

Research in Connecticut Towns: Part I: Records Kept in Connecticut Town Halls

By Joyce S. Pendery, CG

As a new columnist, I wish to introduce myself, call your attention to the outstanding columns on this site written by my predecessor Barbara Jean Mathews, C.G., and indicate some of the Connecticut resources I will cover in this and future columns. Although I have yet to discover my first Connecticut ancestor, I was involved in historical and genealogical research in Connecticut for fifteen of the twenty-one years I lived there before moving to Massachusetts in 1991. I continue my interest in Connecticut history and genealogy.

Future topics will include records at the [Connecticut State Library](#) and the [Connecticut Historical Society](#) in Hartford, lesser-known Connecticut libraries with outstanding genealogical collections, genealogical societies in Connecticut, several leading Connecticut genealogists and their work, and special publications of interest to Connecticut researchers. Your suggestions for future topics are welcome.

Visiting Town Halls

Although many Connecticut records have been microfilmed and are widely available, many researchers like to visit town halls where they can do "hands-on" research from original records or first-generation copies of those records. Researchers planning such a visit may wonder what they will find and whether it will be worthwhile.

Much ink has been spilled over how to get the most out of visiting a town hall. If you plan your research in advance, allow enough time for careful and thorough research, and use common sense, your visit can be rewarding. Offices of town clerks and registrars of vital records, as well as probate offices, may be open to the public during limited hours. In small towns, the town clerk may, in fact, hold more than one town position. [Call](#) before visiting these offices for more information.

When planning your trip, determine when the town of interest was founded. Records there will begin at that date, and earlier records will be found in the parent town. This information can be found in Betty Jean Morrison's *Connecting to Connecticut* (Glastonbury, 1995) and in Marcia D. Melnyk's *Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research* (Boston, NEHGS, 1999 and 2001). For example, vital records for the town of Cromwell begin in 1851, but earlier Cromwell records are found in Middletown. Until the early 1800s New Canaan and Darien were part of Stamford, where their early records will be found.

Town Clerks and Registrars of Vital Records

Town clerks have always been responsible for recording information pertaining to Connecticut's 169 towns, including birth, marriage, and death records. Vital records in Connecticut have never been kept on the county level. As towns grew, that work was sometimes reassigned to registrars of vital statistics, whose offices may not be in the town or city hall. Among the towns with separate registrars of vital statistics are Bridgeport, Greenwich, Hartford, Middletown, New Haven, and Waterbury.

Town clerks, registrars, and other town officials fit requests of genealogists into busy schedules, so be patient and courteous to personnel and other researchers in the offices. Present your driver's license or other identification and explain the reason for your visit. Some town halls have open stacks, while in others clerks bring out requested volumes, perhaps one at a time. If you follow all the procedures and ask if there are other records of possible interest, you may be rewarded with an opportunity to see special records that are not on the open shelves. One Connecticut town clerk, who used to have a "goodie cabinet" where she stored old records under lock and key, could sometimes be persuaded to bring them out. Another clerk in a small Connecticut town who was helping me find information about a certain family brought out an early nineteenth century handwritten compilation of information about town residents of that era.

Vital Records

Town halls or bureaus of vital statistics in Connecticut towns and cities are the only places where you will find all the vital records of a town, dating from its founding to the present.

The majority of vital records up to about 1850 have been included in the Barbour Collection of vital records or in

separate town volumes. Many have been microfilmed and are available at the [NEHGS Research Library](#), the [Connecticut Historical Society](#), the [Connecticut State Library](#), or through the various [Family History Centers](#). While generally accurate and complete, these compilations are derivative sources, and genealogists often prefer to examine the original records kept by town clerks. Even then, some records may be missed or omitted. In a recent article in *Connecticut Ancestry*, "Darien Vital Records, Book 1: Another Barbour Omission," Harlan R. Jessup discusses vital record keeping in Darien after its separation from Stamford in 1820. For some time, the new Darien town clerk used the same volume for recording vital and tax records. Because that volume was eventually filed with tax records, agents collecting vital records for the Barbour compilation failed to find the book and omitted early vital records for about sixteen Darien families.

Connecticut vital records from about 1850 to 1897 are available from town clerks or registrars, on microfilm at the Connecticut State Library, or through the FHL. Vital records from July 1897 to the present are kept by town clerks or registrars, who send copies to the Department of Public Health in Hartford. The vital records office is currently closed for microfilming of its holdings. In Connecticut, access to birth records for the last 100 years is restricted to the actual person or a close family member, public officials, attorneys, persons authorized by court order, or members of genealogical societies authorized to do business in Connecticut. You will need to present identification and show your credentials to see these records or obtain copies.

For information on ordering vital records by mail, consult Barbara Mathews' [earlier column](#) on Connecticut vital records or read the [general guidelines](#) online. You may also find information about obtaining vital records from specific towns at [this site](#).

Earmarks

Beginning in the 1640s and continuing through the mid-nineteenth century, residents of Connecticut towns were required to register the earmark or brand they used to identify their cattle and swine. Town clerks recorded descriptions and sometimes included drawings of these marks along with other town records. In early volumes, earmark registrations were often interspersed with vital records and town meeting minutes. In later volumes they were usually grouped on special pages in town record volumes.

Earmarks are an overlooked and important source of genealogical information. They indicate that the registrant was resident in a certain town at a certain date. They may state family relationships, such as the following Stamford, Connecticut, earmark, entered into town records on September 4, 1790: "Catherine Bishop enteres for her Son Isaac Bishop's ear mark the same that was formerly entred to his Grand Father Isaac Bishop decd., viz. a crop on the end of the near ear, and two slits in the end of the off ear." Some earmarks were transferred during a registrant's lifetime, proving that both individuals were living in the town at that date. Again from Stamford Town Records, February 1, 1792: "Joseph Stevens junr. enters for his ear mark the same that was formerly entred to Nathaniel Hoyt & by his permission as he saith, viz., a crop on the end of the near ear and a hole in the same."

Town Meeting Minutes

Town clerks sometimes recorded minutes of town meetings in the same volumes as vital and land records. In some Connecticut towns, these early volumes no longer exist; elsewhere you may find originals or early copies. Microfilmed copies of original or transcribed town meeting minutes are available for some towns.

Each town held an annual meeting of freemen or property owners and additional meetings took place during the year, as needed to transact town business. Elections of town officials were held at annual meetings. Reading town meeting minutes is a good way to learn about the history of your ancestor's town and to flesh out the skeletons of (male) ancestors who actively participated in town government. One of your ancestors may have served as a selectman, grand juryman, surveyor of highways, sealer of weights and measures, brander of horses, or pound keeper. When someone fell upon hard times, they might be "warned out" of town or assigned to a townsman as a boarder. In Cornwall in December 1774: "Daniel Steward agreed to keep Abiel Dudley one year next ensuing for L6-15s-0 lawful money and keep his clothes in good repair..." For several years, responsibility for the care of Abiel Dudley was passed around to the lowest bidder. Town meeting minutes also include discussions on schools, taxes, smallpox inoculations, bounties for killing rattlesnakes, foxes, and wildcats, annexations, Sabbath Day houses and meeting house pews, construction of highways and bridges, liquor licensing, and other topics of local concern.

Land Records and Town Maps

While some Connecticut deeds have been microfilmed, visiting a town hall enables the researcher to see every deed of interest. Since the founding of their towns, Connecticut town clerks have been responsible for keeping land records that include deeds, mortgages, attachments, liens, tax liens, judgments, releases, conveyances, and grantor-grantee indexes to those records. Maps of towns and subdivisions, surveys, and planning and zoning records may also be found in town clerk offices.

Deeds are a source of information that no family historian should overlook. Information about family relationships included in deeds has solved many genealogical problems. Other important genealogical information found in deeds may include places of residence of both grantor and grantee and occupations or titles. Relationships may be stated as well as the names of earlier owners of the same parcel of land, often family members. Since indexes to land records include only the names of grantors and grantees, studying deeds is essential for ferreting out important information. For more about land records, consult Patricia Hatcher's article [Land Records: An Under-Appreciated Genealogical Resource](#).

One of my favorite projects that used information from land records is *Genealogical References in Stamford, Connecticut. Land Records, Volumes A-S, 1666-1800+* (Stamford, Connecticut Ancestry Society, 1999), available as both a book and CD-ROM. While abstracting early Stamford deeds, Edith Wicks noted and later prepared a separate index of all genealogical references in those deeds. Under entries for the surname "Allen," for example, one finds the names of Eunice Allen and her deceased husband John, originally of Stamford and later of Mamaketing, Ulster Co., New York. Also listed are the names of their children, Lydia, Reuben, and Seymour of Ulster Co., and Trowbridge, who had moved to Irish Settlement, Northampton Co., Penn.

Other Records Kept by Town Clerks

- Voter registration records: Town clerks keep current voter registration lists, and some town clerks save old voter registration books. They might be in the town hall basement or attic or in out-of-the way storage rooms. In Stamford, for example, the town clerk still has the separate registration books for men and women used after 1893 when, in Connecticut, women were granted the right to vote in local school elections.
- Election and absentee ballot information
- Veterans' Records: Town clerks keep on file limited military records of veterans who apply for tax exemptions or for patients in veterans' hospitals who require assistance.
- Trade name registrations
- Notary Public applications, filings, and certifications

Probate District Court Offices

Probate Records

For an historic overview of probate record keeping in Connecticut, consult Barbara Jean Mathews' [column](#) on probate records previously published in this series.

Connecticut's probate records are kept in 131 probate district court offices, not quite one district office for each of Connecticut's 169 towns. Over the years there have been many changes in district boundaries, so consult *Connecting to Connecticut* or *Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research* to determine where you should look for probate records that include the years of interest to you.

Probate district courts handle estate settlements of deceased town residents, guardianships for minors and jurisdiction over their trusts, legal matters pertaining to adoptions, and powers of attorney for adults judged incompetent. Probate offices in town halls maintain indexes to probate records of their district. Most Connecticut towns sent their probate packets of original documents through about 1880 to Hartford, so most original probate records for the early years are available only at the Connecticut State Library or on microfilm. Towns maintain an index of records sent to Hartford. However, most town probate district offices have probate court record books containing handwritten copies of the original records, and these volumes are available for research. As Barbara Mathews points out, information in original probate packets and in probate court record books may vary, so both should be consulted.

Most twentieth century probate packets of original documents as well as record books with copies of those documents will be found in probate district offices.

Assessor's Records

Grant lists or property valuations for tax purposes are kept in assessor's offices in town halls. Although information for several recent years may be found there, historic tax lists may be in town archives, historical societies, or at the Connecticut State Library.

Happy hunting in town halls. Next time we will discuss what you can find in Hartford at the Connecticut State Library and the Connecticut Historical Society.