

County Resources in Massachusetts

By Maureen A. Taylor

"Few areas in this country or the British Isles equal the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the quantity and quality of its historical records," stated Edward W. Hanson and Homer Vincent Ruther in their 1984 book, *Genealogical Research in New England*. What they said almost twenty years ago remains true today. In fact, the access to these records has only increased with time thanks to the Internet. Rather than focus on specific town records that are useful only if you know the name of the town, let's survey county level materials. Researchers in Massachusetts are fortunate in that there is an amazing amount of genealogical and historical information available for the state's counties. Listed below are five different avenues to explore to discover more about your family.

Know Your County

As colonists began spreading out from the original settlements and acquiring new land it became necessary to divide the state into counties. Even parts of New Hampshire were once under the jurisdiction of Massachusetts from 1641/2 to 1679. In order to access county records, you first need to identify the correct one based on where your family lived and when. For instance, Suffolk County originally included land now found in Norfolk and Worcester Counties. If your ancestor lived in Dedham after 1793 then they were in Norfolk County rather than Suffolk County. Thomas Galvin's *Historical Data Relating to Counties, Cities and Towns in Massachusetts, 5th Edition* (NEHGS, 1997) helps sort out the details.

Date County Formed

Barnstable 1685

Berkshire 1761

Bristol 1685

Dukes 1683

Essex 1643

Franklin 1811

Hampden 1812

Hampshire 1662

Middlesex 1643

Nantucket 1695

Norfolk 1793

Plymouth 1685

Suffolk 1643

Worcester 1731

Land and Probate Records

In Massachusetts, these records are located on the county level rather than in town halls. In larger counties this may be further broken down so that records are divided between two repositories. Consult Marcia Melnyk's *The Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research* (NEHGS, 2001) to find out where materials exist for the county you are interested in.

The good news is that many land records are now online and available for various fees. Below is a list of websites that offer such records. The Essex County Registry of Deeds www.salemdeeds.com offers free access to land records.

- The registries of [Berkshire](#) and [Bristol \(North\)](#) counties offer a program called TITLESEARCH for searching land records online. They charge a one-time fee of \$100.00 to utilize their title index.
- [Hampden County](#) charges \$50.00 for off-site access.
- [Northern Middlesex County](#) offers off-site searching of limited records through Telesearch. To use this program you must first purchase special software at a cost of \$195.00, after which you will be able to access the records at no cost for thirty days. After the trial period, users are charged \$12.00 an hour to use the system.
- [Plymouth County](#) also offers limited information from 1971 to the present through TitleView. Their charge is sixty cents per minute for connect time.

- [Suffolk County](#) is gradually adding images of their deeds to their website. Their database index is currently available free of charge.

The Probate Records of Essex County, Massachusetts, 1635-1681 (1880-1906) is one of the many examples of probate records that have been published. Printed indexes also exist for the counties of Middlesex, Norfolk, Suffolk and Worcester. [The Family History Library](#) of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) has microfilmed probate records available for loan or you may arrange LDS loans through the NEHGS library. With the exception of Suffolk and Franklin Counties, microfilms of probate documents are available on the 4th floor of the NEHGS library. Of course, researchers can also use original records by visiting research facilities on the county level.

County Histories and Biographical Cyclopedias

Did you know that published histories exist for every county in Massachusetts? Besides being a wonderful resource for historical information, many county histories also feature genealogical data on prominent families. Biographical encyclopedias, also known as "mug books" due to the number of photographs of prominent citizens in them, became popular civic endeavors in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Individuals invited to participate in these encyclopedias often wrote their own biographies or genealogical statements. Be sure to verify all the material mentioned in one of these publications in case your relative hadn't done their research. Consult P. William Filby's *A Bibliography of American County Histories* (1985) or John Haskell's comprehensive *Massachusetts: A Bibliography of Its History* (1976) for titles and locations. The Committee for a New England Bibliography periodically updates Haskell's work and you can search the latest volume (nine) [online](#).

Genealogical and Historical Societies

No genealogist should ever overlook the holdings of local historical and genealogical societies. These organizations collect material specific to a particular area and may have the very genealogical data you seek. Researchers of Massachusetts can find historical societies and even genealogical groups in most cities and towns. Here is a list of some larger organizations that also collect county information.

- [Connecticut Valley Historical Museum](#)
Research Library and Archives
194 State St. (rear)
Springfield, MA 01103

The library describes some of its holdings as follows: "An extensive local history index, the Springfield Index, which carries citations to local books, newspapers and periodicals which document the lives of people, organizations, and events in the Springfield area." They also have a photograph collection.

- [Historical Records of Dukes County, Massachusetts](#)
RR 2, Box 247
Vineyard, MA 02568

This site has a little bit of everything-queries, cemetery records, and genealogies of Dukes County families.

- [Peabody Essex Museum](#)
Phillips Library
East India Square
Salem, MA 01970-3773
(978) 745-1876

The Phillips Library has a large manuscript collection that includes the probate records for Essex County.

- [Berkshire County Historical Society](#)
Margaret H. Hall Library and Archives
780 Holmes Rd.

Pittsfield, MA 01201
(413) 442-1793
info@berkshirehistory.org

The Margaret H. Hall Library and Archives maintains a collection of manuscripts, books, maps, oral histories, and photographs. The library is open by appointment.

- [Essex Society of Genealogists](#)
P.O. Box 313
Lynnfield, MA 01940-0313

This organization offers an online queries page and publishes The Essex Genealogist, a quarterly magazine.

- Old Colony Historical Society
66 Church Green
Taunton, MA 02780
(508) 822-1622

This society has a research collection of material on the Taunton area including manuscripts, city directories, and photographs.

- [Massachusetts Society of Genealogists, Inc. \(M.S.O.G.\)](#)
705 Southbridge St.
Worcester, MA 01610
508-792-5066

The Society operates a non-circulating library. Call for hours.

Online Resources

Don't forget that message boards have sections devoted to posting queries about specific localities including counties. Check out the [Massachusetts county pages](#) at Rootsweb or the general [Massachusetts message board](#) on Genealogy.com

Here you will find individuals who are looking for specific family members, others requesting help with resources, and some that even offer their genealogical information--accurate or not--for all to see. [Cyndislist.com](#) has links to mailing lists for each county. Be sure to independently verify all information gathered from these sources!

The United States GenWeb project features individual pages for each county in a state, which are sponsored and kept up by volunteers. The quantity and quality of information found in each page vary accordingly, but you may very well discover information specific to a locality that would be otherwise difficult to find.

[Massachusetts GenWeb](#) contains links to all county pages.

- [Berkshire](#): Mailing list, search feature, and vital records
- [Bristol](#): Online books, census records, plus a search feature
- [Dukes](#): Access records, queries, and cemeteries.
- [Essex](#): Online books, records, wills, and a research guide.
- [Franklin](#): Features a newspaper bibliography, a list of researchers, and genealogies of county families.
- [Hampden](#): Access online cemetery inscriptions and photographs of the stones plus search the whole site.
- [Hampshire](#): Vital records, county address book, and lookups.
- [Middlesex](#): Queries, reunion postings, and Woburn census records.
- [Nantucket](#): Queries, bible records, wills, military pension records, cemeteries.

- [Norfolk](#): Queries, links to local resources, and FAQs
- [Plymouth](#): Maps, family home pages, lookups, and links to other US GenWeb sites.
- [Suffolk](#): Cemeteries, links to personal genealogy pages, and lookups.
- [Worcester](#): Contains a directory of historical societies and libraries as well as genealogies of families from specific towns.

These individual county pages also include links to other sites containing research resources, such as the [Plymouth Colony Archive Project](#) at the University of Virginia. The home page, which acts as a guide to online collections, is designed to resemble the floor plan for a seventeenth century house. You can also search surnames and terms that appear in the online archive from court records to online texts. There are so many places to look for genealogical treasure. These five steps only provide a brief overview; the rest is up to you. Be sure to post queries on the all the message boards you can and view all the postings relevant to your research. Take advantage of the research services offered by most societies for individuals unable to travel to their area or facility. Remember that each research possibility provides you with a chance to find missing information, connect with other researchers, or discover new leads.