

Finding Massachusetts Vital Records

By Helen Schatvet Ullmann

Almost from the time they set foot on shore, Massachusetts settlers began keeping vital records. Unlike most other states, these records are kept in the towns. There was no statewide registry until 1841. Even then, some towns were slow to submit copies. Boston did not comply with the new law until 1848.

Perhaps because it was a deliberate legal act, marriages were the most likely to be recorded. Births far outnumber deaths in the official civil records. But births were not necessarily recorded at the time or even in the same town where they occurred. Sometimes one can tell by looking at the original records that a father probably visited the clerk and recounted the vital events for his whole family at one time, often including his and his wife's birth, their marriage date, and children born at a previous residence. If we are lucky, he brought the family Bible along to assist his memory.

Where does one find these records? What indexes exist? Which records are in print or manuscript copy or on microform? Remember that the original records are always in the town or city clerk's vault. Divorce records are kept in the probate courts and will not be discussed here.

Think in terms of three periods of time:

- 1906 to the present
- 1841 to 1905
- Pre-1850

1906 to the Present

Almost all vital records are open to the public. The only exceptions are out-of-wedlock and sometimes abnormal births (when there has been a physician's report filed) and marriages. Corrected records filed later will be in a different place, and the original will not be accessible. If you know the town where the vital event occurred, you can go there or write to the clerk for a copy. Call ahead for hours and fees if you need a certificate. The clerk who answers may even look to see whether they have the record you want. If you do not know the town, look in the state indexes.

Microfilm copies of the indexes to 1971 are at the State Archives and a few other places (see the list in the next section). The original index volumes are at the State Registry of Vital Records and Statistics. This is now at 150 Mt. Vernon Street, Dorchester, MA 02125-3105. Telephone: 617-740-2600 -- not far from the Massachusetts State Archives. Unless procedures change at the new location, you can get a certified copy for \$6, or go there and search for \$3 per hour on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday from 9-12 and 2-4:30. The indexes are in volumes for five-year periods. Be sure to check spellings imaginatively. Fill out a slip for each entry you want to examine, and hand three at a time to the attendant when he calls for them, every fifteen minutes or so. He must check each birth or marriage entry to see whether it is all right for you to look at it. Some are in books and some on microfilm. If you have looked up the references ahead of time, and it is not crowded, you may be able to examine up to six records in half an hour.

1841 to 1905

Every five years another five-year segment of the records is transferred from the State Registry to the State Archives, and microfilm becomes available for purchase from the Family History Library (FHL), but only by institutions and with written permission from the state. The next five years of records will probably be transferred sometime in 2001. Bills before the state legislature, S345 in the Senate and H122 in the House, if passed, would provide for the transfer of marriages and deaths through 31 December 1955 and births through 31 December 1915 to the State Archives.

Presently both indexes and records for 1841-1905 are available at the State Archives, across the parking lot from the JFK Library on Columbia Point. A free shuttle bus runs every 20 minutes from the JFK subway stop on the MBTA red line. The mailing address is 220 Morrissey Boulevard, Boston, MA 02125.

The following libraries also have these films:

- Berkshire Athenaeum in Pittsfield, 1841-1905 (plus death indexes to 1971)
- [Boston Public Library](#), Microtext Dept., has the indexes only, 1841-95. They also have the Holbrook microfiche for Boston and many other towns
- Connecticut Valley Historical Museum in Springfield, 1841–1905
- Family History Library in Salt Lake City, accessible through Family History Centers (plus death indexes to 1971)
- Haverhill Public Library, 1841-1900
- Mogan Center, University of Lowell, 1841-1905
- New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1841-1905 (plus death indexes to 1976, marriage indexes to 1935 and birth indexes for some years to 1945)

Except for 1841-50, the indexes are in five-year segments. The spelling of surnames is exactly as it appears in the record, so check all possible spellings.

The State Archives will search for and issue certificates for \$3 for each event. If an approximate date is known, they will search approximately three index volumes, i.e., fifteen years. It is a good idea to narrow down the time by using census or other records first. Surprisingly, only about 40% of the approximately 150 requests per week that the archivists receive can be found in the records. So give all relevant information, including date, place, spouse, parents, and age -- whatever you already know. When there is a common name, if both the year and at least the general area are known there is a much greater chance of success.

Pre-1850 Vital Records

There is no master statewide index to records before 1841. However, a large percentage of birth and marriage (not death) records are in the International Genealogical Index (IGI). Many have been submitted by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but the Family History Department of the Church has also extracted records from most of the published books and from some original records. Thus the IGI serves to a large extent as an index. Nevertheless, it is well to bear in mind that member submissions have been taken from a myriad of sources, such as genealogies, town histories, and unpublished family compilations. The place given for the event may have been carefully researched or may have been a guess, usually based on a known residence.

Family Tree Maker's [Family Archives CD #231](#), *Marriage Index: Massachusetts, 1633-1850*, contains marriages from about 227 towns. Many of the original records for the some 351 towns in Massachusetts have been microfilmed and are in the [Family History Library Catalog](#) (FHLIC). About 150 towns' records have been produced on microfiche and may be purchased from the [Holbrook Research Institute](#), Locust St., Oxford, MA 01540.

Early in the 20th century, vital records for many towns were published in the "Systematic Series." *The Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research*, described in the previous column for Massachusetts on this website, contains a list of towns with a column titled "CODE." The official series books are coded as "POS." (See a similar list in *Red Book*, or see PERSI.) These volumes are in nearly every public library in Massachusetts, and many other libraries have at least a selection of them. The compilers arranged the names in alphabetical order. While this makes searching easier, the original order has been lost. Items from church and cemetery records and others, such as Bible records and newspaper notices, have usually been included. If there was a town record of birth, a baptism was not included unless it added information. The same would be true for other types of records as well.

Records of many towns have been published in independent volumes or in the *Register* or the *Mayflower Descendant* (see the *New England Handbook*, *Redbook* or PERSI). Sometimes these too are alphabetical; other times they follow the original order and are then indexed.

There are many unpublished transcriptions of town vital records. Some are on FHL microfilm. NEHGS has, for example, three different manuscript copies of Hatfield records. The Walter Corbin Collection, now on NEHGS microfilm, contains many such transcriptions, as does the Rollin H. Cooke Collection at the Berkshire Athenaeum (Pittsfield Public Library). Contact local libraries and historical societies for others.

The published records are also turning up on the Internet. Ancestry.com and genealogylibrary.com have some. Town clerks' addresses and some links to town sites are provided at vitalrec.com. Many of the published records are on a series of CD-Roms published by Search and ReSearch Publishing Corp. available in this site's store. These include towns in Barnstable, Bristol, Essex, Middlesex, Norfolk, Plymouth and Suffolk Counties. Newer volumes, still under copyright, are not included. The indexes on the CDs are confusing and are often just to the surname. The query procedure also does not find many of the names that appear in the images of the books.

For a period from roughly 1632 to 1795 most early towns reported marriages, and sometimes births and deaths, to the county courts. (See the *Register* 135 (1981): 170n for a list of these.) These are on FHL microfilm, catalogued under the county name and the topic "Vital Records." Most, but not all, of these records have been included in the publications for the relevant towns, and many of the marriages were published by Frederic W. Bailey in *Early Massachusetts Marriages Prior to 1800*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1898-1900; reprint, Baltimore, 1979).

Other Helpful Resources

Bowen, R. L. *Massachusetts Records: A Handbook for Genealogists, Historians, Lawyers, and Other Researchers* (Rehoboth, MA, 1957). CD3291/ B6 at NEHGS.

Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts: Law in Colonial Massachusetts 1630-1800 (Boston, 1984). F61/ C71/ v. 62.

Historical Records Survey, Guide to Public Vital Statistics Records in Massachusetts (Boston, 1942). No copy at NEHGS.

Wright, Carroll D. *Report on the Custody and Condition of the Public Records of Parishes, Towns, and Counties* (Boston, 1889). CD3290/AZ.