

Westward Ho

By Maureen A. Taylor

In an earlier column, “[Rhode Islanders on the Move](#)” I wrote about the reasons Rhode Islanders left their native state, but didn’t elaborate on where they went. Whether your great grandfather listed RI as his birthplace in a census or you found a reference to an ancestor moving west in a genealogy, you’ll want to learn how to discover more about their migration. The term “gone west” meant different places to different generations. For instance, if your ancestor migrated west in 1790 they probably went as far as New York, but if they went west in 1900 you might find them on the California coast or in Alaska. Stewart Holbrook’s *The Yankee Exodus: An Account of Migration from New England* (Macmillan, 1950 out of print) provides an excellent overview of the settlement of this country. He mentions many Rhode Island family names. It’s worth trying to find a copy of this book through used book dealers or your public library.

Before spending a lot of time looking for original documents survey what’s already in print. Start your search for wandering ancestors by looking at past issues of the Rhode Island Genealogical Society publication, Rhode Island Roots. That periodical frequently features articles on Rhode Islanders who migrated. Contact RIGS through their website www.rigensoc.org/.

If you don’t locate your ancestor in that periodical next try looking at standard genealogical sources for evidence of ancestral travels such as census records, church records, court documents, land records, local histories, family genealogies and even photographs. Orient yourself to the expanding boundaries of the U.S. by studying maps like those in Derek Hayes, *Historical Atlas of the United States* (University of California Press, 2006). He covers the colonial period through contemporary America.

Census

Beginning in 1850, census enumerators asked for a place of birth. While you can’t search online census databases specifically by state of birth you can narrow down the possibilities. Using Heritage Quest’s census records (available through larger libraries like the Boston Public Library website), search for all the individuals with the surname you’re searching for by state, pick a county, then click on the drop down menu on the right and sort by the option: birthplace. The list appears in alphabetical order by state.

Church Records

When a person left a parish for another, generally they obtain a paper transferring their membership. If their home church recorded where they were going, you’ll have a good lead to follow. However, what you find depends on your ancestor’s denomination and if their religious institution kept track of parishioners. My earlier article, “[Religious Records in Rhode Island](#)” outlines the denominations most commonly found in RI.

City Directories

Follow your ancestors in nineteenth century city directories until they left the area and you might end up with a surprise. Publishers sometimes recorded the town and state where someone moved. In other cases they just used the frustrating word “removed” with no other information. Unfortunately the majority of people just disappear from the books. The Rhode Island Historical Society has the largest and most complete set of city directories for the state. Check their website <http://www.rihs.org/> for hours and procedures.

Court Documents

Relatives living elsewhere are often mentioned in depositions relating to civil and criminal cases. You can learn more about Rhode Island court documents by consulting *New England Court Records: A Research Guide for Genealogists And Historians* by Diane Rapaport (Quill Pen Press, 2006) and by looking at the website for the [Judicial Records Center](#).

Local Histories and Family Genealogies

Search the databases of Ancestry.com (select the tab “Stories and Publications”) and Heritage Quest (select “Search

Books”) to locate references to former Rhode Island residents using the name or keyword fields. Also try Google Books. A wide variety of out of print materials is now fully searchable and can be downloaded for free. You never know where your ancestor’s name might pop up. They might be mentioned in a church history or a commemorative booklet for their town.

Manuscript Collections

Even if you think your ancestors never wrote a letter, it’s worth casting out a net looking for bible records and family photographs. My last article “[With Pen in Hand: Rhode Island Manuscripts](#)” explains how to search for family documents.

Photographs

Don’t forget to look at the names and addresses of the photographers who took family photos. One of your relatives might have gone west to visit a cousin and had their picture taken while there. That imprint can lead you right to the town where your “missing” family lived.

As the country grew, Rhode Islanders eventually settled in every state. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, individuals frequently traveled in groups bringing along family, friends and neighbors recreating the feel of home in their new state or territory. Eighteenth century newspapers carried notices about the availability of land enticing people to move to the Susquehannah area of Pennsylvania, the western regions of Virginia as well as closer to home in New Hampshire and Vermont. Hayes’ book can help you estimate where settlements occurred during particular time periods. Here are some of the states and notable groups that left Little Rhody to seek their future further west.

California

The Gold Rush of 1849 beckoned to Rhode Islanders. By 1850 there were at least 860 individuals from the state living in the area with double that number a decade later.

New York

Many Rhode Islanders moved to New York counties such as Broome, Chemung, Columbia, Ontario, Saratoga, Schuyler, Tompkins, and Tioga. Relevant articles on these individuals appear in *Rhode Island Roots*.

Illinois

A group calling themselves the Pawtucket Western Emigrating Society left the state in 1836 to settle Providence, Illinois. Elizabeth J. Johnson and James L. Wheaton IV wrote an article, “The Pawtucket Western Emigrating Society” (*Rhode Island Roots*, vol. 12, no. 3, September 1986) that lists members and contains a map of the new settlement. The Providence Farmer’s and Mechanic Emigrating Society founded Mount Hope while another group of Rhode Islanders settled Delavan in the 1830s.

Kansas

In Holbrook’s book, he mentions the Vegetarian Settlement Company (1856) that aimed under the leadership of Henry Clubb to establish a permanent home for vegetarians at “Octagon City.” Among the settlers were Mr. and Mrs. William Sommerville of Lonsdale, Rhode Island. The settlement failed. A Mrs. Colt wrote a memoir of her experiences, *Went to Kansas, Being a Thrilling Account of an Ill-Fated Expedition to that Fairy Land, and Its Sad Results* (1862). Non-vegetarian Rhode Islanders with these surnames: Beatley, Burrow, Bush, Cowell, Davis, Douglass, Fuller, and Pearce moved to Kansas and stayed.

Wisconsin

After King Phillip’s War in the seventeenth century, the native populations of Rhode Island ended up scattered. Some of the Narragansett tribal members eventually ended up in Wisconsin as part of a group known as The Brothertown Indians. Additional information is on their website. www.brothertownindians.org/. The NEHGS library has a collection of papers relating to the tribe in the R. Stanton Avery Special Collections Department.

Rhode Islanders went in all directions—north, south, east and west seeking a new start. For everyone that left, a less adventurous relative stayed behind. When you find what you seek, think about writing an article about it. Other Rhode Island genealogists will appreciate it.