

# Locating Ancestral Homesteads in Rhode Island

By Maureen A. Taylor

Have you ever wondered where your ancestors lived? Not the town or even the village, but the actual structure inside which they spent their everyday lives – in a dwelling, tenement or boarding house built of wood, brick or stone. There are numerous sources to help you learn about their place of abode. Researching house history is more than finding a land record confirming ownership – it means learning about their neighbors and immersing yourself in the neighborhood, as well as the architectural history of the building they called home.

## City Directories

Start by verifying where forebears lived by searching city directories for your ancestor's name and address listing. Normally the entry will be annotated in a sort of shorthand such as "h" (owns house), "bds" (boards), or "r" (rents). Once you have the address, you're ready to locate where they lived, in census or on maps.

## Finding Them on the Map

Begin your map research by locating one from the same time period your ancestor resided in a particular place. Explore the options presented in my earlier article, "Mapping Rhode Island". There are a few additions to that original list.

- You can obtain maps reprinted from D.G. Beers and Co.'s, *Atlas of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations: from Actual Surveys and Official Records* (1870), from the Higginson Book Company, 148 Washington Street, Salem, MA 01970 <http://www.higginsonbooks.com/> (\$6.95 per map, plus tax).

- Explore the neighborhoods of 1917 Providence by using this map on the University of Texas website: [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/rhode\\_island.html](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/rhode_island.html)

- An 1895 general map of the state with villages noted can be viewed online: [http://fermi.jhuapl.edu/states/1895/ri\\_1895.jpg](http://fermi.jhuapl.edu/states/1895/ri_1895.jpg)

Maps created by the Sanborn Insurance Company use color coding to designate building materials and layout features. The Everts and Richards set of maps, *New Topographical Atlas of Surveys* [Southern Rhode Island, Northern Rhode Island], provide users with a general sense of the footprint of the buildings included.

Panoramic maps, actually scenes of an area drawn or photographed from a high vantage point, are available online at the American Memory Project of the Library of Congress <http://memory.loc.gov/>. Search their map holdings by location.

## Land Records

If your ancestor owned property – that's why it's so valuable to check for the "h" in street directories – you'll want to research the history of that ownership by using land records available on the town or city level. Grantor/Grantee indices are usually available.

- Some early property records are in the collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society <http://www.rihs.org/> - or in the hands of local historical societies, but start at the town hall before looking for records elsewhere. Deeds in Rhode Island are filed at the town level. Survey the holdings of the RIHS under "Business: Estate/property/holding," contained in the Manuscript Department section of their website, for your town of interest.

- Early land records for Providence exist as reconstructed plat maps and lists of owners.

- *The Home Lots of the Early Settlers of the Providence Plantations with Notes & Plats* by Charles Wyman Hopkins (1886) (Higginson Books, 1997).

- *Names of the Owners or Occupants of Buildings in the Town of Providence, 1749-1771* (1870) (Higginson Books, 1997).

- *Lot, Houses & Shops in the Town of Providence in 1798 with Maps of Providence, 1650-1765-1770* by Henry R. Chace (1914) 1997.

These are useful resources when trying to ascertain when and where someone lived in the City of Providence prior to the appearance of city directories in the early nineteenth century.

- Local histories can also contain colonial land ownership details. Town histories exist for most Rhode Island localities and are available at NEHGS or through interlibrary loan. Several compilations of colonial land evidences are in print such as:

- James Newell Arnold, *Records of the Proprietors of the Narragansett, Otherwise Called the "Fones Record"* (1894) (Higginson Books, 1992). This volume covers land ownership in what is now Washington County, Rhode Island, from a 1659 land grant, and includes deeds and land transactions until 1686.

- An interesting collection of land ownership records created by the Commonwealth Land Title Insurance Company contains abstracts for deeds for which it issued title insurance between 1850 and 1905. The material is indexed by location.

### **Historic Preservation Records**

Discovering that your ancestor lived in a historically significant house is like winning the lottery. Rhode Islanders like Antoinette Downing were at the forefront of the Historic Preservation movement. Staff members at organizations such as the Rhode Island Historic Preservation Commission and the Providence Preservation Society have researched many of the early properties or architectural gems in the state's cities and towns. Before examining land records, locate a copy of one of the RIHPC reports on the community or (in the case of Providence) the neighborhood in which your ancestor lived. You'll discover historical and architectural information on the structure. Reports are available at many of the libraries and archives in the state and may be able to be obtained via interlibrary loan as well.

Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission - <http://www.rihphc.state.ri.us/directory.html>

Old State House

150 Benefit Street

Providence, RI 02903

- Consult website for a list of staff and email addresses.

Providence Preservation Society - <http://www.ppsri.org/>

21 Meeting Street

Providence, RI 02903

401-831-7440

Consult this list of classic titles and new offerings on Rhode Island's architectural heritage:

- William H. Jordy, Ronald J. Onorato and William McKenzie Woodward, *Buildings of Rhode Island* (Oxford University Press, 2004). Profiles include the current name of a building, with any earlier names in parentheses, the date of completion, the date of major additions or alterations and the architect if known.

- John Hutchins Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development of Providence* (1957) (Higginson Book Co., 1998). A classic that explores the growth of the city covering everything from the date streets were paved to population changes.

- Myron O. Stachiw, *Early Architecture and Landscapes of the Narragansett Basin*, vol. 1. Annual Meeting and Conference of the Vernacular Architecture Forum Newport 2001. Contains house histories and an essay on domestic architecture in the Narragansett Basin, 1636-1840.

- Norman F. Isham and Albert F. Brown, *Early Rhode Island Houses: An Historical and Architectural Study* (1895) (Higginson Books, 1997). Explores several colonial houses built between 1636 and 1725, dividing them into three categories of architectural development. Extensive drawings and floor plans accompany the text.

- Richard Grosvenor, *Newport: An Artist's Impression of Its Architecture and History* (Commonwealth Editions, 2002). Uses contemporary illustrations to accent the text and includes a list of selected architects of Newport as well as an architectural style sheet.

### **Photographs**

Review the tips in [A Picture Perfect Past: Finding Rhode Island Family Portraits](#) and apply them to finding images of

the houses in which your ancestor lived. With a street name, you'll be able to search picture files at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library by geographical location. You might even find a picture of your family posed in front of the house!

### **Architectural Drawings**

In 1982, an extraordinary exhibit displayed the state's architectural heritage from the eighteenth through the twentieth century. The exhibition catalog, *Buildings on Paper: Rhode Island Architectural Drawings, 1825-1945* by William Jordy and Christopher Monkhouse (1982), presented historical data on many domestic, industrial and commercial buildings.

While it is difficult to locate drawings of ordinary houses unless they are passed down from owner to owner, drawings of Rhode Island houses and buildings can be found in the collections of the contributors of the exhibition found in the front matter of the catalog. One of the most extensive collections [c. 1750-1960] of these house drawings is found at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library; it primarily focuses on work by prominent architects. According to the collection description on the RIHS website, the material spotlights "renowned Rhode Island architectural firms and architects like Albert Harkness; Stone, Carpenter and Wilson; Monhan and Meikle; Thomas A. Tefft; Russell Warren; Bowerman Brothers; and William Warner, among others." There are also files created by architectural historians Isham and Cady. It's worth searching the index to the collection if you have reason to believe a house was designed by a prominent architect or firm.

Spending time researching the homes your ancestors owned or lived in is not a waste of time. Discovering that your great-grandfather's family lived in the same neighborhood where your great-grandmother grew up could verify the persistent oral-history account that he married the "girl next door." It's also possible that your ancestor built the house in which he lived and passed it down to his children, creating an unbroken chain of ownership for several generations. House research is not just about architectural details, quibbling about gables or gambrels – it can help to re-create your ancestors' daily lives.