

Using Arnold's Vital Record of Rhode Island In Print and Online

There is no doubt among the genealogical community that James Newell Arnold (1844-1927) was tireless in his efforts to document Rhode Island's genealogical past. With more than fifteen titles to his credit, including the serial publication *The Narragansett Historical Register*, Arnold labored more than forty years saving Rhode Island's heritage. He spent seventeen years abstracting the classic *Vital Record of Rhode Island* in twenty-one volumes, which took twenty-one years to publish (1891-1912), with support from the Rhode Island General Assembly.

Rather than just abstracting births, marriages, and deaths found in town records, Arnold sought out church records, wills, and even newspapers. The first six volumes covered each Rhode Island county broken down by town; volume seven focused on Quaker records and ministers; volumes eight through eleven abstracted church records; volume twelve included the names of Revolutionary War soldiers and began his publication of newspaper records that continued to volume twenty-one. He attempted to cover all the cities and towns of Rhode Island from their founding until the beginning of civil registration in 1850. While the coverage varied between volumes, the Arnold set is generally considered to cover the period 1636 to 1850. He tackled a formidable task and as a result, several generations of researchers have been able to locate ancestors by consulting a single set of books.

Novice users of Arnold's *Vital Record of Rhode Island* often become confused about his format, but after consulting his notes in volume one (under the heading "Please Observe") a few things become clearer. Each town has a separate surname-only index and separate pagination as well as a few details about the community. Each index contains three sections: "Names occurring in their natural order," "Names occurring promiscuously," and "Places mentioned in the text."

Arnold also stated that he presented names "as they stand on the record, when they are not too far wrong." That means that he changed some spellings, and with estimates of Arnold's accuracy suggested by some as fifty percent, it appears that there are more changes than original spellings. To enable researchers to check listings against the original document, Arnold included the volume and page where each citation was found in the town records. Researchers searching for marriages need to be aware that the full citation only appears under the groom's name; the bride's entry contains just the name, date of the event, and volume and page of the record.

Now that NEHGS has placed Arnold's information into a [database](#), searching those volumes is even easier. NEHGS members no longer have to painstakingly search each surname index and check each page for an ancestor of uncertain origin. Search terms include first name, last name, type of record (birth, marriage, death, or all), town, keyword or phrase, volume and page number, and the ability to refine the search to a set of years. It is possible to search all towns at one time by filling in a first and last name. Consult the search tips before using the database to fully understand the quirks of using both the original Arnold volumes and the database. For instance, searching by surname will locate all instances of the name, not just surnames because the database is not sorted by field. One of the confusing features of the original books was Arnold's arrangement of family groups. For example, let's look at the family of John and Isabella Waterman of Warwick.

In the printed version of Arnold they appear as follows: (Arnold cited them as 4-71; volume four, page seventy-one of the original Warwick town records)

Waterman, John Robinson, of Dea. John and Welthian, February 19, 1783 [also 2-218]

Isabella (Warren, of Thomas and Mary), Sept. 13, 1783 [also 3-33]

Louisa, of John R. and Isabella [3-33] August 26, 1806

Maria [3-33] Mar. 27, 1808

Maria [3-33] d. Aug. 5. 1808

The Arnold abstract continues by listing eleven other children (six of whom died) and a death date for Isabella, wife of

John R., who died January 24, 1832. Arnold interpreted the information in the town records and gathered data on family groups together in one place — alphabetically under surname. It's astounding to think that he could accomplish this project without a computer.

Arnold arranged family groups as he found them in the original record, usually listing the parents first, followed by all birth and death dates of children, and lastly, any other references in which they appeared. The numbers in brackets refer to additional citations in those volumes and page numbers.

Using the [online database](#) you can search the entire set of Arnold's *Vital Record* for all persons named Waterman, even if you don't know what town they originated in. You may also search specifically for Isabella Waterman (or any other member of the family) by birth, marriage, death, or all events. It is also possible, after selecting a town, to search by volume and page for a specific reference. For instance, a search for Isabella Waterman in the town of Warwick revealed seven citations for births, marriages, and deaths. The standard fields in the results page of the database are: year (of event), family name, record, original record, original volume and page, and town. Selecting the "more" link under the original record field allows you to view the record in its original context, while choosing "town" provides a full citation for the published series and introductory matter for the town. Because the database is not field indexed, you will also find a marriage for an Isabella Warren to a John R. Waterman along with several listings for Isabella Waterman. You may also search by keyword or phrase, but be aware that entering a name such as Isabella Waterman into this field will limit the results to only entries recorded exactly as Isabella Waterman. You are likely to miss many relevant records when using this search. For example, a keyword or phrase search on Isabella Waterman will produce the following single result (only record and record type are listed here):

COLBURN Rev. Alfred, and Isabella Waterman ; m. by Rev. John Dowling, June 21, 1842 - Marriage

However, if you use the first name/last name search you will get the following results:

COLBURN Rev. Alfred, and Isabella Waterman ; m. by Rev. John Dowling, June 21, 1842. - Marriage

VINALL Gideon, of Gideon, of New Bedford, Mass., and Isabella Field, of Oliver W., of Providence ; m. by Rev. Thomas T. Waterman, July 2, 1846. - Marriage

Warren Isabella, and John R. Waterman, Nov. 3, 1805. - Marriage

Waterman Isabella (Warren of Thomas and Mary), Sept. 13, 1783. [also 3-33] - Birth

Waterman John R., son of Dea. John and Welthian, and Isabella Warren, of Thomas and Mary ; m. by Eld. Samuel Littlefield, Nov. 3, 1805. - Marriage

Waterman Louisa, of John R. and Isabella, [3-33] Aug. 26, 1806. - Birth

Waterman Isabella, Nov. 1, 1819. - Birth

Waterman Richard, of John R. and Isabella, and Dianna Maria Chapin, Feb. 15, 1831. - Marriage

Waterman Isabella, wife of John R., died Jan. 24, 1832. - Death

WATERMAN Isabella, and Rev. Alfred Colburn, June 21, 1842. - Marriage

While performing a keyword/phrase search on names will minimize the number of hits for common names such as "John Brown" (first name/last name search will bring up all occurrences of "John" and of "Brown"), you will undoubtedly miss valuable information that may have been entered as Brown, John; Brown, son of John; John T. Brown, and any other variety that may have been entered. Traditional research requires the repetitive task of going through many pages of records and the same techniques must be observed in the online database in order to find every relevant record.

All of the information that appeared in the original published volumes has been transferred to the database, but it may take a few clicks to find all links. In the case of Isabella Waterman, the original record appeared in volume four, page seventy-one of the Warwick town records. However, Arnold also added an additional citation for volume three, page thirty-three. In order to find that record it is necessary to go back to the search field and fill in Isabella Waterman,

select the town of Warwick and specify a search for that volume and page. This record will be highlighted and show you what else appeared on that page in the original volume, according to Arnold's transcription.

Whether you use the printed or online version of Arnold's set, you should always return to the original documents for the specific towns. There are many discrepancies in the original Arnold transcriptions. There is evidence of spelling changes and misinterpretation of the family data presented in the town records. It is not necessary to travel to Rhode Island to access the town documents. While the original records are available on microfilm at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library (121 Hope St, Providence, RI, 02906), these reels can also be ordered directly through the Family History Libraries of the Church of Latter-day Saints or via the NEHGS library. Use their [website](#) to find the appropriate reel numbers.

When Arnold was about to publish the first volume of the *Vital Record of Rhode Island the New England Historical and Genealogical Register* made a prophetic statement regarding genealogy: "Among the works sold today at the bookstores none realize more satisfactory prices than those concerning local history and genealogy. This interest will increase with the years to come." (*Register* 44 [1890]: p.317). The original volume sold for a mere \$4.50. Today, with the complete set difficult to find in print, the NEHGS database is a welcome addition to the electronic resources for genealogical research in Rhode Island.

Note: The complete database will take several months to complete, so researchers interested in towns not currently in the database should check back on a weekly basis and subscribe to the *NEHGS e-News* for regular updates.