

# Rhode Island Biographical Resources

By Maureen A. Taylor

After you've verified the basic life dates and facts of your Rhode Island ancestor's life using vital records, censuses, city directories, and probate records, you may discover more about their lives by searching biographical sources. It's about finding the person behind the name and dates. Here are some tips and sources to check when filling in the details of their everyday lives.

- Begin by looking at your genealogical research for information relating to your ancestor's occupations and interests. Census records will contain their occupation while city directories occasionally list the name of their employer. Obituaries often mention groups to which the deceased belonged.
- Consult the organizational listings in the back of city directories to see if there are societies such as musical groups or fraternal organizations for specific ethnicities. Search for related material by using an online search engine such as Google.com then try the card catalog at the Rhode Island Historical Society and the [Library of Congress online catalog](#).
- Before you start searching for biographical material, take a short cut by looking in J. Carlyle Parker's *Rhode Island Biographical and Genealogical Sketch Index* (Marietta Publishing Co., 1991). He's compiled entries from 214 books on Rhode Island history.
- Look for accounts of both the men and women in your family. Generations of Rhode Island women were involved in social and political causes. Papers of those groups are in several different repositories such as the Rhode Island Historical Society, [Rhode Island College](#), and the [University of Rhode Island](#).

## Sources to Consider

Biographical data can appear in a wide variety of published and unpublished documents. Tracking down the sketches and stories requires searching books, magazines, and manuscripts generated by both individuals and organizations. Listed below is a sampling of publications to provide an overview of the diversity of material available on Rhode Islanders. In addition to using the relevant items on that list, don't overlook the following:

### Manuscripts

- Consult the [National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections online](#) to find material in special collections throughout the United States.
- The reorganization of patron services at the Rhode Island Historical Society means that card catalogs and finding aids for their manuscript collections are now accessible in the general reading room. Contact them for information on how to have someone search those materials. Their [website](#) has a general list of materials.

### Magazines and Journals

- Genealogical and historical publications such as *Newport History* (Newport Historical Society), *Rhode Island Roots* ([Rhode Island Genealogical Society](#)), and *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register* are good sources of biographical sketches.
- Organizations and businesses often published their own journals such as the *Yardarm*, a magazine published by the Kaiser Shipyard in Providence, RI, during World War II. Copies of this and similar publications are available at the Rhode Island Historical Society.

### Online Databases

- Check out the [searchable databases](#) for Rhode Island on the NEHGS website. You'll discover a list of the members of the First Baptist Church in Providence as well as the men in the Artillery Company of Newport. Other databases are available for free on [Rootsweb](#) or through subscription at [Ancestry.com](#).

Listed below are resources organized by topic. Coverage varies depending on the publication. Not all of the materials are indexed. Call numbers are included for titles available at the NEHGS Research Library (RL) or the Circulating Library (CL).

## General

*Biographical Cyclopedia of Representative Men of Rhode Island* (Providence: National Biographical Publishing, 1881), F78/B61/1881, RL, CL.

*Biographical Encyclopedia of Connecticut and Rhode Island of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Metropolitan Publishing and Engraving, 1881)

Robert I. Vexler, state editor. *Chronology and Documentary Handbook of the State of Rhode Island* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1979)

Rhode Island School of Design, Museum of Art. *Early Portraits in Rhode Island, 1700-1850; an exhibition to honor the seventy-fifth anniversary of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 8 March-9 April 1967*. (Providence: Rhode Island School of Design, 1967)

Patrick T. Conley and Manuel Gorriaran. *Eminent Rhode Islanders: Biographical Profiles of the Inductees to the Rhode Island Heritage Hall of Fame, 1965-2000* (Rhode Island Publications Society, 2001)

Thomas Williams Bicknell. *The History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*. (New York: The American Historical Society, 1920).

Alfred M. Williams and William F. Blanding, editors. *Men of Progress: biographical sketches and Portraits of Leaders in Business and Professional Life in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*. (Boston: New England Magazine, 1896).

Rhode Island Historical Society. *Necrology*. (Providence, RIHS, 19--)

Representative Men and Old Families of Rhode Island: Genealogical Records and Historical Sketches of Prominent and Representative Citizens and of many of the Old Families. (Chicago: J.H. Beers & Co, 1908), F78/R42/1908, RL, CL.

*Who's Who in Rhode Island* (Providence, R.I.: RPJ, 1990.)

## Town and Local Histories

The majority of town and local histories for Rhode Island communities contain biographical sketches of prominent citizens and early settlers. A good list of publications organized by municipality appears in the Rhode Island volume and subsequent New England updates produced by the Committee for a New England Bibliography. The NEHGS has a fairly good collection as does the Rhode Island Historical Society Library and the Library of Congress. A directory of local history collections in the state appeared in “A [Rhode Island Research Directory](#).” Two examples are:

Richard LeBaron Bowen. *The Providence Oath of Allegiance and Its Signers, 1651-2*. (Providence, 1943).

Wilfred Harold Munro. *The History of Bristol, R.I.: The Story of Mount Hope Lands, from the visit of the Northmen to the Present Time* (Providence: J.A. & R. A. Reid, 1880).

## Occupational

See an earlier article “[Help Wanted: Researching the Employment History of Your Ancestors](#)” for other resources.

Ernest Constant Bowler. *An Album of Attorneys of Rhode Island* (Bethel, Maine: News Publishing Co., 1904), F78/B69/1904, RL only.

Joseph D. Hall. *Biographical History of the Manufacturers and Business Men of Rhode Island, at the opening of the Twentieth Century*. (Providence, RI: J.D. Hall & Co., 1901), RI 80 42 [project entry], RL only.

Charles W. Parsons. *Early Votaries of Natural Science in Rhode Island* in *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections*, vol. 7, F76/R47/v.7/pt.3, RL only.

Ralph S. Mohr. *Governors for Three Hundred Years, 1638-1959*. (Providence: Oxford Press, 1959)

William Harrison Taylor. *Legislative History and Souvenir of Rhode Island 1899 and 1900* (Providence, 1900), RI 41 2 [project entry], RL only. Charles William Parsons. *The Medical School Formerly Existing in Brown University, Its Professors and Graduates* (Providence, RI: S.S. Rider, 1881).

Wilkins Updike. *Memoirs of the Rhode Island Bar* (Boston: Thomas H. Webb & Co., 1842)

*Ships and Shipmasters of Old Providence: A Brief account of some of the famous Merchants, Sea Captains, and Ships.* (Providence: Providence Institution for Savings, 1920)

## **Organizations**

Check city directories for a listing of organizations—fraternal, religious, or business-related—to which your ancestors might have belonged. Then search card catalogs for publications and manuscripts of unpublished minutes of meetings.

Sons of the American Revolution. Rhode Island Society. *Memorials of Compatriots who have Died during the Year.* Annual publication.

*Necrology of the Rhode Island Society for the Encouragement of Domestic Industry, for the year 1874.* (no publisher, 1874).

## **Military**

A more complete list of sources appear in my earlier articles, “ [Rhode Island Soldiers in the Civil War](#),” “[Finding a Revolutionary War Ancestor in Rhode Island](#),” and “[Rhode Island in the War of 1812](#).”

John Russell Bartlett. *Memoirs of Rhode Island Officers who were Engaged in the Service of Their Country During the Great Rebellion of the South* (Providence: S.S. Rider & Brother, 1867), F78/B28/1867, RL, CL.

Rev. Frederick Pyne, *Descendants of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence* (Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, 2004). Includes three CD-ROMs of the actual application papers required by the Society of the Descendants of the Signers.

*Revolutionary Portraits: People, Places and Events From Rhode Island's Historic Past* (Providence: Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, 1976).

## **Newspapers**

Newspaper articles, obituaries, business announcements, and personal notices all may contain mentions of your Rhode Island ancestors. An earlier article, “[All the News Fit to Print: Rhode Island Newspapers](#),” provides an overview of the topic and where to locate copies of specific papers.

## **Schools**

Rhode Island's major colleges and universities maintain archives with biographical material on alumni as well as past issues of newsletters and magazines. Their facilities are open to the public by appointment.

Charles Chapin, *Historical Catalogue of Brown University, 1764-1904* (Providence: Brown University, 1905)

Phi Beta Kappa. *A Century of Scholars: Rhode Island Alpha of Phi Beta Kappa, 1830-1954* William T. Hastings, ed. (Providence, 1955)

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