

Coming Home to New England: Creating a Family History Itinerary

By Maureen A. Taylor

In 1899, New Hampshire Governor Frank West Rollins began a trend. He inaugurated “Old Home Week.” It was a reunion occasion billed to people as “an opportunity to come back to their old homes and meet once more their old friends and schoolmates.”¹ Within a few years Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont and Rhode Island all followed suit. An editorial in the *New England Magazine* explained the importance of the event, “If only a small percentage of New England’s absent natives can be induced to come back and settle down among us again, if merely in the capacity of summer visitors, something will have been accomplished toward counteracting the drain upon our resources that we are now feeling so seriously.”² So many people left New England for other areas of the country that the region suffered economic consequences. Rollins idea was an attempt to reverse that trend. It was successful.

People returned to New England. They came for Old Home Week, summer vacations and because they connected with family history. There are no statistics on how many decided to stay, but those that visited endowed public drinking fountains, public libraries, and left behind tablets and monuments to their ancestors.

Old Home Week was a great idea. While a few towns still honor the event, most have forgotten it ever happened. Why wait until your ancestral hometown resurrects that reunion feeling. Create your own.

My family is from Rhode Island for several generations so if I get homesick I get in my car and drive across the border. It takes less than an hour for me to revisit childhood places and reminisce. I’m lucky. I still live close to the places most of my ancestors called home, but that doesn’t mean their neighborhoods still look the same. To really get a sense of the places they lived, worked and played it’s necessary to create a personalized family history itinerary. It’s not as difficult as you might think. As a genealogist you can put your research skills to work to chart a trip into ancestral New England.

Family History is the Key

Start by making a list of all the places your ancestors lived and when. Those place names probably appear in the genealogical documents you’ve accumulated—court records, census documents, city directories and more. Next organize them by surname (for a family specific trip) or by place name for a more general family history tour. As you probably know the types of records your ancestor created and the information recorded depends on when they lived. You can plan your trip using the following resources:

- Early census records mention the head of household, but by the twentieth century all sorts of data appear on the enumerations including street addresses. Search federal census records online using [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) or [HeritageQuest.com](https://www.heritagequest.com) or use microfilm at libraries like NEHGS and the National Archives.
- City directories list exact street addresses and often occupations allowing you to schedule the street on which your ancestor lived into your itinerary. House numbers and street names are often changed so look carefully at directories to see if there is any information in the front on street renumbering or renaming. Most New England city directories are on microfilm at research facilities across the country including the NEHGS library. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) is in the process of expanding their online directory collection.
- Nineteenth and twentieth century maps like Beers Atlases contain dots signifying houses with surnames beside them. When visiting a town in New Hampshire where family once lived in the early nineteenth century I asked a town historian to help me find their neighborhood. All the houses were gone replaced by a development, but then she showed me a mid-nineteenth century map and there they were. A mere dot, but it meant a lot to get a sense of the area when they lived there. Other nineteenth and twentieth century maps are in electronic format.

Piper Publishing <http://www.piperpublishing.com/> reproduced on CD the late 19th century atlases of Massachusetts counties. Digital Sanborn Maps from 1867-1970 for the New England States are available to members on the New England Ancestors website <http://www.newenglandancestors.org/>. Sanborn Atlases actually color code the buildings so that you can identify construction materials and obtain a general layout of the structure.

- Additional document sources appear in my article, “[Locating Ancestral Homesteads.](#)”

Fodor’s of the Past

Once you’ve plotted out your places to visit on a contemporary map enrich your tour adding sites and scenes relevant to your ancestors. Travel diaries present first person accounts of trips; published guidebooks resemble familiar favorites like Fodor’s while even gazetteers add a few extra bits of information to personalize an itinerary.

- *Diaries and Letters*

Perhaps your ancestor kept a journal of their trip cross country or sent letters home describing it. Check with family to locate documents and turn to the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUMUC) to search for others. You can access a full description of NUMUC on the Library of Congress website <http://www.loc.gov/>.

- *Published Travel Journals*

Instead of inventing an itinerary try following a historic one. For instance, Sarah Kemble Knight left Boston for a five month round trip to New York in 1704. Her diary mentions road conditions and accommodations. You can view it online at [History Matters](#). A list of other nineteenth century travelers books appears on the [Library of Congress website](#).

- *Published Guides*

The American Guide Series published by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930's combine tours and history. They offer a variety of motor and foot itineraries of highlighted sites and short histories of the towns and places. In addition to what you’ll see along the way is interesting trivia and literary references. For instance, in the Rhode Island volume under Newport site 22, (3 Pelham St on the corner of Thames St.) “is a marker indicating the house in front of which David Melville placed gas lights in 1806, the first installation of the kind in the country.”³ These guides are available in public libraries through interlibrary loan or can be purchased through used book dealers. Beverly Rice, CG describes these useful books in “A Look Back in Time: The American Guide Series” in the *Association of Professional Genealogists Quarterly* (APGQ).⁴ Sometimes it’s fun to follow these old tours and see what’s the same and what’s different.

- *Gazetteers*

One of my favorite books is a well-worn copy of Lippincott’s 1884 *Gazetteer of the World* I purchased at a used book sale. Even the littlest post office towns appear in this snapshot of late nineteenth century life. I know it’s not a guidebook but the listings help me imagine the past providing the number of residents to the chief industries. Every year I visit Peru, Vermont a town that figures prominently in my husband’s family. According to Lippincott, Peru, a post-village in Bennington County, Vermont, 30 miles S. of Rutland had a township population of 500.”⁵ It’s not much bigger today.

Visit the Past

Since it isn’t possible to sit in H.G. Well’s time machine and go back to the past in person, the next best thing is visiting a living history museum. A list of sites across the country appear online at <http://www.outdoorhistory.org/>. Coupons for discounts are available through links on the website. Attendance at these sites is causing budget difficulties threatening programming and their existence. Take a day, step away from your computer and experience life as your ancestors lived it. Here’s a list of must see sites in New England.

- **[The Billings Farm & Museum \(Woodstock, Vermont\)](#)**

It's a working dairy farm and a museum of rural farm life in Vermont.

- **Canterbury Shaker Village (Canterbury, New Hampshire)**

The Village which was continuously occupied by Shakers from 1792 to 1992 has 25 original buildings that present two centuries of Shaker life. Visitors can take guided tours, watch craft demonstrations, or participate in hands-on activities.

- **Freedom Trail Foundation (Boston, Massachusetts)**

Follow this 2.5 mile self-directed tour of 16 historic sites by following a painted red line. Tours led by costumed guides are available.

- **Hancock Shaker Village (Pittsfield, Massachusetts)**

Similar to Canterbury Shaker Village, this site has twenty buildings and a working farm with animals.

- **Historic Deerfield (Deerfield, Massachusetts)**

The Old Deerfield National Historic Landmark consists of 14 house museum from the 18th and early 19th century.

- **Lowell National Historical Park (Lowell, Massachusetts)**

Step into the world of 19th century mill life by visiting restored mills and several exhibits.

- **Mystic Seaport (Mystic, Connecticut)**

This living history museum is a nineteenth century maritime village complete with tall ships and a shipyard dedicated to wooden boat building.

- **Plimoth Plantation (Plymouth, Massachusetts)**

Experience life as the Pilgrims lived it through “three major open-air exhibits—the 1627 Pilgrim Village, Hobbamock’s Wampanoag Indian Homesite, and Mayflower II.” Interpreters speak in seventeenth century dialect.

- **Strawberry Banke (Portsmouth, New Hampshire)**

Learn about 300 years of American history in one of country’s oldest continuously occupied neighborhoods with 40 buildings.

- **Old Sturbridge Village (Strubridge, Massachusetts)**

Forty buildings and costumed guides recreate daily life and activities in a rural New England town 1790-1830.

As you create a family history vacation think about the roots of genealogical tourism. “Old Home Week” intended to bring people back to New England to bolster the economy but it also introduced new generations to their parent’s and grandparent’s past creating a new type of trip—one for family history. Follow that example and bring the kids along on your trip to teach them a little history/genealogy. It’ll turn the return to your roots into a modern day family history event.

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<http://www.photodetective.com/>.

¹Editorial. *New England Magazine*, 40 (March 1906), 88-90. ²Ibid. 90.

³Works Progress Administration, *Rhode Island: A Guide to the Smallest State*. American Guide Series (Boston:

Houghton Mifflin, 1937), 223.

⁴Beverly Rice, CG, "A Look Back in Time: The American Guide Series," APGQ (March 2006), 19-24.

⁵*A Complete Pronouncing Gazetteer or Geographical Dictionary of the World* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1884), 1731.