

Religious Records in Rhode Island

By Maureen A. Taylor

Tracking down the religious records of your ancestors can be a challenge, especially if they switched congregations every time they changed residences, as some of my ancestors did. Thankfully, there is an abundance of information available on the various denominations that settled in Rhode Island. A wide variety of religious groups gravitated to Rhode Island because the colony was considered tolerant. In the seventeenth century Roger Williams brought his group of followers to Providence to escape the repressive climate of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He founded the First Baptist Church in America there in 1638. Soon after, various dissenting sects began migrating to the state, including the Society of Friends (Quakers), French Huguenots, and Jews.

Researchers can discover what records exist by consulting both reference works for the state and sources that focus on one particular parish or denomination. *A Guide to the Church Vital Statistics in the State of Rhode Island*, produced during the Works Progress Administration's Historical Records Survey, listed the church records available as of 1941. The Rhode Island State Archives updated that publication in 1971. Both versions are available at the Rhode Island Historical Society (121 Hope St., Providence, RI 02906). James Arnold's helpful transcription of church and minister records can be found in volumes 7 to 11 of his *Vital Record of Rhode Island* (21 vols., Providence, RI: Narragansett Historical Pub. Co, 1891). Use the searchable database on *NewEnglandAncestors.org* for easy access to those volumes.

The [Rhode Island Historical Society](#) and the [Newport Historical Society](#) (82 Touro St, Newport, RI 02840) keep church records in their manuscripts departments. If you are unable to locate the records for a defunct parish, try contacting these societies to see if the missing records might be in their collections. RIHS has miscellaneous records for Protestant churches throughout the state while NHS keeps a comprehensive collection of records for Newport's churches of all denominations. If you are looking for a particular denomination, here is an outline of what is available in print and in manuscript form.

Anglican

Both Trinity Church in Newport and St. Paul's Church in Narragansett established congregations by the late seventeenth century. Original church records for Trinity Church are at NHS. Wilkins Updike included the parish register for St. Paul's from 1718 to 1774, as well as some genealogical data, in his *History of the Episcopal Church in Narragansett, Rhode Island* (New York : H. M. Onderdonk, 1847; reprint, Boston: Merrymount Press, 1907).

Baptist

Unfortunately, the records of the First Baptist Church of Rhode Island, founded by Roger Williams in 1638, do not contain information of a genealogical nature. These records are kept in the manuscripts department of the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, but researchers must first write to the historian at the First Baptist Church (75 North Main St., Providence, RI 02903) for permission to view them.

The [American Baptist Historical Society](#) (1106 S. Goodman St., Rochester, NY 14620) published an inventory of their holdings for Rhode Island titled *The Records of American Baptists in Rhode Island and Related Organizations* (Rochester, NY: American Baptist Historical Society, 1981). If you are looking for a particular parish, try contacting them for a copy or consult another WPA publication, *Inventory of Church Archives in Rhode Island: Baptist Bodies* (Providence: Historical Records Survey, 1939), also available on microfilm through the [Family History Library](#) . Other notable sources for Rhode Island Baptist churches are:

- Records for the Six Principle Baptist Church in North Kingstown, Rhode Island, are kept in the manuscripts department of RIHS.
- John Comer, a Baptist minister, kept a diary of the people he met while serving in Little Compton and Tiverton from 1774 to 1800 that includes some genealogical data. C. Edwin Barrows edited Comer's records, which were published in *Collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society*, Vol. 8 (1893)
- Ruth Wilder Sherman's, *Peleg Burroughs's Journal, 1778-1798: The Tiverton, R.I. Years of the Humbly Bold*

Baptist Minister (Warwick: Rhode Island Genealogical Society, 1981) is helpful when seeking information on Tiverton Baptists.

Congregational

Some miscellaneous material relating to Rhode Island Congregationalists can be located at the [Congregational Library](#) (14 Beacon St., Boston, MA 02108). The diary of Ezra Stiles, minister of the Second Congregational Church in Newport, which contains births and deaths from 1760-1773, is available here, as are early church records of the Congregational Church of Bristol, 1687-1705.

For related information, see

- Franklin B. Dexter, ed. *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* (3 vols., New York: Scribner's Sons, 1901)
- Ruth Wilder Sherman and Robert M. Sherman, "Bristol RI Church Records," in *The American Genealogist* 66 (1991), 119-120, 183-184, 247; 67 (1992), 119-120, 184, 210; 68 (1993) 55-56, 119-120, 184-185, 249-250; 69 (1994) 55-56, 119-120, 185-187, 247-248; 70 (1995) 55-56, 81, 181-184.

Episcopal

Some of the Episcopal parishes records given to the Episcopal diocese can be viewed in the special collections department of the [University Library](#) at the University of Rhode Island in North Kingstown.

Quaker

The value of the Quaker, or Friends, records for Rhode Island cannot be underestimated. At one point in the mid-eighteenth century, almost fifty percent of the state's population was Quaker. The New England Yearly Meeting records from 1654 to the present are on deposit at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, which published Richard D. Stattler's *Guide to the Records of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in New England* (Providence: RIHS, 1997). These records contain meeting minutes, vital statistics of members, their testimonies (beliefs and convictions), membership lists, sufferings (penalties Quakers suffered for following testimonies), denials, memorials, slave manumissions, financial transactions, and more. The New England Yearly Meeting of Friends covers all of Rhode Island, most of Massachusetts (except Nantucket), and parts of Connecticut, Maine, and New Hampshire.

A number of early Rhode Island Quaker families migrated to New Jersey, so William Wade Hinshaw's *An Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy* (six volumes, 1936-1950; reprint, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1969-1973) on Quakers in the Mid-Atlantic States should also be consulted. A good resource for families in the South Kingstown area is *Nailer Tom's Diary* (Boston: Privately published, 1930), the diary of Thomas Benjamin Hazard, which refers to births, marriages, and deaths from 1778 to 1840. While the book lacks an index, a typescript index is at RIHS.

Huguenot

The French Huguenots were Protestants who fled persecution for their beliefs. In the seventeenth century a French Huguenot settlement was located in East Greenwich, but it was short-lived. Many of the emigrants left the area, and those that stayed anglicized their names. The records of their church were translated and printed in an article by Effingham de Forest titled, "Records of the French Church at Narragansett, 1686-1691" (*New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 70 [1939] 236-241, 359-365; 71 [1940] 51-61).

Jews

The first Jewish synagogue in America was founded in Newport in 1680 and built with contributions from Jews throughout the colonies. The papers of Aaron Lopez, one of the first Jews in Rhode Island, are at the NHS.

Methodist

Some records for Rhode Island Methodist churches are in the collections of the library of the Boston University Theological School (745 Commonwealth Ave, Boston, MA 02215). A list of their holdings appears on their [website](#)). Church records include: State Street Methodist Episcopal Church (Bristol), several parishes in Newport, and the Print Works Mission (Cranston). Unfortunately, the collections for the African Methodist Episcopal churches owned by the [Rhode Island Black Heritage Society](#) are currently in storage and unavailable for viewing.

Moravian

The records for the Moravian Church in Newport are in the [Moravian Archives](#) (41 West Locust St., Bethlehem, PA 18018). The Moravians are a Christian sect established in 1457.

Roman Catholic

Some parishes will allow individuals to use their records, though most will direct you to the [Diocesan Archives](#) (1 Cathedral Square, Providence, RI 02903). Irish parish registers may be viewed at the Chancery Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston (2121 Commonwealth Avenue, Brighton, MA 02135). Father Robert Hayman's history of the Catholic Church in Rhode Island, *Catholicism in Rhode Island and the Diocese of Providence* (Providence: Diocese of Providence, 1982) provides a good general overview. The [American French Genealogical Society](#) (78 Earle St., Woonsocket, RI 02895) transcribed and published parish records for Rhode Island churches.

It is important to regularly search the Internet for new transcriptions, publications, digitized publications, and databases. For instance the [Rhode Island GenWeb site](#) has several items of interest to researchers looking for religious records. Among them are a membership list of the Sabbatarian Church (Seventh Day Baptist) of Newport from 1671 to 1830 and Memorials of Deceased Friends (Quakers) of New England Yearly Meeting. Another tool for finding manuscripts in unlikely places is the [National Union Catalog of Manuscripts](#) .

I continue to search for records on my elusive ancestors and I am hopeful they will turn up. Never give up hope! It is possible to find valuable information in the most unlikely places. Utilize online message boards and get the word out about your ancestors. Investigate manuscript collections of societies and libraries in the family's area. Original religious documents might be discovered in an attic or basement, tucked away and long forgotten by their owners. You never know when the exact papers that were declared "missing" will suddenly be found.