

Learn About Your Ancestors Through Local History

By Maureen A. Taylor

Sometimes the key to finding information about your ancestors is through local history. The material you gather studying the development of geographic areas can not only lead you to new data, but also help you visualize the world in which they lived. All these facts help you to understand them as people rather than just names and dates. You can start with general histories of Massachusetts to read about immigration patterns or work from specific details such as place names. In either case it's a good idea to begin by searching card catalogs, online bookstores, and websites for available resources. Then develop a bibliography of printed materials that can help you fill in the blanks on your family tree.

Here are some of my favorite printed local history sources to help you get started. Watch for additional material on these resources in future columns.

Gazetteers

You've just discovered from a document that your family once lived in an area you never heard of. One of the best ways to find out more about that location is to consult a gazetteer. Contemporary gazetteers will tell you where a place is, but nineteenth century volumes let you peek into the past. These dictionaries of place names contain an amazing amount of useful data. Suppose your ancestor lived in Farleyville, Massachusetts. Well, in the 1890 *A Gazetteer of the State of Massachusetts* by Rev. Elias Nason and George J. Varney you'll discover Farleyville is actually a village in the town of Wendell. By turning to the appropriate page you will locate a description of Wendell that includes the number of inhabitants (509), its location, and a list of all the villages within the town. The fact that it is on the Fitchburg Railroad line tells you how people and goods were transported. Economic data, such as the types of industries active in the area, might enlighten you about what they did here, and you can use that information to [track down employment records](#). The notation that there were both Congregational and Baptist churches can lead you to church records. Gazetteers for Massachusetts are available at NEHGS and at other repositories, so start browsing online card catalogs for available copies.

Travel Guides

The use of travel guides will allow you to build on what you've learned in your study of gazetteers. In the nineteenth century, Moses King published a series of guidebooks for major cities. His *King's Hand-Book of Boston*, first printed in 1878, is like taking a walk in the past. Information about roadways, buildings, charitable organizations, clubs, churches, and schools is given, sometimes accompanied by an illustration. You can use the facts to make your family story more interesting or to track down additional records for places no longer in existence. In the twentieth century, auto clubs printed driving guides to non-metropolitan areas that included tourist information. *Massachusetts: A Guide to Its Places and People* (Houghton Mifflin, 1937), compiled by the Federal Writers Project of Works Progress Administration, mentioned local history and presented a modified tour of towns. Before you know it you will want to use these guides to take a trip in time and add historical details to your genealogy.

County and Town Histories

In the nineteenth century, publishers printed local histories that included biographies and even genealogies of families who contributed to the cost of publication. These "mug" books, so called because a picture of the subject often accompanied their biography, are fun to look at. The basic facts of local history appear but because of their narrow focus these county and town histories often include details broader histories leave out. The biographies are meant to flatter contributors so all details should be researched and verified. Not all early families have bragging rights to having immigrated with John Winthrop. An earlier column, "[County Resources in Massachusetts](#)," covered printed histories and where to find them. Consult P. William Filby's *A Bibliography of American County Histories* (1985) or John Haskell's comprehensive *Massachusetts: A Bibliography of Its History* (1976) for titles and locations. The Committee for a New England Bibliography periodically updates Haskell's work and you can search the latest volume (nine) [online](#). The NEHGS research and circulating libraries also have a wonderful collection of these books.

It is not enough to follow the written word about your ancestor's town. Take time to look at pictures and imagine what life was like. [The Arcadia Publishing Company](#) publishes illustrated town histories in their Images of America series. Books exist for many Massachusetts towns. Arcadia is always looking for knowledgeable people to work with them to publish a local history. If there isn't a volume on your town, propose the idea to them and make it happen. Contact information is available on their website. You can purchase these books through online booksellers or borrow them from a library.

City Directories

City directories can help you create a year-by-year timeline for your ancestors. The first city directory was printed in Boston in 1789, and other areas eventually followed suit. The NEHGS Research Library has a complete collection of Boston directories on microfiche on the 4th floor. Standard listings include names, residence, occupation, and sometimes the place of employment. While these volumes are useful to track an ancestor's movements during their lifetime, the full research potential only becomes known if you look in the front and back of the book. This is where you will find maps, street names, business directories, advertisements, and lists of clubs, companies, and churches. Discover the name of the minister at the church where your ancestor married or verify when a photographer was in business. There are so many ways to use a city directory that this topic requires a column all of its own.

Newspapers

Many researchers use newspapers to search for birth, marriage, and death notices without scanning the news for important events. Reading newspapers can uncover your great grandfather's reasons for moving to a particular area. His migration might have been triggered by a land company's notice placed in the paper or the opening of a new factory. If you truly want to get a sense of what your ancestor's lives were like then take some time to read the news. The Boston Public Library has a large collection of newspapers published in Massachusetts. One of the first things that new immigrant groups did when they settled in a particular area was print a newspaper. A list of ethnic papers appears on <http://www.bostonfamilyhistory.net/>, and a search of the [Boston Public Library catalog](#) will result in many of these newspapers as well.

Background research can help you find solutions to brick walls and let you discover the "real" person behind the name and date on your pedigree chart. Consult "[Often-Overlooked Repositories in Massachusetts](#)" to expand your search for printed material beyond Boston. Public libraries and local historical societies are also good hunting places for new material, printed or otherwise. Two helpful guides are Elizabeth Petty Bentley's *Genealogist's Address Book* (GPC, 1998) and Marcia Melnyk's *Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research, Fourth Edition* (NEHGS, reprint 2001). The five resources covered in this article gives you a head start to put together the pieces and put more branches on your family tree.