Finding Scoundrels in Rhode Island

By Maureen A. Taylor

Everyone has at least one in his or her family tree - a scoundrel. The very word conjures up a scruffy appearance, shifty eyes, and villainous deeds. Yet, the definition of a scoundrel varies between families. Generally anyone who exhibits behavior outside the norm can be regarded as one. Most people usually associate the condition with men, but just as many family trees have colorful women. In fact, the word "scoundrel" refers to someone with unknown origins or one who is known as a disreputable person. When searching for the skeletons in your family closet, remember to keep your impressions in historical context. A misdeed in the seventeenth century may not be considered one in the nineteenth century.

Rhode Island had a reputation of being home to all sorts of unsavory characters, from religious dissenters in Colonial times to rumrunners during prohibition. Your chances of finding those "interesting" characters in your family increase when you search records outside of the normal areas, as shown below. Try to think like your ancestor and follow good genealogical research techniques to discover the hidden history in your family tree.

Methodology comes first. It makes sense to create a list of records that the individual may have created or left behind in his or her lifetime, and then try to find them. If you think about life patterns, places lived, activities and events of the time, and family members, you might be able to discover more than you think. If you are researching a hard-to-find individual that lived within the last century, start by talking with relatives. Generally, family members pass on tales of exploit and remain silent on scandal, but you never know what kernels your relatives might want to share.

Begin by checking all the usual places, such as vital, census, and military records. Unfortunately, you may not find complete documentation for poor, transient, or troubled individuals. Civil registration commenced in 1853, but records before that are notoriously incomplete, especially for rural areas. Census reports after 1850 contain lists of residents of orphanages, prisons, and insane asylums. In the late nineteenth century, the Rhode Island State Legislature printed rosters of students that attended schools for the deaf and blind in their annual reports. Newspapers regularly published notices of criminal activity, desertion, runaways, and personal notices. The two volumes of my *Runaways, Deserters, and Notorious Villains from Rhode Island Newspapers* (Picton Press, 1994, 2001) contain those announcements that were published in Rhode Island in the eighteenth century. City directories, usually thought of as being all-inclusive, in fact fail to include the homeless, the poor, and anyone in an institution. However, directories are great resources for locating orphanages, prisons, and names of institutions, which may lead you to new record sources. Anyone in a special circumstance will not appear in tax records either. So where can you look? There are plenty of places!

Here is an overview of seven different types of records, why you should consult them, and where you can find them. Two good resources for earlier records are Ann Smith Lainhart's *Digging for Genealogical Treasure in New England Town Records* (NEHGS, 1996) and Laura Szucs Pfeiffer's *Hidden Sources: Family History in Unlikely Places* (Ancestry, 2000). For twentieth-century records, use Kathleen W. Hinckley's *Locating Lost Family Members & Friends* (Betterway, 2000).

Adoption/Guardianship Cases

Prior to the twentieth century, adoptions were primarily informal affairs. However, you can find adoptions recorded in guardianship papers, which are contained in probate records at the town level. For instance, the Billings children appear in the probate records for the city of Providence. Not only do the records indicate the reason for the removal of the children from their natural family (neglect), but also who took them (The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty of Children). By using census records one can piece together their lives. As it turns out, the Billings children were never adopted and they spent their childhood in state care.

The State Legislature also sanctioned adoptions. From 1800 to 1880, the quarterly reports of the General Assembly listed the names of adoptive parents and birth names of the children. Once you have that information, uncover the background by using vital records and census reports.

Apprenticeship Contracts

These materials are difficult to locate even when you know the name of the person and with whom they were

apprenticed. Start with manuscript collections for the family or town by searching the card catalog at the Rhode Island Historical Society or at NEHGS. An apprenticeship document usually contains the name, age, place of birth, and term of service of the apprentice.

Court Documents

Civil and criminal court cases kept by the Rhode Island Supreme Court Judicial Records Center can be a gold mine for researchers. Their archives contain civil and criminal court cases (1671-1900), divorce cases (1749-1900), and some naturalization papers (1793-1974). Online order forms are available on their website for specific requests, but for general information about the archives' holdings, send an email request to them. All court cases after 1900 must be requested via regular mail. See their website for further details.

Since Rhode Island had a reputation as the most litigious colony, there is a good chance you'll find information on those unsavory ancestors in court documents. Civil or criminal court cases and divorce proceedings consisted of petitions and depositions with lots of details. You'll be surprised how much the neighbors knew about family disputes in the eighteenth century. Indexes are by the name of the petitioner or criminal, but that doesn't mean you can't find your ancestor. Try searching the indexes by surname for collateral relatives and you might uncover testimony given by your direct descendant.

Manumissions

Was your ancestor involved in the slave trade? Rhode Island figured prominently in the Triangle Trade of slaves, rum, and sugar. Jay Coughtry's *Notorious Triangle* (Temple University Press, 1981) divulges all the details. A small but wonderful collection of manumission papers exists in the Quaker records for the city of Newport. My personal favorite is the slave who first bought his own freedom, then negotiated for the release of his mother. Names, dates, and terms of the manumission make for interesting reading. Unfortunately, there is no surname index for this group of material. While colonial census records included a column for slaves, the next step is finding out their identity in state documents and family papers.

Photographs

Don't overlook your photographs for clues to those notorious family members. In existence in Rhode Island since 1840, photographs offer hints to the time period in which they were taken. Look closely at the clothing, the props used, and the photographer's imprint. That small pin in the lapel of your grandfather's suit coat may link him to a membership organization, or the style of his clothing may tell you more about his occupation.

Poor Records

In colonial New England, towns had a responsibility to care for their indigent population. That means you might find them mentioned by name in town records. When formal workhouses and poor farms became the norm in the mid-nineteenth century, records for these institutions started being kept. The Dexter Asylum served as the primary poorhouse in the city of Providence for over a hundred years. The manuscript division of the Rhode Island Historical Society currently houses the records of the Dexter Asylum. These records list the names of inmates, their ages, and how long they stayed at the asylum, among other things. Sometimes you will find whole families under town or state care.

If you know your family lived in Rhode Island, but you cannot find them in tax records, city directories, or any other records, check the poor farm documents. Since the towns themselves paid for the care of the poor, they were careful to make sure that they only assisted their own citizens. Anyone moving to a new town in the colonial period had to prove they had means to financially support themselves; if they could not, they underwent a transient examination, in which they would have to disclose information about their last legal residence to the town's council or selectmen. The town officials might then elect to order the newcomer(s) out of town, which was known as a "warning out." The purpose of warning out transients was to protect the town and reduce the homeless and vagrancy rate. In some areas, warning out records list the names of all family members, while other areas list only the head of the household and his or her children. Many, however, list the previous residence of the family or individual, which is perhaps the most valuable information contained in warning out records.Ruth Wallis Herndon studies Rhode Island's transient population in her new book, *Unwelcome Americans: Living on the Margin in Early New England* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001)

Prison

Prison records are related to court documents and usually list the name of the incarcerated, their place of birth, age, crime, and length of sentence. Bear in mind that persecution of certain ethnic groups sporadically occurred, which is why prison ledgers show large numbers of Irish or Italians during certain time periods for offences as minor as drunkenness to serious crimes like murder. These records can be found in various locations, such as State Archives or at the prison itself. The manuscript department at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library has a large collection of prison records.

If you do find a “scoundrel” on your tree, it is important to understand why he or she was regarded as one. Consider when and where they lived, their occupation, why they disappeared from public record, when that happened, and the historical events that may have shaped their behavior. It is vitally important to understand your relatives in the historical context in which they lived rather than using contemporary standards to judge them. Don’t forget to use Internet resources to assist in your search. Enlist the help of other relatives through online message boards and search online databases for the information you seek. You never know where you’ll find clues. If you are unsure how to include these scoundrels in your family history read the "Family Histories" chapter by Christine Rose in *Professional Genealogy* (GPC, 2001); it has some great advice.