

# Rhode Island Colonial Population Estimates

By Maureen A. Taylor

In *American Population before the Federal Census of 1790* (1932; reprint, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co, 1993), authors Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington identify several informal “censuses” taken during the colonial period. The information in this volume, combined with other sources, can help you locate your ancestor in colonial Rhode Island. Unfortunately, the majority of aggregate data mentioned in Greene and Harrington provide only numbers, not names. There are no official “census” records that list the names of the individuals being counted in the seventeenth century. The original records are no longer in existence. However, several seventeenth-century population lists actually contain data useful for genealogical research. For historical background on the colonial period consult Sydney James, *Colonial Rhode Island: A History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1975).

## Seventeenth Century

The seventeenth-century lists mentioned in Greene and Harrington attempt to estimate population by using militia numbers or houses standing in the four original towns — Providence, Portsmouth, Newport and Warwick — and later in the whole colony. Full citations are provided in Greene and Harrington’s work for such sources as the colony records found at the State Archives and Public Records Administration. For instance, 258 freemen were counted in the 1655 citation from the above towns, but no names were recorded. From that statistic it is difficult to estimate how many women and children were living in the area. Since there is no specific information about individuals, the genealogical uses for this data are limited.

To verify if your ancestor was actually in Rhode Island during the seventeenth century you’ll have to rely on manuscript collections, land records, town documents, and whatever vital records were kept. Here is a compilation of some of the published and online resources that can help you pinpoint your ancestor’s location in the colony. This does not include any specific documents located on the local level.

- 1) If your ancestors were members of the Society of Friends (Quakers), vital records and monthly meeting records kept by the Society are fairly comprehensive. See “[Religious Records in Rhode Island](#)” for details on what is available.
- 2) *Rhode Island Land Evidences: 1648-1696* (reprint Baltimore: Clearfield, 1998). According to the preface, this volume abstracts only one of four of the original record books for the colony. It covers a few deeds from Providence, some from Newport, and the majority from the area known as South County or the Narragansett Country, including lands not covered by any colonial government. South County and the Narragansett Country consist of the area currently covered by Washington County.
- 3) Jane Fletcher Fiske’s two books of court records, *Rhode Island General Court of Trials 1671-1704* and *Gleanings from Newport Court Files 1659-1783*, were both self-published in 1998 and are available from the author (44 Stonecleave Road, Boxford, MA 01921). The indexes in these volumes contain references to individuals that escape notice in other sources such as Arnold’s *Vital Record of Rhode Island* (online at [www.newenglandancestors.org](http://www.newenglandancestors.org)).
- 4) An important resource available in print and online is Robert Charles Anderson’s Great Migration Project. Consisting of the three-volume *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England, 1620–1633* (NEHGS, 1995) and the current series, *The Great Migration: Immigrants to New England 1634-1635*, 3 vols. (NEHGS, 1999- ), Anderson’s work covers early immigrants to New England in general, including those who settled in Rhode Island. *The Great Migration Begins: Immigrants to New England, 1620 – 1633* searchable database and the [Great Migration quarterly newsletter](#) are both available at [www.newenglandancestors.org](http://www.newenglandancestors.org).

## Eighteenth Century

In the eighteenth century, population assessment became more formal with at least five lists now in published form and available to researchers. There is no other eighteenth-century colonial census known to exist that lists names.

**1730:** Ruth W. Sherman, “1730 Census of Portsmouth, Rhode Island,” *Rhode Island Roots* 7, June 1981, pp.16-17, and

Jane Fletcher Fiske, "The 1730 Census of South Kingstown, Rhode Island," *Rhode Island Roots* 10, March 1984, p. 8. The original in each case is held by the town clerk. This census covers Portsmouth and part of South Kingstown, giving the number of inhabitants in each household. For a list of city and town clerks consult the links available on the [Rhode Island Records Advisory Board website](#) .

**1747:** Bruce C. MacGunnigle, Ed. *Rhode Island Freemen, 1747-1755: A Census of Registered Voters* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Col., 1977). MacGunnigle used lists of freemen to create this "census" of men in the colony for the seven-year period covered by this book. Freemen were formally admitted to the town with full privileges to vote, hold land, and participate as full members of the community. The original lists are at the State Archives and Public Records Administration, 337 Westminster St., Providence, RI 02903, (401) 222-2353.

**1774:** John R. Bartlett, ed. *Census of the Inhabitants of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1774* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing co., 1969). This includes the number of people under and over the age of sixteen in each household, grouped by gender. An additional column enumerates the number of black and Native American individuals in the household. The census data for New Shoreham (Block Island) is missing. Originals are at the State Archives and Public Records Administration.

**1777:** Mildred Mosher Chamberlain, ed. *The Rhode Island 1777 Military Census* (Baltimore: GPC, 1985). The Rhode Island government needed a count of males between sixteen and sixty years old who were eligible for military service. This census, arranged by town, includes Quaker males excused from service because of their religious beliefs. The original is held by the State Archives and Public Records Administration. For additional information on tracing your Revolutionary War roots in Rhode Island consult my earlier article " Finding a Revolutionary War Ancestor in Rhode Island "

**1782:** Jay Mack Holbrook, ed. *Rhode Island 1782 Census* (Oxford, Massachusetts: Holbrook Research Institute, 1979). The original manuscript includes householders, with family members tallied by gender and age grouping, and additional data on blacks and Indians. Unfortunately the returns for North Providence and Smithfield are missing. Holbrook's publication, which presents only data on white inhabitants, rearranges names in alphabetical order and reconstructs a white population for the missing towns by using manuscripts and tax lists. The original returns are at the Rhode Island Historical Society, 121 Hope St., Providence, RI 02906.

While not a census, Howard M. Chapin's *Rhode Island in the Colonial Wars: A List of Rhode Island Soldiers & Sailors in King George's War 1740-1748 and A List of Rhode Island Soldiers & Sailors in the Old French & Indian War 1755-1762* (reprint Baltimore: GPC, 1994) supplements the other lists (especially MacGunnigle's volume). Chapin's compilation lists the name of each soldier, the unit in which they served, and sometimes their place of residence.

Searching for roots in colonial Rhode Island is a lot like a treasure hunt but fortunately there are only a finite number of records to search. Ken Carlson of the State Archives and Public Records Administration recommends that researchers consult the lists of deputies and freemen, colony records, and land and public notary records. If you don't locate your ancestor in any of these sources read current genealogical periodicals to stay up to date. Valuable historical documents are periodically unearthed and hopefully some of the incredible sources referred to in Greene and Harrington will surface. Personally, I'd like to learn the names of the men counted in the 1690 Abstract of the Militia or of all those inhabitants numbered in the Census of 1708. Ken Carlson is still looking for those documents and with any luck they'll turn up.