

# New Hampshire: Resources for Vital Records

By John Fipphen

Events are recorded on cards measuring 3 3/8 by 7 3/4 inches. Each card contains a single event. The cards are filed in row upon row of oak filing drawers. To access information, the researcher must look up the drawer location of the record on a finding chart. The filing system is unique and usually confuses the uninitiated. Records are filed according to the first and third letter of the surname. The researcher must submit a request slip with the name sought and the drawer number to the volunteer in charge of the research room. The volunteer then retrieves the file drawer and selects a group of cards, which should include the desired record. Since the research room is staffed by volunteers from the New Hampshire Society of Genealogists, the vault room is not open to the public if a volunteer is unavailable. Fortunately, this has occurred very rarely in recent years.

There is some danger in this system of records being misfiled or even lost after use. But many times the researcher finds previously unknown information about the family. Because the cards are filed in this unique manner, the researcher has to keep in mind that the name they are seeking may be filed under a different, or in the case of the large French-Canadian population in the state, Anglicized spelling. Marriage records are filed according to the groom's last name in the master files. There is no similar record filed according to the bride's last name. There is, however, a bride's list on microtext, which is readily available in the Search Room. These cards contain the same information as that which is on the grooms' cards but are filed according to brides' last name.

The restricted access vault contains the more recent records, which are stored in volumes. In order to gain access or get a copy of a record, a researcher has to demonstrate relationship to the person whose record is sought. New Hampshire has been using an interim computerized system for about two years in 120 of the state's 234 towns. When someone requested a certified copy of a family record, a clerk would look up the paper record, key the information into a computer, and then print out a copy.

Recently the New Hampshire Bureau of Vital Records and Health Statistics became the first state in the country to replace its paper system of recording births, deaths, and marriages, so-called vital records, with a computerized database and imaging system. New Hampshire now possesses the first state-of-the-art system in the country for vital record retention and accumulation. The new system makes it possible for researchers to obtain copies of these records at local town or city clerk's office instead of having to travel to Concord or the city where the events originally were recorded. State officials realized they weren't taking full advantage of technology.

Getting the system in place meant changing some laws. For instance, electronic signatures had to be allowed to stand in for hand signing, and the requirement that records be stored at the local levels had to be amended. Computerizing the system begins to solve another looming problem: local officials have been running out of space to store records. The State Vital Records division, for example, was running out of room in the confidential records vault, where recent records are kept. All new records will be kept on computer instead of on the shelves and file cabinets that line the current vault. As funds permit, older records will be entered into the database.

As of the fall of 1998, the system was up and running in six pilot communities: Concord, Keene, Nashua, Exeter, Dover, and Littleton. Hospitals, funeral directors, and town clerks in these communities have been filing vital records electronically. The information is then transmitted either by modem or via an internet server to Concord. As for the rest of the state, everything depends on the budget. It is expected that the state will be able to fund 25 to 50 new municipal installations a year. Information retrieval has now been simplified. Once the records are stored in the database, a clerk need only type in the requested record and the information appears on the screen, ready to be printed out. The resulting copy is neat, accurate, and virtually indistinguishable from a typed copy.