

New Happenings at New Hampshire Vital Records

By Sherry L. Gould

Changes and new developments at New Hampshire Vital Records are noteworthy to the genealogical community. In December 1999, John Fipphen wrote an article for this website entitled “ [New Hampshire: Resources for Vital Records](#),” which outlined the state of affairs for vital records collection and access in New Hampshire. Information regarding the history of vital record gathering and retention in the state is contained in that article and will not be repeated here. This article will outline exciting new changes affecting the public’s access to records held by the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Community & Public Health, [Bureau of Vital Records](#) , 6 Hazen Drive, Concord, NH 03301-6527. (Note the new title of the bureau’s oversight.)

The Basics

The first change has to do with volunteer staffing of the open access research room. Volunteers come from a wide range of specialties across the state. They include professional genealogical researchers, professors of history, experienced family researchers, and members of the New Hampshire Society of Genealogists. Previously the research room would close if there were no volunteers available to assist patrons on that day. Now, if for some reason a volunteer is not available, the staff of the vital records bureau covers the research room, enabling public access every day the state office is open. (A list of [state holidays](#) is available online. The holidays are negotiated every two years as part of the collective bargaining agreement and are subject to change, so be sure to check before traveling any distance on a possible state holiday.)

[Hours of operation](#) have broadened and are currently 8:15 to 11:45 a.m. and 12:15 to 4:15 p.m. Monday through Friday, except on Wednesday when it closes at 3:30 p.m. for cleaning. The room is closed for lunch each day from 11:45 a.m. to 12:15 p.m. It is important to understand that the closing time means the doors close and researchers need to leave. However, if after hours of searching you have just found your ancestors when closing time approaches, do not hesitate to ask the volunteer for staff assistance to get your information. The staff is very accommodating under these circumstances and will work with the public.

As Mr. Fipphen outlined in his article, the unique system used to file the open records is challenging to those who are unfamiliar with it. This system, which files individuals according to the first and third letter of the surname, has confounded many researchers, especially those using the microfilmed records in sites other than the state office. That was the purpose of the design for the system when the records were confidential. Now that the records are open to the public, many researchers view the system as an impediment in locating the information they seek. New Hampshire State Registrar William Bolton has announced his intent to alphabetize the open records, and this initiative has received the support of State Archivist Frank Mevers. To accomplish this task, a new staff position has been added to the genealogical research room to initiate the alphabetizing project and assist the volunteers with research requests from the public. Research room volunteers may also assist in the alphabetizing effort, as time permits.

New Records Added

A long awaited change is the release of new records to the open access research room. Previously researchers could freely search for birth records prior to 1901, marriages from 1640 through 1938, and divorces from the earliest on record through 1938. Throughout 2002 the bureau released marriage, divorce, and death records covering the period between 1939-1948. Such records from 1949 to present remain restricted and [eligibility](#) to access them is granted only to those who have a “ [direct and tangible interest](#) ” in the information. (For a complete review of New Hampshire [laws, rules, and policies](#) regarding vital records, see the Bureau of Vital Records website.)

A researcher may obtain an uncertified copy of any open access record for a fifty-cent fee. Certified copies are currently \$12, whether they are from the open or restricted records. Copies from the restricted records are only available as certified copies.

LDS church representatives have just completed filming these newly released records, which should be available on microfilm in the near future.

Technological Advances

New Hampshire has continued to build on new technologies in state government. This is evident in the way the bureau does business including:

- The option to fax requests for vital record copies with [credit card payment options](#)
- One hundred fifty towns currently submit vital records electronically to the bureau.
- Computer replacement project for all participating towns in 2003
- New Web-enabled software for towns, cities, hospitals, funeral homes, and certifying physicians will allow greater participation in electronic submission. January 2004 is the rollout date, the vendor just having been awarded a contract.
- Laptop outlets will be added in the genealogical research room. The work order has been submitted and scheduling is just a matter of time.
- Images of open records are coming online!

The staff of the bureau has long been committed to getting the event cards in the research room scanned. Finding the time and money for the project has been the major obstacle in completing this goal. Noel Barton from the LDS Family History Library recently announced that New Hampshire has been selected as the third state behind Ohio and Kentucky to have their record images digitized. New Hampshire approved the project without hesitation. LDS project manager Brent Peterson is so motivating that State Registrar Bill Bolton, volunteered to index some records personally.

The state must now make a decision on where to host the images, and will tackle that choice in the near future. Two choices are the LDS website or the State of New Hampshire website and Mr. Bolton has indicated that there are pros and cons to each choice.

The date targeted for completion of the project has not been determined. Indexing of New Hampshire records has taken a back seat to Eastern European record projects at this time. The most recent status report as of August 31, 2002, indicated that 51.72 percent of the 2,025,235 New Hampshire records have been assigned and 1.07 percent has been submitted.

We will all anxiously await the completion of this exciting project! Much of the information given in this article will become obsolete to many researchers when the images are available online to search from the comfort of your own home or local library. But until then, this update should add to your successes in searching for New Hampshire ancestors.