

# A Guide to Genealogical Research in Rhode Island

By Maureen A. Taylor

For a small state, Rhode Island is amazingly diverse — culturally, economically, and politically. In the seventeenth century, religious dissenters like Roger Williams sought refuge from persecution, creating a society that encouraged a variety of religious followers to settle in the area, including Quakers and Huguenots. This independent spirit characterized politics during the American Revolution, when Rhode Islanders declared themselves free of Great Britain in May 1776, two months before the rest of the colonies, and were the last colony to ratify the Constitution and join the Union. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries immigrants from all over the world found employment in the state's manufacturing industry.

Genealogists looking for records will find plenty from the colonial period to the present. Town clerks maintain vital records, probate documents (including adoptions), and land and tax records. While there is material on microfilm, online, and in print in many locations, including the New England Historic Genealogical Society, no Rhode Island researcher should overlook a visit to a town clerk's office. There are unique resources on the town level that are not yet widely available, such as school records.

On the state level, researchers will find court documents (divorces, criminal, and civil cases) and naturalization materials (for state courts) at the Rhode Island Supreme Court Judicial Records Center. Military records for state units since the colonial period are either at the Rhode Island State Archive or the Rhode Island Historical Society. See the chart at the end of this article for where to find types of records.

## Rhode Island research help

- Alice Eichholz, ed., *Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources* rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Ancestry, 2004).
- Charles W. Farnham, *Rhode Island Colonial Records* (World Conference on Records and Genealogical Seminar, Area 1–25; Salt Lake City: Genealogical Society, 1969), reprinted in *Rhode Island History* 29 (1970):36–44.
- Jane Fletcher Fiske, “Genealogical Research in Rhode Island” in *Genealogical Research in New England* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1984).
- Kip Sperry, *Rhode Island Sources for Family Historians and Genealogists* (Logan, Utah: Everton Publishers, 1986).
- Maureen A. Taylor, *Research in Rhode Island!* Research in the States Series, National Genealogical Society, edited by Gary B. Mills and Elizabeth Shown Mills, 2001.

## Helpful hints

- Border conflicts in the colonial period and changing state boundaries can confuse researchers. John Hutchins Cady's *Rhode Island Boundaries, 1636–1936* ([Providence] R.I. Tercentenary Commission, 1936), clarifies those boundary changes. When researching persons who lived in towns bordering either Massachusetts or Connecticut, look for records in those states as well.
- Rhode Island is a small state, but it has more than one hundred post offices and place names. Consult John C. Pease and John M. Niles' *A Gazetteer of the States of Connecticut and Rhode Island* (Hartford: William S. Marsh, 1819) and Henry Gannett's *Geographic Dictionary of Connecticut and Rhode Island* (1894; reprint, Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1978) or the *American Places Dictionary: A Guide to 45,000 Populated Places, Natural Features, and Other Places in the United States* 4 vols. (Detroit, Michigan: Omnigraphics, 1994) when confronted with a place you don't recognize.
- Rhode Island General Assembly Reports from 1800 to 1880 contain petition abstracts of adoptions, name changes, or divorces. See “Name Changes in Rhode Island, 1800–1880,” *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, July 1995. These state reports also include residents of state schools or mental institutions, and inmates at the state prison.

## Colonial

Records from Rhode Island's four original towns — Providence, Warwick, Newport and Portsmouth — are extensive and readily available. Record-keeping began in the 1630s and a law in 1700 mandated what should be kept by town clerks. Town meeting records are available on microfilm from the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, and contain vital and land records, ear marks, licenses, and records on the care of the poor. Many seventeenth-century town documents for Providence, Portsmouth, and Warwick have been published. *The Early Town Records of Providence* by Horatio Rogers et al. (Providence, 1949) includes references to individuals living in other towns, as does John Russell Bartlett's *Records of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (1863–1865; reprint New York, 1968).

During the Colonial period, colonists and the native population co-existed, conducting trade and living in the same area until King Philip's War (1675/1676). At the end of the war, tribal members were separated and given to the settlers who participated in the conflict. Those who fled the area migrated first to New York and later to Brothertown, Wisconsin, where their descendants still reside today.[1] The United States Government established a reservation for the Narragansett tribe that remained in existence until 1881.

In addition to Native Americans enslaved to the colonists, Rhode Island merchants participated in the Triangle trade that brought slaves into the area from Africa and the West Indies. Manumission papers can be found amongst the Quaker records on deposit at the RIHS. Newspaper notices for runaway slaves have been transcribed.[2] Slavery was eliminated by gradual emancipation in 1787.[3]

During the American Revolution, British troops occupied Newport from 1776 to 1779. When they evacuated, a ship carrying Newport's town records sank, an irreparable loss. Settlers of Newport with Tory sympathies fled the island and formed a community called Newport in Nova Scotia.[4] Revolutionary land grants, for those who served in the conflict, encouraged migration to New Hampshire, Vermont, and New York.

## **Major resources**

### ***Vital records***

As early as 1647 the colonial government required all marriage banns to be recorded on the town level, but compliance was probably less than fifty percent. Two published series attempt to complete the missing records from the colonial period to 1850: James Arnold's *Vital Record of Rhode Island* and Alden Beaman's *Rhode Island Vital Records*. [5] The 1853 civil registration requirement of vital records left a two-year gap, and coverage after passage was inconsistent. The RISA has special indexes to vital records — an index to residents who died while out of state from 1900 to 1948 and one to delayed births from 1846 to 1898. RISA also has an index to recorded births from 1800 to 1855 and one to marriages performed by justices of the peace from 1810 to 1866.

Access to birth and marriages records more than 101 years old and death records older than fifty-one years are available at RISA and NEHGS. More recent records can be found at the Office of Vital Records, Rhode Island Department of Health, 3 Capitol Hill, Room 101, Providence, RI 02908-5097. Call 401-222-2811 for current fees and restrictions.

### ***Cemetery records***

An index to the cemetery records compiled by the Rhode Island Cemetery Transcription Project is available online at [www.rootsweb.com/~rigenweb/cemetery](http://www.rootsweb.com/~rigenweb/cemetery) and at [NewEnglandAncestors.org](http://NewEnglandAncestors.org). The complete database is searchable at RIHS. Information in the database is from earlier cemetery transcriptions, as well as the markers themselves. Data is verified by the volunteers working on the project.

### ***Census records***

At least five colonial population lists exist for the eighteenth century — 1730, 1747 (actually a list of freeman), 1774, 1777 and 1782. Originals are at RISA or RIHS and all have been transcribed and published. State censuses were taken at ten-year intervals between 1865 and 1935, although the 1895 returns (except Bristol) are missing. Card indexes exist for 1865 and 1875 while the 1885, 1905, and 1935 censuses are self-indexed alphabetically by town. 1915 and 1925 are arranged by street. There are four known local enumerations for Providence — 1776, 1791, 1825, and 1845 (only

half of the second ward).

All existing federal population census records for Rhode Island are indexed with the exception of 1910. An individual can be located by using city directories in conjunction with the census. Noteworthy is the existence of Special Schedules for Rhode Island at either the Rhode Island State Archive or the Rhode Island Historical Society: agricultural, and mortality schedules exist for 1850 to 1880 and manufacturing for 1850, 1860, and 1880. In the absence of the population schedules for 1890 researchers can refer to the Special Schedules of the Eleventh Census Enumerating Union Veterans and Widows of Union Veterans of the Civil War (1890).

### ***Church records***

A wide variety of religious groups gravitated to Rhode Island because the colony was considered tolerant. In the seventeenth century, Roger Williams brought his group of followers to Providence and founded the first Baptist Church in America; they were followed by the Society of Friends (Quakers), French Huguenots, and Jews.

Both RIHS and NHS include church records in their manuscripts departments. If you can't locate the records for a defunct parish, try contacting either historical society to see if the missing records might be there. RIHS has miscellaneous church records for Protestant churches while NHS has a comprehensive collection of records for Newport's churches, including Trinity.

If you are looking for a particular denomination, here's a select outline of what's available either in print or manuscript.

### **Anglican**

- Wilkins Updike, *A History of the Episcopal Church in Narragansett, Rhode Island* (1847; reprint, Boston: Merrymount Press, 1907) includes the parish register for St. Paul's for 1718 to 1774.

### **Baptist**

- Records of the First Baptist Church of Rhode Island, founded by Roger Williams in 1636, on deposit at RIHS, do not contain information of a genealogical nature.
- Contact the American Baptist Historical Society (Hamilton-Samuel Colgate Baptist Historical Collection, 1106 S. Goodman St., Rochester, NY 14620), for a list of their holdings for Rhode Island churches.

### **Congregational**

- The Congregational Library (14 Beacon St., Boston, MA 02108) has miscellaneous material on Rhode Island parishes.

### **Episcopal**

- The records of the Episcopal diocese are located at the Special Collections Department, University Library, Kingston, RI.

### **Quaker**

- The New England Yearly Meeting records are on deposit at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library. These records cover all of Rhode Island, most of Massachusetts (except Nantucket), and parts of Connecticut, Maine, and New Hampshire. Richard D. Stattler, *Guide to the Records of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in New England* (Providence: RIHS, 1997) should be consulted.

### **Huguenot**

- The records of the French Huguenot settlement church of East Greenwich were translated and printed in the *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*.<sup>[6]</sup>

### **Jewish**

- The papers of Aaron Lopez, one of the first Jews in Rhode Island, are at NHS.

## **Methodist**

- Some records for Rhode Island Methodist churches are in the collections of the Library of the Boston University Theological School (745 Commonwealth Ave, Boston, MA 02215). Church records for Cranston and Bristol are particularly well-represented.

## **Moravian**

- The records for the Moravian Church in Newport are in the Moravian Archives (41 West Locust St., Bethlehem, PA 18018).

## **Roman Catholic**

- Some parishes will allow individuals to use their records, though most will direct you to the Diocesan Archives (1 Cathedral Square, Providence, RI 02903).
- There are registers for Irish parishes at the Chancery Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston (2121 Commonwealth Avenue, Brighton, MA 02135).

## ***Probate records***

Probate records concerning wills, adoptions and guardianships are filed on the town level. Town councils acted as probate courts. Until 1818, the city of Providence required an inventory of a deceased person's belongings regardless of the size of the estate. After 1818 inventories were prepared only when a person died intestate. Volume 16 of the *Rhode Island Genealogical Register* is an index to abstracts of probate records that have appeared in that journal.

## ***Court records***

The Rhode Island Supreme Court Judicial Records Center maintains records for civil and criminal cases (1671–1900), divorces (1749–1900), and naturalization papers (1793–1974). The documents for Bristol, Kent, and Washington Counties are in poor condition and may not be available to researchers. Only the earliest court records have been transcribed and published.

## ***Land and property records***

RISA has all the charters and land grants for the colony as well as a card index to land transactions from 1648 to 1776. Land transactions on the local level are located in town halls. A fire damaged or destroyed some of the record books for North Kingstown in the 1870s, but some have been reconstructed.

## ***Military and benefits records***

Manuscript service records for the state guard, militia units, and other branches of services up to the end of World War II exist at RISA. Print sources for King George's War (1740–1748), the French and Indian War (1755–1762), the American Revolution and Civil War are available at various repositories. Unfortunately, no comprehensive list of individuals from Rhode Island who participated in the American Revolution exists. Researchers should also consult the holdings of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, and the National Archives for the American Revolution. RISA has enlistment papers, regimental descriptive books and compiled military records for the Civil War. Records for the three Rhode Island militia units that served in the Spanish American War are at RISA, as are the draft registrations for World War I and casualty lists for World War II, Korea, and Vietnam.

## ***Immigration and naturalization***

Passenger lists for the ports of Bristol, Warren, Providence, and Newport are part of the United States Custom House Papers, located at RIHS, while those for Newport are at the National Archives. Passenger lists for the Port of Providence in the twentieth century are available as a microfilm publication from the National Archives and available to researchers at RIHS.[7]

The Rhode Island Supreme Court Judicial Records Center is the central repository for naturalization papers filed with state courts from 1793 to 1982, except for the records from 1894 to 1916, which are missing. The National Archives

(Northeast Branch) has federal-level court records. These records (1791–1906 and some post 1916) were indexed by the WPA. The index is available at the Judicial Records Center and on microfilm from the National Archives. For records after 1906 contact the National Archives or the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

### ***Newspapers***

Rhode Island has a fascinating newspaper history. The first paper in the colony was the *Rhode Island Gazette*, published from 1732 to 1733. The longest running newspaper is the *Providence Journal*, established in 1833 and still printed today. Under the auspices of the United States Newspaper Project, RIHS microfilmed all known Rhode Island newspapers including foreign language papers. These reels are accessible at RIHS.

### ***Genealogical manuscript collections***

Manuscripts relating to the history of the state and the genealogy of its families can be found at RIHS, NHS, RISA, and the John Hay Library at Brown University.[8] These include the DAR transcriptions of Bible, cemetery, death, marriage, and probate records; the Sidney S. Rider Collection of correspondence, newspaper clippings, church histories, and published materials on Rhode Island; the Louise Prosser Bates collection of deed abstracts, land grants, probate records, genealogies, and town and cemetery records; and the Anthony Tarbox Briggs collection of transcripts of cemetery, family, and vital records, plus wills.

### **Notes**

1 Cutting Marsh, "Sketch of the Brothertown Indians," *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 4 (1857–58):291–98.

2 Maureen A. Taylor, *Runaways, Deserters and Notorious Villains: Notices from the Providence Gazette* (Picton Press, 1995); volume two with John Wood Sweet covers other eighteenth century newspapers (Picton Press, 2001).

3 Irving H. Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen: The Story of the Negro in Rhode Island* (Providence: Urban League of Rhode Island, 1968); Jay Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700–1807* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1981).

4 John Victor Ducanson, *Newport Nova Scotia: A Rhode Island Township* (Belleville, Ont.: Mika, 1985).

5 James N. Arnold, *Vital Record of Rhode Island 1636–1850*, 21 vols. (Providence: Narragansett Historical Publishing Company, 1891–1912.); Alden Beaman, *Rhode Island Vital Records*, new series, thirteen vols. (Princeton, Mass.: privately printed, 1976–87).

6 L. Effingham de Forest, "Records of the French Church at Narragansett, 1686–1691," *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 70 (1939): 236–241, 359–365; 71 (1940) 51–61.

7 *Index to Passengers arriving at Providence June 18, 1911 to October 5, 1954* (NARA T518). Passenger lists exist on microfilm from 1911 to 1943.

8 RIHS also has a large number of unpublished genealogies of Rhode Island families.

b>Maureen A. Taylor writes a column on Rhode Island research for NewEnglandAncestors.org. She is co-editor with Henry B. Hoff of *A Guide to the Library of the New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS, 2004)*.

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### **Important Rhode Island research addresses**

Rhode Island Historical Society Library (RIHS)  
121 Hope St., Providence, RI 02906  
[www.rihs.org](http://www.rihs.org)

Rhode Island State Archives (RISA)  
337 Westminster St, Providence, RI 02903-3302  
[www3.sec.state.ri.us/Archives](http://www3.sec.state.ri.us/Archives)

Newport Historical Society (NHS)  
 82 Touro St., Newport, RI 02840  
[www.newporthistorical.com](http://www.newporthistorical.com)

Rhode Island Supreme Court  
 Judicial Records Center  
 5 Hill St., Pawtucket, RI 02860  
[www.courts.state.ri.us/records/defaultrecords.htm](http://www.courts.state.ri.us/records/defaultrecords.htm)

Rhode Island Genealogical Society  
 P.O. Box 433, Greenville, RI 02828  
[users.ids.net/~ricon/rigs.html](http://users.ids.net/~ricon/rigs.html)

American French Genealogical Society (AFGS)  
 78 Earle St., Woonsocket, RI 02895  
<http://www.afgs.org/>

## LOCATIONS OF RHODE ISLAND GENEALOGICAL RESOURCES

(A "•" indicates holdings of some, but not necessarily all, records in a category.)

### Primary Records

	RIHS	RISA	Rhode Island town halls	Libraries, historical societies	NEHGS
<i>Accounts, diaries, journals</i>	•			•	•
<i>Bible records</i>	•			•	•
<i>Cemetery records</i>	•			•	•
<i>Census records</i>	•	•		•	•
<i>Church records</i>	•			•	•
<i>Court records</i>	<i>located at Rhode Island Supreme Court Judicial Records Center</i>				
<i>Land records</i>	•	•	•	•	
<i>Military records</i>	•	•		•	
<i>Naturalization records</i>					
<i>Passenger lists</i>	•				
<i>Photographs</i>	•				
<i>Probate records</i>	•		•	•	
<i>School records</i>			•	•	
<i>Tax records</i>	•		•	•	
<i>Town records</i>	•		•		
<i>Vital records</i>	•	•	•	•	•

### Secondary Records

	RIHS	RISA	Rhode Island town halls	Libraries, historical societies	NEHGS
<i>City directories</i>	•	•		•	•
<i>County and state histories</i>	•			•	•
<i>Family histories</i>	•			•	•
<i>Manuscripts</i>	•	•		•	•
<i>Maps, atlases, gazetteers</i>	•	•		•	•
<i>Newspapers</i>	•			•	
<i>Town histories</i>	•			•	•

## A century and a half of Rhode Island records

Since the founding of Rhode Island by the dissident Roger Williams in the seventeenth century, the smallest state in the union has made valuable contributions to American history. Descendants of early Rhode Island families have a valuable resource available to them in *Records of the Colony and State of Rhode Island* edited by John Russell Bartlett on CD-ROM from the Society.

In the mid-nineteenth century Bartlett oversaw the review, transcription, and abstraction of thousands of documents from the state's storied past. This effort was undertaken at the behest of the legislature to ensure that significant papers from Rhode Island's settlement in 1636 through about 1792 would be preserved for future generations. The end result was ten volumes and one supplement. All eleven books are included on the CD-ROM. The information is from a wide variety of sources, from freeman's lists to pension files to acts of the General Assembly, the legislative body of Rhode Island.

Those interested in joining a hereditary society, such as the National Society of Colonial Dames in America, will find this work exceedingly valuable in identifying individuals whose service qualifies descendants for membership in such organizations. Officers of the colony and state, militiamen, Revolutionary War soldiers, and others are often listed.

Some of the records can provide insight into your ancestors' lives. Zorababel Westcot and Elisha Mitchell were two of five men convicted on April 22, 1700, in the town of Kingstown for causing a riot. The five petitioned the General Assembly for a rehearing. Westcot admitted his guilt before the Assembly and begged forgiveness for which actions his penalty was abated by twenty shillings and he was required to pay only that amount in penalty. Mitchell, on the other hand, refused to acknowledge the legality of the conviction, and maintained that in fact he had ridden out to rescue a legitimate prisoner of a deputy sheriff on the same day as the trial. He was required to pay the entire penalty, plus the fees of the officer since his commitment, and he was to remain a prisoner until the monies were paid.

With the coming of the Revolutionary War, the Assembly required individuals to take an oath to test their allegiance. Subsequent sessions are filled with records of individuals who refused and were forcibly removed from their homes, such as Matthew Cozzens, Andrew Christy, and Dr. William Hunter.

The fully-searchable format makes it easier to find heretofore hidden information. One must, however, beware the vagaries of colonial-era spelling which can make it more difficult to find information. The materials that Bartlett preserved so long ago are finding new life and use helping all genealogists with Rhode Island roots.

### Notes

1 *Records of the State and Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*, edited by John Russell Bartlett (CD-ROM, orig. pub. Providence, RI: A. Crawford Greene and Brother, State Printers, 1856. Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2003) Records #60, 332–60, 379.

2 For more information about the search functionality see "Getting the Most out of NEHGS CD-ROMs" by this author in *New England Ancestors* 5 (2004), 2:9

**Michael J. Leclerc** is director of special projects at NEHGS.

Records of the Colony and State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations edited by John Russell Bartlett on CD-ROM is available from the NEHGS Book Store for \$39.99, plus shipping and handling. Order online at [www.NewEnglandAncestors.org](http://www.NewEnglandAncestors.org) or call toll-free 1-888-296-3447.