

Rhode Island Vital Records

By Maureen A. Taylor

Finding Rhode Island vital records can be a frustrating experience for both amateur and professional genealogists. While birth, marriage, and death information exists on the town level from the beginning of the colony in 1636 and on the state level from the institution of civil registration in 1853, it can be difficult to decide where to begin your research. Here are answers to some commonly asked questions...

Should I look for vital records on the town level?

Birth, marriage, and death records are available on the town level. Before visiting a local repository, though, be sure to call ahead to check on hours and policies. Consult Jane Fiske's "Genealogical Research in Rhode Island" in Ralph J. Crandall's *Genealogical Research in New England* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1984) or in the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 136 (July 1982): 173-219. (See also Marcia Melnyk's *Handbook of New England Research* (NEHGS, 1999) for dates of town incorporation and location of records.) When you do go, bring along your membership card for a genealogical society, such as the New England Historic Genealogical Society, as some town clerks restrict access to card holders.

Do I need to visit town halls to see the original records?

No. Microfilm copies of Rhode Island vital records are available in several facilities including: NEHGS library (4th floor); the Rhode Island Historical Society Library; at the Rhode Island Archives; and at a regional branch of the Family History Library. Consult the list at the end of this article for more information.

Are the town records indexed?

While most town vital records have a manuscript index, only Providence published a series of indexes to municipal birth, marriage, and death records. Births are indexed from 1636 to 1970, while marriage and deaths are indexed from 1636 to 1970. Copies of Edwin M. Snow and Charles V. Chapin, *Alphabetical Index of Birth Marriages and Deaths Recorded in Providence*, 32 vols., can be found at the Providence City Archives, the Rhode Island Historical Society and the Providence Public Library. Ken Carlson, of the Rhode Island State Archives, is working on a database of birth information for more than 25,000 individuals taken from municipal and state records. By comparing town records and state data, he found inconsistencies, omissions, and additional data that will appear in the database. Contact the Rhode Island State Archives for more information. Their address appears at the end of this article.

Are any of the pre-1853 records available in print?

There are two publications of early Rhode Island vital records. These volumes are available in most large genealogical libraries.

1. Arnold, James N. *Vital Record of Rhode Island, 1636-1850*. 21 vols. Providence, R.I.: Narragansett Publishing Company, 1891-92.
Arnold transcribed birth, marriage, and death records of towns, religious institutions, and newspapers. Users should compare the citations from Arnold with the original records, as there are transcription errors.
2. Beaman, Alden G. *Vital Records of Rhode Island, New Series*. Princeton, Mass: privately published, 1975-present.
Birth, marriage, and death information is derived from gravestones and probate records.

What statewide vital records exist from 1853 to the present?

Original birth and marriage records older than 101 years and deaths more than 51 years old are at the Rhode Island State Archives, with indexes. This material has been microfilmed and is available at the following facilities:

Location	Births	Marriages	Deaths
The Rhode Island	1853–1898 with	1853– 1900	1853–1900

Historical Society	indexes to 1900	with indexes	with indexes
Rhode Island State Archives	1853–1898 with indexes	1853–1898 with indexes	1853–1948 with indexes to 1945
NEHGS	1853–1894 with indexes	1853–1894 with indexes	1853–1945 Index through 1920
Family History Library	Consult their library catalog for holdings and film numbers	~	~

Where are more recent records located?

The Rhode Island Division of Vital Records maintains the files for births and marriages less than 100 years old and deaths less than 50 years old. There is a \$15.00 fee per record for copies. In order to fill a request you need to supply in writing the following information: name on the record, date of the event (birth, marriage, or death), city or town where it occurred, your relationship to the individual and why you need the copy. If you are requesting a birth record, you will also need to supply the name of the father and the mother's maiden name. For additional information call (401) 222-2811.

There appears to be a gap between when the Arnold volumes end in 1850 and the beginning of civil registration in 1853. Where are these records located?

An index to birth, marriage, and death records for the years 1851 and 1852 is available at the Rhode Island Archives.

How has legislation affected the types of recorded information?

Colonial and state laws regarding births, marriages, and deaths cover what information is to be kept by the town clerks, the fees that they can charge, and when records need to be turned over to the town and later the state. Most of the legislation appears to be a response to loopholes in the law. An abbreviated listing of statutes relating to vital records follows:

Timeline of Vital Records Legislation 1647-1930¹

- **1647** The Colony passes the first law regarding marriage in response to the Horod Long court case, which discusses her co-habitation with George Gardner.
- **1647** A statute requires that marriage banns be published in two town meetings prior to the event.
- **1655-56** Marriage banns can be published either at town meeting or on training day.
- **1698** Births, marriages, and burials are to be brought to the town clerk to be recorded no later than ten days after the event. Once a year the town clerk is to give an account of these occurrences to the head magistrate of the town or the chief justice of the peace.
- **1701** The Act to Prevent Clandestine Marriages holds that "Intentions of marriage shall be posted in a public place for 14 days. Officials who perform marriages without posting intentions are fined 5 pounds for 1st offence and 10 pounds for 2nd offence. Out of state residents must have authorization from their government to marry in Rhode Island. Individuals found living together without being married are fined 5 pounds and if convicted in the General Court of Tryals they may also be imprisoned for three months. Assistant, Justice or Warden shall provide to the town clerk the names of those married within 3 months."
- **1708** Town clerks can be fined three shillings for failing to record marriages.
- **1727** Town clerks have the right to sue persons for refusal or neglect to register birth, marriages, or burials.
- **1767** Wording on marriage certificate is established: "I hereby certify that ___ of ___ Son of ___ and ___ of ___ Daughter of ___ were lawfully joined together in marriage on the ___ day of ___ anno domini by me the subscriber." Banns must be announced for three Sundays prior to marriage. If the individuals who plan to be married are from different towns, banns must be published in both towns. Anyone who breaks this law (assistant, justice, warden, minister or elder) fined 100 pounds. Individuals fined 20 pounds or three months imprisonment. Marriages should be brought to the town clerk by the married couple within one month. Parents

should register births and deaths of children within 2 months. Town clerks are empowered to collect fines or sue within two years of event.

- **1798** Banns must be placed in a public place by an official for 15 days prior to the marriage. The ceremony must be performed with two witnesses in attendance.
- **1822** Justices of the peace and town wardens are given the right to perform marriage ceremonies.
- **1844** Parents shall give the town clerk a certificate signed by them within two months of the birth of each child or be fined a dollar. Town clerks will enter the certificates of marriages, births and death or be fined \$10 for each incident of neglect. Out-of-state marriage candidates must have a certificate from their town that says that they can be married. Failure to do so results in a fine of \$50.00. Marriages must be registered within 60 days.
- **1850** Trustees of school districts are to obtain an accurate account of all births, marriages, and deaths within their district and turned over to the commissioner of public schools and to the town clerk to be recorded. Blank forms are provided. Birth records should contain the following: date of birth, place of birth, name, sex, name and surname of one or both parents, color, occupation of father, residence of parents, and time of recording. Births, marriages and deaths of non-residents shall be recorded separately.
- **1852** Town and city clerks are required to obtain, record, and index all records and to turn over a certified copy to the secretary of state for each year ending on the first day of June. Failure to do so results in a \$20.00 fine. Doctors and undertakers are required to report deaths before the second Monday of each month.
- **1854** Alphabetical indexes are to be kept in the Secretary of State's office. Birth records should contain the date and place of birth, name, and sex of the child and whether living or stillborn; name and surname, color, occupation, residence and birthplace of the parents and the time of recording. Births need to be reported within 10 days and marriages quarterly.
- **1857** Marriage certificates should contain names, ages, color, occupation, birthplace and residence, if married before and how many times, names, occupations and birthplace of each of their parents. Births, marriages, and deaths for the previous year need to be presented annually before first Monday in March to the Secretary of State. Deaths need to be reported within 48 hours. The certificate is to contain the name of the deceased, date of death, and the disease or cause of death.
- **1872** Marriage certificates should includes whether or not the parties are divorced and whether or not they are widows or widowers. In Providence, anyone under guardianship will not be allowed to marry unless they have the consent of a parent or guardian.
- **1883** Guardianship certificates may be issued by the town clerk or registrar to a female over 18 who has no parent or guardian living in the United States.
- **1898** Non-resident women must get a marriage license at least 5 days before the event.
- **1910** Death certificates should state the date of death, name and surname of the deceased, sex, color, marital state, age, occupation, place of death, place of birth, names and birthplace of parents, disease or cause of death, the name and relation of the person providing the information, the place of burial, and time of recording. Stillbirths are recorded separately as both a birth and a death. Burial permits are required.
- **1917** Law of 1898 for non-resident women shall not apply to immigrant women.
- **1923** Clergy must have a license to perform a marriage ceremony.
- **1927** In the case of divorced individuals, a divorce decree must be presented before remarriage.
- **1930** Birth records should contain the date and place of birth, name of child, the sex and color, number of children for mother, living or dead, name and surname age, color, residence and birthplace of the parents, the occupation of the father and time of recording.

Useful Addresses

Rhode Island Historical Society

121 Hope St.

Providence, RI 02906

(401) 331-8575

Rhode Island State Archives

337 Westminster St.
Providence, RI 02903
(401) 222-2353

Providence City Archives

City Hall
Providence, RI 02903
(401) 421-7740

Providence Public Library

225 Washington St.
Providence, RI 02903
(401) 455-8000

Rhode Island Division of Vital Records

3 Capitol Hill, Room 101
Providence, RI 02908
(401) 222- 2811

Footnotes

1. Historical Records Survey, Division of Community Service Projects, Works Projects Administration. *Guide to the Public Vital Statistics Records Births Marriages Deaths in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (Providence, 1941).