

New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers

By Edward F. Holden

In 1866 New Hampshire Governor Frederick Smyth began the seventy-seven year process that resulted in the publication of the forty-volume set of the New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers. It is highly doubtful that he was particularly interested in providing future family historians with a wealth of genealogical information at that time. But, if you had ancestors who lived in New Hampshire at any time from its colonial beginnings to its years of early statehood, chances are excellent that you will find information about one or more of those individuals in this series.

The *New Hampshire Genealogical Research Guide* (Heritage Books, Inc., 1983), by Laird C. Towle and Ann N. Brown, lists the contents of each book in the New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers with the exception of volumes thirty-four to thirty-nine, which are devoted exclusively to probate records. In their preface Towle and Brown note, "Each volume has a detailed index which generally cites all persons mentioned as well as all localities and topics. Browsing will disclose that many apparently perfunctory records contain fascinating genealogical data."

Volumes One to Ten

The first seven volumes consist of provincial papers from 1623 to 1776; volume eight contains state papers from 1776 to 1783; volume nine contains miscellaneous town papers; and volume ten consists of provincial and state papers from 1749 to 1792. Collectively these volumes present a potpourri of information more valuable to those who are interested in the early history of New Hampshire than to researchers seeking genealogical facts about the colony's residents. However, in the first volume I discovered an entry verifying my grandfather's claim that our ancestor, David Thompson, was in the Piscataqua area by 1623, and shortly thereafter moved to Boston where he settled on a piece of water bound real estate known to this day as Thompson Island. This revelation was significant to me because in trying to validate the facts in the family history my grandfather compiled, I decided early on that he relied as much on his own imagination as he did on proven documentation.

In another instance serendipity rescued me in my search for an answer to a question a State Library patron had asked. Neither my colleagues nor I were successful in our attempts to find the answer using tried and true research procedures. The answer to the question "What was the census of 1786?" was found while casually leafing through volume ten. In 1786 the General Court of New Hampshire passed a resolution providing for the "... taking and reporting of the Number of Souls in the several Towns within this State." The town of Alstead replied to this demand very succinctly, "We have numbered the people in this Town & find there is 943 Encluding every age & sex." New London reported in somewhat more detail, "... forty-six males 21 and upord [upward], sixty-six males under 21, thirty-nine feemales 18 and upord, sixty-one feemales under 18." In contrast, Peterborough Slip supplied the names of each of the town's thirty-four family heads and the number of members in each household.

Volumes Eleven to Thirteen

These volumes contain town papers of New Hampshire, with the towns arranged in alphabetical order. Each town's opening entry reports information about its original settlement. The chapter devoted to Deering begins by noting that it was originally the northern section of an area called Society Land. The first settler was Alexander Robinson who arrived in 1765, soon followed by William McKean, Francis Grimes, and others. In response to the inhabitants' petition in 1774 to charter their section of Society Land, Governor John Wentworth officially named the town Deering, in honor of his wife, Frances Deering. In 1772, when Wentworth chartered the southern section of Society Land in response to a petition of its inhabitants, he named it Francestown.

With a single exception, the nature of the additional items of information in these volumes varies considerably. That lone exception is the listing of facts about the townsmen who served during the Revolutionary War, which state the units of which they were members, whether or not they were injured or died in the service, their dates of enlistment and discharge, and miscellaneous information. For example, it was noted in the Weare town papers that Ebenezer Sinclear was killed during the Battle of Saratoga, leaving a destitute widow and three small children.

Volumes Fourteen to Seventeen

The four volumes that receive the greatest use, especially among patrons wishing to apply for Daughters of the

American Revolution (DAR) or Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) membership, are volumes fourteen through seventeen, entitled “Revolutionary War Rolls.” Within the series itself they are called “War Rolls, Volumes 1” through “War Rolls, Volume 4.” New Hampshire State Archivist Dr. Frank Mevers has compiled a very helpful every name index to this four-volume set. The War Rolls are also available on microfilm, microfiche, and CD-ROM. Isaac Hammond, who edited the War Rolls, commented, “They will be of great value to town historians, genealogists, and others tracing the history of their ancestors.”

Historians who are interested in campaigns that occurred during the Revolutionary War period will find relevant information in these volumes. Volume fourteen, for example, includes an article by the editor entitled “New Hampshire Troops in the Québec Expedition,” which describes the planning for the campaign, the agonizing hardships encountered during the winter expedition from Cambridge to Québec City, and the role New Hampshire men played in this valiant but unsuccessful action.

Another account of historical relevance in this series is a transcript entitled “Diary of Lieutenant Jonathan Burton While in the Canada Expedition from Aug. 1, 1776, to Nov. 29, 1776.” Burton’s account begins and ends at his home in Wilton, New Hampshire. His company did not lose any lives in armed combat, but by November, outbreaks of smallpox, pneumonia, and other forms of illness killed or seriously impaired the health of more than half of the sixty-seven men who embarked on the campaign as soldiers in Lieutenant Burton’s company in August.

It appears that all of the hundreds of rosters that comprise the bulk of these four volumes include soldiers’ names, the officers under whom they served, and the dates of their service. Beyond those three basic pieces of information the facts found from roster to roster vary considerably. The list of Captain Henry Dearborn’s company in Colonel Benedict Arnold’s detachment contains as much information as the family historian can hope to find in any of these rosters. For example, one entry in this company roster states that twenty-one-year-old fifer Caleb Edson, from the town of Cockermouth, was a joiner [carpenter or cabinet maker] in civilian life. On September 18, 1775, he received two months pay amounting to four pounds and eight shillings. The same roster reveals that twenty-seven-year-old Thomas Tolley of Dover was a seaman, and twenty-two-year-old Thomas Holmes of Derry was a cordwainer [shoemaker]. As scarce as the information may be in many of the lists in these four volumes, it is fortunate that the vast majority of rosters do provide the name of the unit in which a patriot served since this fact must be provided in order to obtain an ancestor’s service record or pension record from the National Archives.

Volumes Eighteen to Twenty-two

Volume eighteen, titled “Miscellaneous Provincial and State Papers” (1725-1800); volume nineteen (provincial papers from 1679 to 1764); and volumes twenty to twenty-two (state papers from 1784 to 1793) are a continuation of volumes one to ten. These papers contain an extensive collection of facts about early state citizens such as the New Hampshire man for whom Bellows Falls, Vermont, was named although he never lived in that state.

The appendix in volume twenty-one contains fifty-eight brief biographies of leaders who have not received the full recognition they deserve for their contributions to New Hampshire’s early history. Benjamin Bellows of Walpole, for example, left an outstanding record of service in many fields. As a result of his zealous support of the American Revolution he eventually rose to the rank of major general. He held many offices in Cheshire County including sheriff, registrar of deeds, justice of the peace, representative to the State Legislature, and judge of the court of common pleas. At the state level he was an elector of the Vice President of the United States in 1789, 1792, 1796, and 1800.

Bellows’ biography indicates that his honesty and compassion cost him considerable sums of money early in his career. As a merchant supplying provision to the town’s newest settlers, he continued to accept payment in bills from newcomers to Walpole and others across the Connecticut River in Vermont long after the value of paper money had depreciated.

While the vast majority of entries in volumes eighteen to twenty-two do not contain as much detail about most individuals as the account of Benjamin Bellows does, a search through the hundreds of names indexed in these volumes may well reveal new information about an ancestor who lived in New Hampshire prior to the nineteenth century.

Volume Twenty-three

Volume twenty-three is titled “Documents in the Public Record Office in London, England, Relating to the Province of New Hampshire, 1606– 1771.” Despite this imposing title, few facts of genealogical relevance will be found on its pages. Essentially it is a catalog of documents in the Public Records Office relating to New Hampshire with only a single line for each entry.

Volumes Twenty-four to Twenty-nine

Volumes twenty-four and twenty-five make up “Town Charters,” which also has a subset of volumes within the primary volumes. For example, both “Volume XXIV” and “Volume 1” are printed on the title page of the first book. In the case of many towns these volumes include not only the listing of the lot assigned to each settler, but a foldout map showing the location of each of those lots. According to volume twenty-seven, my ancestor Joshua Martin was assigned Lot 5 in Range 2 situated on the “so side” of the Piscataquog River. His brother, Nathaniel, was assigned Lot 3 in Range 9 on the “no side” of the “Piscataquog” River. By comparing the map from volume twenty-seven with a current geodetic survey map, I have been able to pinpoint my ancestor’s original property. The Martin brothers had to meet certain regulations in order to attain permanent ownership of these lots: “Within one year of May 31, 1749, each Owner must have a house Sixteen Foot Square with a Chimney and Cellar and Four Acres of land enclosed, cleared, & fitted for mowing or Tillage.”

Volume Thirty

Among the many features of volume thirty, “Revolutionary War Documents,” is the town-by-town roster of the 8,199 New Hampshire men who signed the Association Test and the 773 who refused to sign. The signers, “... solemnly promised that they would to the utmost of their power and at the risk of their Lives and Fortunes with ARMS oppose the hostile British Fleets and Armies, against the United American colonies.” Of the sixty-nine male residents of the town of Dunbarton that were twenty-one years old or over, ten refused to sign [the roster excluded “lunaticks or Negroes”]. At least three non-signers, William Stark and William and James Stinson, joined the loyalist force as the war progressed.

Volumes Thirty-one to Thirty-nine

Volumes thirty-one to thirty-nine are made up entirely of probate records from 1635 to 1771, and should be of particular interest to family historians whose ancestors died in provincial New Hampshire. One of these records, however, illustrates the fact that no entry in the entire forty volumes is a primary source. This record is in the printed will of Scotsman Archibald Stark, who died in 1758. The will lists a son of Archibald named Henry. Since few if any Scottish children were named Henry in the eighteenth century I suspected the will had been transcribed incorrectly. My examination of Archibald Stark’s handwritten will at the New Hampshire State Archives shows very clearly that between the original document and the printed page Anna became Henry.

Volume Forty

Judging by the entries in this volume, which includes court records from 1640 to 1692 and court papers from 1632 to 1668, seventeenth-century society was just as litigious as today’s society. In addition to citing scores of cases involving suits that plaintiffs brought against relatives, neighbors, and others, and cases the town brought against its residents, this volume also illustrates the fact that colonial punishment could be very inhumane. Being a Quaker was a crime. Thus, “The Court Lookes upon Edward Wharton as a vagabond Quaker & Sentence him to be Conveighed from Constable to Constable untill he Coms to Salem ye place of his habitacon & that he be whipt through Dover hampton & Newbery by the Constables Of said Townes at ye Carts tayle [tail] to ye Number Of 30 stripes, viz, tenn stripes in each Towne. 4th July, 1663.”

Where to Find the New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers

Every town and city in the state received a copy of each volume of the New Hampshire Provincial and State Papers as soon as they came off the presses. Over the years these sets disappeared from smaller libraries for lack of shelf space. Currently the researcher will find these volumes at the New Hampshire State Library, the Tuck Library at the New Hampshire Historical Society, and the New Hampshire State Archives. They are also available at the New England Historic and Genealogical Society, academic libraries, and no doubt in many libraries and other repositories housing large historical collections.