

# Research in Connecticut Cities and Towns, Part II: Hartford: The Connecticut Historical Society

By Joyce S. Pendery, CG

## Introduction

Many genealogists with Connecticut ancestors dream about a research trip to Hartford where the Connecticut Historical Society and the Connecticut State Library house the two largest collections of genealogical materials relating to Connecticut. Hartford might be described as a “one-stop genealogical research destination,” especially for anyone with limited time or ancestors from several Connecticut localities. This article will concentrate on records available at the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS).

The Connecticut Historical Society, created in 1825 by a resolution of the Connecticut General Assembly, originally had as its mission to collect civil, ecclesiastical, and natural history materials relating to the United States and especially to the state of Connecticut. No mention was made of collecting family history materials. Fortunately, in the late nineteenth century, CHS librarian Albert Carlos Bates recognized the importance of such acquisitions and initiated their family history collection.

## Visiting the Connecticut Historical Society

Early one Tuesday in May, I set out to revisit CHS. Staff Genealogist Judith Ellen Johnson gave me a grand tour of the library during the morning, and in the afternoon I used the library to work on research projects and to collect information for future articles in this series.

The CHS library, located at One Elizabeth Street, Hartford, CT 06105-2292, on the Hartford-West Hartford town line, is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays and is closed Sundays, Mondays, and major holidays. The non-member daily admission fee is \$6.00 (\$3.00 for seniors age 60 and over). Ample on-site parking is available. The reading room is set up for the convenience of genealogists and historians. From previous visits, I knew I would find a knowledgeable and helpful library staff. For details and directions consult the CHS [website](#) or telephone the library at (860) 236-5621.

Many of the library’s 100,000 books and 3 million manuscripts would be of interest to genealogists. In addition to family histories and compilations of vital and other records, researchers will find local, county, and state histories. Social histories are also available to provide background information about the places where ancestors lived. The majority of books and manuscripts are housed in closed stacks. They can be located in card catalogs and called for use in the reading room. Waiting time for materials called from the stacks is minimal. CHS also houses collections of microfilm and microfiche, as well as CD-ROMs.

While you are at the library, allow time to visit the CHS museum, which has special and permanent exhibits featuring outstanding examples of furniture, costumes, textiles, paintings, decorative arts, toys, and tools from many eras, as well as exhibits about life in twentieth-century Connecticut.

You can also visit CHS online. CHS has recently developed a new, easy-to-use [website](#) that provides extensive information about the library and museum. The [Online Exhibits](#) page may be of interest to genealogists. Exhibits include “Connecticut in 1836,” featuring sketches of local buildings and views by John Warner Barber; “Hartford in the 1850s,” featuring drawings, prints, and paintings by Joseph Ropes; and “Civil War Treasures.” [Connecticut History Online](#), a collaborative website, provides online access to nearly 15,000 historic images from the archives of CHS, Mystic Seaport, and the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center at the University of Connecticut. Images are enhanced by brief historical commentaries. You might find historic drawings, prints, or photographs of places your ancestors frequented. Examples include town greens, factories, churches, and bird’s-eye views of towns. Additional images will be added in the future.

## Can’t Travel to Hartford?

If you are unable to visit the library and you do not use the Internet, consider becoming a member of CHS. (Consider

becoming a member even if you can!) The annual membership fee is \$25.00 for students, individuals living outside Connecticut, and anyone age 65 or over. In-state individual memberships are \$30.00.

CHS members may borrow for one month up to three volumes from the Society's Loan Collection of 1,000 genealogies and town histories (this privilege also applies to members of the Society of Mayflower Descendants in Connecticut). The fee is \$5 per volume plus return postage. A [catalog of the collection](#) and information about borrowing books is available on the CHS website or you can contact the [CHS Loan Coordinator](#).

CHS volunteers provide a research service for genealogists with Connecticut ancestors. They will search CHS library sources for information about specific individuals. The fee per inquiry is \$15 for members and \$25 for non-members, plus photocopy and service charges. To obtain details and forms contact Judith Ellen Johnson by regular mail at the library address listed above or by [email](#).

The large CHS [photographic collection](#) might include a photo of one of your ancestors. Nancy Finlay, Curator of Graphics, will search the collections for images of specific individuals. She will respond to telephone calls directed to (860) 236-5621, ext. 236 or to inquiries via [email](#) or regular mail. You may also contact her to schedule an appointment between 1:00-5:00 p.m., Mondays through Fridays.

### **Genealogy Collections for New England**

Although Connecticut is the principal focus for CHS collections, other New England states as well as New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio are included. You will find the following valuable resources:

#### **Bound volumes**

- Printed genealogies (oversize genealogies are shelved separately from regular size books)
- Nineteenth and twentieth-century Connecticut town and city directories (incomplete run)
- Local, county, and state histories
- Vital records
- Cemetery records
- Church records, including the manuscript collection of the Connecticut Society of Colonial Dames, which consists of 111 bound volumes of transcribed church records dating from 1638 to 1900. The Society's members collected these records from 106 (primarily Congregational) parishes.

#### **Microfilm**

- Barbour Index of Connecticut Vital Records to 1850
- Charles R. Hale Collection of Connecticut Headstone Inscriptions and Death Notices to 1934
- Connecticut censuses from 1790 to 1920
- Corbin Collection for Western Massachusetts and part of Connecticut
- Torrey's Notes for *New England Marriages Prior to 1700*
- Connecticut newspapers (including the *Hartford Courant*) from 1764 to the present.

#### **Microfiche**

- Holbrook Collection of Massachusetts Vital Records (mainly Western Massachusetts)

- 1988 International Genealogical Index for U.S. and Canada
- *Boston Transcript* genealogy columns
- *Hartford Times* genealogy columns and index
- *The Connecticut Historical Society Collections*, Vols. 1-31

## Reference Materials

- Published passenger and immigration lists
- Military lists
- Biographical dictionaries
- Hereditary registers
- Genealogical indices and bibliographies
- Library catalogs
- Guides for ethnic research
- Census indices for New England, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, 1790-1850
- American Genealogical-Biographical Index (AGBI)

## Electronic Resources

- Torrey's *New England Marriages* CD-ROM
- 1880 U.S. Census CD-ROM (LDS)

## Historical Manuscript Collections

Historical and genealogical manuscripts comprise the most outstanding and unique aspect of the CHS library collections. Manuscripts date from the early 1700s to the present. Collections include family and business papers, collections relating to ethnic and racial communities in Connecticut, and information about occupations of Connecticut residents. Many of the collections have finding aids.

The historical manuscript collections, accessed through the card catalog, can be helpful to genealogists by providing information concerning historical events that affected the lives of ancestors as well as about occupations and the ways of life in different times and places.

## Historical manuscript collections of possible interest to genealogists:

- Mathew Grant's "Record of the founders and early inhabitants of Windsor, 1639-1681."
- Connecticut Tax Assessment Lists of 1797 and 1798 (by occupation) for about 102 Connecticut towns.

- Direct tax lists (1798, 1814-16) for dwelling houses and land and slaves between the ages of twelve and fifty. These lists cover sixty-three Connecticut towns in six counties. Fairfield and Litchfield counties are missing.
- Account books from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that contain information on businesses and various details about individuals. Some books contain genealogical notations.
- Diaries of Connecticut residents that include descriptions as well as personal information about local events and births, marriages, and deaths.
- Autograph books of Connecticut residents.
- Bible records for Connecticut families.
- Membership applications for the Connecticut Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution with documentation of vital events. (Documentation on early applications may be weak.)
- Scrapbooks that may contain genealogical information. For example, Mary Felt Morris collected social and obituary notices from 1877 to 1924 that she compiled into fifty-two scrapbooks of social notices and 131 volumes of obituaries, including follow-up articles.
- Newton Case Brainard (1880-1964) Collection that contains research notes on Connecticut clockmakers, cabinetmakers, inventors, printers, and silversmiths.
- Hartford Widows' Homes records (1860-1928) that include applications for admissions with detailed information on individuals.
- National Popular Educational Board Collection (1845-55) that consists of letters, autobiographical information, and religious statements from young New England women who were trained as teachers in Hartford and sent to teach at schools in the west.
- The Primus Family Collection (1854-1893) contains papers of African-Americans describing their lives in Hartford and elsewhere.

### **Genealogical Manuscript Collections**

The Genealogical Manuscript Collections, also accessed through the card catalog, includes compilations prepared by professional and amateur genealogists. While the quality varies, the collection includes some excellent, fully documented genealogies, filed by family surname or town. In addition to family histories, there are data sheets and copies or abstracts of bible, vital, church, land, and probate records. In some cases the sources of the information may be difficult to determine. In all cases, information should be verified in other sources. Surnames with sizeable collections include Barnes, Brown, Durant, Gillette, Higgins, Kibbe, Kinney, Meacham, Ogden, Parmelee, Royce, Smith, Sykes, Tillinghast, Tinker, Tuller, Waterman, and Whiteelsey.

Several genealogical manuscript collections merit description:

- The D.W. Patterson Collection includes 2,200 books and pamphlets; transcriptions of church, cemetery, and vital records; and notes on specific families. Compilations for specific areas include Tioga County, New York, families; Ridgefield, Connecticut area families; and East Haddam, Connecticut families.
- The William L. Weaver Collection includes manuscript genealogies of 144 families of ancient Windham, Connecticut.
- The Julius Gay Collection includes abstracts of vital records, cemetery inscriptions, and church, bible, and

probate records pertaining primarily to Farmington families. The collection also contains well-documented histories of area families.

- The Erastus Ely Case Collection includes family sheets tracing the descendants of John Case of Simsbury. Sources are indicated on most sheets.
- The Charles L.N. Camp Collection includes genealogical notes on approximately 1,500 families with documentation for many families, primarily from secondary sources.
- The Mrs. Edna Minor Rogers Collection includes carefully documented studies of the Edgerton, Rogers, Stevens, and Welch families, as well as research notes on many New London County families.
- The Lucius Barnes Barbour Collections include abstracts of vital records, cemetery inscriptions, bible records, indexed Hartford probate abstracts from 1750-1800, and group sheets of eastern Connecticut families. In addition, the collection includes a lengthy study Barbour prepared on his own ancestry.
- The Donald Lines Jacobus Collection includes his pedigrees of New Haven families; his research notes, client files, and family manuscripts; and his six-volume study of the descendants of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain.
- The Connecticut Towns Collection contains documents from most Connecticut towns. While not complete, town records may include abstracts of cemetery inscriptions, probate records, vital records, church records, land records, town meeting minutes, and abstracts of newspaper marriage and death notices.

### **Maps and Atlases**

Maps and atlases are useful resources for genealogists. Exactly where is that town located? Did its name change? Did its borders change or did state boundaries change? (Connecticut borders with adjoining states changed several times.)

Regional maps showing topographical features can help explain migration patterns while local and state maps from different time periods can show shifting borders. Local maps and atlases can pinpoint exactly where ancestors lived. The names of residents are often noted on manuscript maps, as well as on some old atlases. There's a good chance that CHS has a map or atlas of interest in its extensive collection.

Maps and atlases at CHS include:

- New England, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio (good for showing migration patterns)
- Maps published before 1850
- Government topographical maps
- Manuscript maps of towns (historical manuscripts)
- Beers Atlases for most Connecticut towns, 1860s-1880s
- Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of larger Connecticut town and cities from 1880-twentieth century (limited in number)
- Aerial views from 1934, 1951, 1965, and 1970

### **Newspapers**

The *Hartford Courant* and *Hartford Times* from 1949 to 1976 are available on microfilm. (Earlier issues of the *Times* are available in hard copy.) The library collection also includes issues of early newspapers from other Connecticut towns. Some of these issues are unique and can be found only at CHS. Anyone who has used old local newspapers for research knows they are often more personal than large city newspapers. Although information in birth, marriage, and

death notices may be minimal, columns about neighborhoods provide interesting details about daily lives. Featured articles often describe in considerable detail such events as graduations, reunions, accidents, political rallies, meetings of local organizations, and other local gatherings.

## **Other Collections of Interest to Genealogists**

### **1930s WPA Historic House Survey**

During the 1930s the Works Progress Administration (WPA) undertook a little-known statewide census of old and distinctive buildings in Connecticut, similar to the statewide survey of historic buildings sponsored by the Connecticut Historical Commission during the late 1970s. The WPA survey focused on structures built prior to about 1850. Arranged by town, the survey is reasonably complete. Each building is described in detail on one page, and the description is accompanied in most cases by a photograph.

### **Military Records**

Military collections are available for the French and Indian War, the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. The most extensive of these is the Connecticut American Revolution Collection, which includes journals, diaries, and letters of participants. The Civil War Collection includes broadsides, maps, letters, and photographs. Some finding aids for the Civil War Collection are available at the CHS website.

### **Special Connecticut Collections**

Depending on where your Connecticut ancestors lived and what they did, you might find information of interest in one of the small, specialized collections at CHS. For example, if you had a Connecticut minister in your family, one or more of his sermons might be in the extensive sermon collection. If an ancestor went to Yale, consult the collection of Yale materials. Or if an ancestor attended a private school in Connecticut, you might find a school history or catalog. Did you have a Connecticut author in your family? If so, consult the collection of works by and about Connecticut writers. If your ancestor was a Connecticut printer, some of his work may be included in the special collection of Connecticut imprints. Was your Connecticut ancestor a noted person? Perhaps a biography is included in the extensive collection of biographies of Connecticut people. You may find a late eighteenth or nineteenth-century trade catalog or the business records for the Connecticut company for which an ancestor once worked.

Do you want to know what the weather was like way back then? An old Connecticut almanac from the CHS almanac collection should answer your questions.

### **CHS Museum Collections**

While at CHS, check to determine if their collections include a portrait of your ancestor. Genealogical information about the subject and his or her family usually accompany portraits in the CHS collection. Similar genealogical information is associated with museum collections of furniture, furnishings, textiles, costumes, and samplers.

### **British Records**

CHS has a surprisingly large collection of British materials. While you are there you might want to look in their collection of bound English parish registers and probate records or their collection of Victorian histories.

So much information and so little time! Plan your trip in advance to take advantage of every research opportunity CHS offers.

Special thanks go to CHS Genealogist Judith Ellen Johnson for her time and effort in providing information and editorial comments.