these lists? Some, such as tax lists or oaths of allegiance, recorded in colony, state, county, or town records have been extracted and published in separate volumes, but more often you will have to dig into the original record books to find them. Check the front and the back for indexes. Often these volumes have index categories for lists.

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