

Tracking Your Twentieth-Century Rhode Island Relatives

By Maureen A. Taylor

One key piece of advice experienced genealogists give to beginners is start with yourself and work backwards. This means researching records for evidence of living family members or those born between 1901 and 2000. Some of the records you consult will be similar to those you'll use for earlier generations, but a few are unique to the twentieth century. Kathleen W. Hinckley's *Locating Lost Family Members & Friends* (Betterway, 1999) is an excellent guide to twentieth-century resources nationwide. This column will offer advice on how to uncover this recent history in Rhode Island. We will review a few sources covered in earlier columns, as well as some that apply only to the twentieth century.

Ask Relatives

This is pretty basic, but oral history needs to be verified or you can end up barking up the wrong family tree. Start with a list of simple questions — birth, marriage, residences, schools attended, and employment, and then approach your relatives for their life stories. This may produce some surprising results. During the interview process I discovered that females in my family generally use their middle names for everyday documents except when the record seems “official” — then they use their first names. Needless to say, this business of interchangeable first names makes the verification process a little more difficult!

One Year at a Time: City Directories and Telephone Listings

After asking lots of questions, work backwards in history for each person and create timelines of events that include source evidence for each fact. Don't forget to track yourself as well. You may be surprised by the amount of misinformation that you will discover.

A wide variety of records await the twentieth-century researcher. . Start your year-by-year chart of who was where with the help of city directories. Directories generally list heads of households and can include any employed resident, but coverage is spotty for some neighborhoods. Major cities like Providence, Pawtucket, and Newport have annual city directories, but smaller cities and towns are often grouped together into volumes and issued sporadically. The best collections are at the Rhode Island Historical Society, the New England Historic Genealogical Society, and the Library of Congress. Some directories are available on microfilm from the Family History Library and others are online at [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com).

Telephone directories — in print form, on CD-ROM, and online — are commonly used today to track living or recently deceased relatives. Telephone books are available from the late nineteenth century to the present day, and are often found at the main branches of public libraries. Use care when using them because they were printed on poor quality paper that becomes brittle.

Online directories: Hinckley did a comparison of the major online telephone directory sites and found several discrepancies. This means you should check each one to be thorough. The four that gave consistent results as of the publication of her book were [Anywho](https://www.anywho.com), [Bigfoot](https://www.bigfoot.com), [InfoSpace](https://www.infospace.com), and [WhoWhere](https://www.whowhere.com).

CD-ROMS: [InfoUSA](https://www.infoUSA.com) and Phonedisk Powerfinder offer updated directories on CD-ROM.

Follow Hinckley's advice in *Locating Lost Family Members and Friends* and record the name, address, and telephone number for each individual. Don't forget to check for individuals listed under first initials and watch for widows who continue to maintain the listing under their husband's name.

Confidentiality

There will be times when you'll be denied access to certain recent records because of confidentiality laws. This is especially true with vital records and court documents. To receive a copy of a birth or marriage record less than a hundred years old or a death record less than fifty years old from either the Rhode Island Division of Vital Records or a

city or town clerk you will need to show a relationship, supply information (see below), and pay a fee. Make your request in writing and provide the following: 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.

According to the Judicial Records Center website, access to twentieth-century civil, criminal, and divorce records are "available to researchers in accordance with the laws of Rhode Island and the operating rules of the department." A driver's license or Rhode Island Identification Card must be shown in order to view a case file. For more information on obtaining access to these materials or for a list of their holdings see their [website](#).

The Full Story

In the twentieth century, home ownership is a reality for many, school attendance is mandatory, and news is everywhere.

In Rhode Island, real estate and land records are not available on the county level, but rather at town and city halls with access through grantor/grantee indexes. Even if your family never owned the building they lived in they might have owned land, a cemetery plot, or income property like an apartment house. Tax records are also available to the public at the town or city hall.

You might be able to find out if your twentieth-century ancestors were good students and maybe even see their school photo by contacting the private or parochial school they attended for records. Public school records are usually the property of the municipal school department. School yearbooks and class photographs may exist in the collections of local historical societies or public libraries.

News outlets offer unique opportunities for twentieth-century research. Most local newspapers are now online, and many have obituary archives. Search the name of the paper online in [Google](#) or [Yahoo](#) and see what the paper keeps in their online archive. Be prepared to pay a usage fee to obtain any pertinent information. The Providence Public Library has a card index to significant news events published in the *Providence Journal*.

In the 1970s the Rhode Island Historical Society began collecting news footage from the three local television stations. Most of the collection is still unavailable to researchers unless they know the specific day that a story aired. The exception is the film from the station WJAR, for which an index now exists. Bear in mind that this archive only includes major local news stories and that duplication may not be possible. Contact the Graphics Department at the Rhode Island Historical Society for additional details.

Tracking a relative through twentieth-century documentation can help you learn more about your family, locate lost relatives, or assist you in finding past friends. Earlier columns covered state and federal census records, church documents, and immigration information.