

Family History Research in Massachusetts

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There are many genealogical resources available for Massachusetts research. Even before their arrival, the Pilgrims and Puritans began to create records that family historians find fascinating. In fact, there may be more compiled genealogies per capita for our state than for any other. Yet there are still gaps to be bridged and puzzles to be solved, particularly in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, for which comparatively few original records have been published.

Anyone approaching research in a new state of the Union would do well to get some background on that particular state's genealogical resources. So in this first column I will list some helpful materials and comment on each. In future columns we will treat individual topics, beginning with vital records.

1. *Research Outline: Massachusetts* (2nd ed., Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1997). Not exactly entertaining reading, this booklet is chock full of very useful information, bibliography, and addresses, arranged by the same topics used in the Family History Library Catalog. It is on the LDS CD-ROM called Source Guide. See the [FamilySearch](#) website to print it out. It's also available in a hard copy at the Family History Library and Family History Centers. You can also order it from the Church Distribution Center at 1-800-537-5950 or 5971 for \$.50 plus tax. Ask for item #31058.
2. *Genealogical Research in New England*, edited by Ralph J. Crandall (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1984). There are articles on all six New England states, including Edward W. Hanson and Homer Vincent Rutherford's "Genealogical Research in Massachusetts: A Survey and Bibliographical Guide," which was originally published in the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 135 (1981): 163–98. The authors treat various topics and provide detailed information about counties and towns. This article also has a select bibliography of town histories and compiled genealogies. If you do much New England research, this is worth owning. Unfortunately, it is currently out of print.
3. *Ancestry's Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 1992). The Massachusetts chapter, by Alice Eichholz, provides some historical background, then topic by topic gives detail on various sources, including some bibliography and addresses of repositories. There is also a handy list of counties, with information about their formation and the location of probate and deeds. A list of towns shows when they were formed, the parent town(s) and location of land records. Available through many commercial genealogy sources, e.g., this site, as a book (\$49.95) and on CD-ROM as Ancestry Reference Library, which includes several other books as well (\$69.95). The prices from [Ancestry.com](#) are a bit lower.
4. *Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research*, 4th ed., by Marcia D. Melnyk (Boston: NEHGS, 1999). A new edition of this well-used resource! Each state section begins with a map showing counties and towns and a list of towns with some basic information on each. For Massachusetts it provides the date established, parent town, county, and a code that identifies where one can find the vital records. Various sections give the nitty-gritty detail of where to find records, vital, census, probate, land, cemetery, church, military, and immigration and naturalization records. There is also information on libraries, including LDS Family History Centers, and societies. Finally there is a very valuable but brief bibliography. This book is indispensable if you are working on site in New England.
5. William Francis Galvin [Secretary of the Commonwealth], *Historical Data Relating to Counties, Cities and Towns in Massachusetts* (Boston, NEHGS, 1997). This is a new edition of the 1966 publication. Town by town, it gives complete detail on their formation and border changes. Part 3 of the earlier edition, "Extinct Places," has been incorporated into the main text, and a new index refers the reader to a new category under each town called "Section/Village Names." There is statewide map at the beginning; small maps of each county are given at the end. This book is almost essential to own and is available from NEHGS for \$9.
6. *Handy Book for Genealogists*, 8th ed. (Logan, Utah: Everton Publishers, 1991). Published in many editions, this book has sections on each state. After some basic information on a few topics, there is a list of "Genealogical Archives, Libraries, and Societies." This is followed by information on census records and mortality schedules, a small bibliography and finally county data, the date created, an abbreviated summary of records available, the

address and phone number of the courthouse and a list of towns organized before 1800. A map section shows counties and major rivers. It is available from [Everton](#) for \$33.45.

7. George K. Schweitzer, *Massachusetts Genealogical Research* (1990) provides much of the same information in the sources cited above but in a rather awkward format. It has an opening chapter with background information, a long second chapter on types of records with all sorts of bibliographical suggestions. The final section gives information on various records for each town, probably too abbreviated to be definitive but still helpful. This is available from Ancestry at \$10.75.
8. Winifred Lovering Holman, "Massachusetts," in *Genealogical Research Methods and Sources*, Milton Rubincam, ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Society of Genealogists, 1960), 113–23. While this is a bit dated and out of print, it is probably the most readable of all these pieces. A good place to begin. You'll probably need to find it in a library or a used bookstore.
9. Norman Edgar Wright, *Genealogy in America: Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Maine* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1968). This book too is a bit dated, but is the most extensive treatment of Massachusetts sources. There's a good deal of history, basic information on counties and towns, a list of local historical societies and a heavy emphasis on land records and probate. Having devoured this as one of my first learning experiences thirty years ago, it is probably what impelled me to become such a bug on solving puzzles by using land records.
10. Last but not least, take a look at these Massachusetts [resources](#). You will definitely want to bookmark this!

There are other similar materials. See the bibliography at the end of the Massachusetts section of the *Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research*. A search of library catalogs will turn them up. Next month we'll get into some of the details about searching for vital records.