

# With Pen in Hand: Rhode Island Manuscripts

By Maureen A. Taylor

Searching for a “lost” record and can’t find it? You might not be looking in the right place. Handwritten documents (letters, diaries and personal papers) traveled with Rhode Islanders in their trips across the country. If your Rhode Island relative left the area for California and settled in several different towns along the way, they could’ve left their manuscripts behind in any one of those communities. Finding those items is a bit like looking for a needle in a haystack. There is help available.

What’s a manuscript?

First let’s start with a definition. According to Tim Salls, Archivist of the R. Stanton Avery Special Collections Department, “manuscripts are handwritten documents as well as typewritten unpublished material.” This includes photographs and items typically considered one of a kind. Archivists usually create finding aids for collections that contain a note about the scope of the material, information on previous owners and an inventory of items.

Search strategies

- **Online**

As more libraries and archives post finding aids it’s easier to find material online. Start with a person’s name, or a place followed by a descriptor. A sample search on [Google.com](https://www.google.com) for papers relating to Rhode Island’s public health pioneer, Charles V. Chapin using “*Charles V. Chapin*” manuscript turned up collections at Brown University and the Rhode Island Historical Society as well as references to some of his published works. A search for information about one of the state’s small villages “*Quonset Rhode Island*” manuscript located an oral history about the area, a photograph and a scholarly article. Try a variety of terms moving from specific individuals and places to the more general.

- **National Databases**

Many research facilities submit their cataloging records to the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUMUC). You can access a full description of NUMUC on the Library of Congress website [www.loc.gov/index.html](http://www.loc.gov/index.html). To search all of NUMUC will require using both their online resources and the earlier printed volumes. The books span the period 1959-1993 and are available at major libraries including the NEHGS library. Read the searching instructions before beginning. I like using the advanced search screens to narrow down hits.

- **Look Locally**

Just about every town has a collection of manuscripts and related material. Contact local historical societies and archives in areas where your ancestors lived to see if they own any items related to your research. The American Association of State and Local History *Directory of Historical Organizations in the United States and Canada* (Altamira, 2001) is a good source for contact data. For specific Rhode Island institutions browse the list of members in the Rhode Island Consortium of Genealogical and Historical Societies <http://users.ids.net/~ricon/index.html>. Since many public libraries also collect local history material, use the American Library Association’s two volume, American Library Directory™ 2005-2006 (ALA, available in most public libraries) Significant collections of Rhode Island manuscripts are kept by the Rhode Island Historical Society <http://www.rihs.org/>, and The John Hay Library at Brown University <http://www.brown.edu/>. The Rhode Island State Archives collects state related material. You can write them at 337 Westminster St., Providence, RI 02903.

Outside of Rhode Island, start with the R. Stanton Avery Collection at [NEHGS](http://www.nehgs.org). Salls compiled a list of Rhode Island material at 101 Newbury St. This collection is open to members.

**Mss 937 George A. Moriarty Papers**

**Mss 911 Effective return of Capt Topham's Company in Col. Church's Regiment Rhode Island Forces**

Handwritten list with the names of 59 soldiers in 3rd R.I. Regiment. List has the following columns: men's names, age, size (feet, inches), enlisted (when, where, by whom), where born (county, town), trade or calling, color (hair, eye), gun who provides who owns, and scars & moles.

**\*\* Mss 910 Privateer commission issued to Mark Anthony De Wolf, 1757 \*\***

Handwritten commission to privateer against French ships granted to Marc Anthony DeWolf (1726-1793), Commander of the Sloop Rhoda. Signed by Step[hen] Hopkins Esq. as "Governour and Commander in Chief over His Majesty's Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation" and Tho[mas] Ward, Secretary.

**Mss 805 Vital records of Newport, RI by Waldo Sprague**

Handwritten copy of original town record books volumes one and two, ca. 1670-1775. Also includes First Baptist Church, Newport, records, 1676-1834 (bulk: 1772-1834).

**Mss 687 Dean family papers, 1758-1905 (bulk: 1840-1905)**

Genealogical notes and charts, correspondence, documents, obituaries, and photographs relating to the Benjamin and Alice (Lofthouse) Dean family of Clitheroe, England; Lowell, MA; and Providence, R.I. ... Among the obituaries is a handwritten copy of a bible record for the John B. and Mary (Tillinghast) Mumford family of Newport, RI.

**Mss 563 Power of attorney by John Ellery, 1708**

Handwritten document by which John Ellery (1681-1742) of Newport, RI assigns power of attorney to Benjamin Ellery. Includes the seal of John Ellery. Witnessed by John Ward and William Coddington and recorded by William Wanton Jr.

**Mss 486 Patrick Kiernan family register, 1845-1852**

Lithograph by Kelloggs & Comstock handcolored and completed in manuscript for the Patrick and Sarah Keirnan family of Rhode Island.

**Mss 195 Lawton M. Patten Papers, 1783-1985**

Includes accounts and sermons of Rev. William Patten (1763-1839), clergyman of Second Congregational Church, Newport, R.I.

**Mss 80 Thomas Fayerweather Papers, 1737-1818**

Includes documents relating to Rhode Island merchants in business with Fayerweather.

**Mss 78 John Leverett Papers**

Papers concerning the administration of Leverett's estate, three Natick (Massachuset) Indian apprenticeships issued by Leverett as judge of Massachusetts Superior Court of Judicature, documents concerning argument with the Crown over the Massachusetts Colony charter, lease of land in Kingston, R.I., reports reflecting his activities as administrator of Indian lands in Rhode Island, and other papers; together with papers of family members.

**Mss 68 Ivory Hovey Papers, 1732-1798**

Includes records and registers of ... United Church of Christ, Little Compton, R.I.

**Mss 53 Thomas and Oliver Durfee Papers, 1740-1801**

Private and public legal documents of Thomas Durfee and his son Oliver Durfee (1754-1798), of Portsmouth and Middletown, RI. The elder Durfee described himself at various times as a vinter and yeoman. Among his

deeds and leases, there is a complaint against a neighbor for selling rum without a license in 1772 and an itemization of property losses to British troops in 1776. Oliver Durfee's manuscripts include 33 private deeds, contracts, public notes etc. followed by 27 warrants issued by Durfee as Justice of the Peace in Middletown. Finally, there are 8 miscellaneous deeds and military petitions.

**Mss C 5694 Documents concerning Joseph Sanford, 1784-1841**

[Note: family lived in Newport] Four of the documents relate to Hannah Hall and seventeen of the documents (primarily receipts) relate to her estate. These documents were probably collected by Sanford because he had power of attorney and was executor of the Hannah Hall estate. The remaining fourteen documents include a marriage certificate for Joseph Sanford and Nancy Stockman (1794), "Remarks of a voyage from Georgetown, SC to Newport in schooner Conziah" by Joseph Sanford (1797), and an indenture binding Joseph's son, Samuel Clarke Sanford, as an apprentice to Isaac Gould (1826).

**Mss C 5436 Documents concerning Richmond family, 1745-1778**

Second item is "A general abstract of wages for several detachments from Col. Cook's Regt militia in the state of Rhode Island in the service of the United States under the command of Capt William Richmond for services from the 7th April -8th June 1778". Third item is "Ration abstract for Capt William Richmond and the troops under his command at Little Compton from the 10th Decr 1777 to the 8 of June 1778".

**Mss C 5092 Deposition of Samuel Slater, 1820**

Handwritten copy of the deposition by Samuel Slater of North Providence, R.I., taken by justice of the peace Stephen Jenks, for the trial of Lydia Croade vs. Edmund R. Croade concerning her failure to honor a promissory note. Slater testified that he sold Lydia Croade a house on 4 May 1818 and never received payment.

**Mss C 4830 Account book of Jason Newell, 1811-1835** Records include an account of schooling and a record of tuition for a school in Cumberland, [R.I.] 1811-1812; a list of creditors to the estate of Ruffus Arnold of Cumberland, RI; Report on the appraisal, division and partitioning of the real estate of Joseph Jencks late of Cumberland April 2 1817; plot of land divided between widow and heirs of Welcome Jillson late of Cumberland by Jason Newell surveyor; account of debts due the estate of Rufus Arnold late of Cumberland deceased 5 Feb 1816.

**Mss C 3147 Marriage certificate, 1875**

Printed form completed by hand. Both parties of Warren, R.I., married at Bristol, R.I.

**Mss C 2341 Power of attorney for Henry Downing, 1803**

Printed form completed by hand. Henry Downing, mariner, of Providence, R.I., assigns power of attorney to his sister, Nancy Downing, also of Providence. Witnessed by William Richmond, Hannah Richmond.

**Mss C 1334 Remonstrance to Samuel Cranston, 1704**

Handwritten complaint of property trespasses.

**Mss C 1196 Acts and orders made by the Court of Commoners held at Portsmouth, RI**

A contemporary handwritten copy of court records for 22 and 23 May 1656.

**Mss C 1177 Papers of the Reynolds family, Bristol, RI**

Three original handwritten wills for individuals named Joseph Reynolds of Bristol, R.I., dated 1757 February 16; ca. 1789; and 1813 August 10. Also a receipt, 1832 August 6, signed by Greenwood Reynolds.

**Mss C 1097 Cranston Detecting Society records**

First document has handwritten meeting minutes for March 14 1801, March 13 1802, March 9 & 16 1799, and March 8 1800. Minutes primarily relate to the election of officers and committee assignments. Second

document is a list of expenses dated March 17, 1806 due to Nathaniel Carpenter from George Waterman for accounts dated 1797, 1802, 1803, 1784.

**Mss A 5703 Orderly book, 1842**

Handwritten copy of orders no. 1-75 issued by Adjutant General Elisha Dyer Jr. by order of Major General William Gibbs McNeill during the Dorr Rebellion.

**Mss A 5161 Record of marriages solemnized by Rev. Charles H. Fay**

List of marriages solemnized by Rev. Charles H. Fay. Locations include Roxbury, MA; New York, NY; Middletown, CT; Providence, RI; Nashua, NH, and Brooklyn, NY.

**Mss A 3788 Christian Church (Foster, RI) records, 1851-1871**

Vital statistic records and membership lists kept by Rev. Gardner Howard, 1851-1871. Includes genealogical notes concerning the Howard family, ca. 1791-1899, and an explanatory letter.

**Mss A 3682 Aaron Peck family record, 1780-1805**

Original handwritten record with births, marriage, and deaths concerning the Aaron and Amey (Spencer) Peck family of North Kingstown, RI.

**Mss A 2891 Record of marriages solemnized by Rev. Warren Lincoln**

Account book with a record of the marriages solemnized by Rev. Lincoln. Locations include ME ... MA ... NH ... Rhode Island (Providence and Smithfield), VT (Bennington) then Cold Spring NY and Allentown NJ. Record includes the following loose documents: six letters, four certificates of marriage, a sermon preached by Lincoln at Banksville in 1871, and a copy of the resolutions passed on the passing of Rev Warren Lincoln March 1877.

**Mss A 1964 Diary of Elisha Green, 1696-1775 (bulk: 1730-1775)**

First five pages have a handwritten record of baptisms performed by Greene and other clergymen at Providence and Cranston, R.I., 1730, 1742-3, 1765-8, 1774. Pages 5-6 have "a journal of remarkable things which happens with my self and of other remarkable things in the world", 1730, 1742-1744, 1755 concerning earthquakes, etc. Pages 8-14 contains "A remarkable jurnel of the providentiall delings of God to me and my family", 1741/2, concerning the illness and death of some of Greene's children. The remaining pages has family vital statistic information [Cranston & Providence, RI], 1696-1775.

**Mss A 1884 Correspondence of William Courtney, 1862-1865, 1867**

51 ALS ; 14-27 cm. Letters from a soldier of the 7th Regiment, R.I. Infantry Volunteers to his family at Rockland (now Scituate), R.I. Describes his participation in battles and sieges at Fredericksburg, MD; Petersburg and Richmond, VA; and Vicksburg, Miss. Includes letters from his wife and daughter, describing the impact of the Civil War on R.I. cotton manufacture.

**Mss A 1075 Orderly book, 1776-1779**

Contains an incomplete record of the orders issued at various times and places by George Washington (Commander-in-chief), General Sullivan (commander of the forces in Rhode Island), and William Perkins. Perkins was a commander of a Rhode Island artillery regiment. The orderly book was trimmed at some point (with the loss of some text) and bound.

**Bible records**

31 original records (Mss A 558, Mss A 1679, Mss A 2562, Mss A 2573, Mss A 3074, Mss A 3395, Mss A 3398, Mss A 3435, Mss A 3535, Mss A 3604, Mss A 3683, Mss A 3688, Mss A 3714, Mss A 4565, Mss A 4805,