

# They Went in All Directions: Rhode Islanders On the Move

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In almost every family genealogy there are people that disappear having “gone west.” This refers to any territory west of where the rest of the family lived. Depending on when your ancestor got that restless feeling it could be New York or California. Your Rhode Island family tree may have several individuals who migrated to other areas of the country or even within the state. These wanderers went north, south, west, and even east (into Massachusetts). A few resources and research rules will help you locate them and add a little missing information to those genealogical charts.

## Rule #1

### Know your Rhode Island history

This little rule can’t be repeated enough. Unless you understand the historical events that influence the decision of your ancestor you’ll never know where to look for information. Start with general historical works like Sydney James’ *Colonial Rhode Island: A History* (New York: Scribner, 1975) or William McLoughlin’s *Rhode Island* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986). They help you fill in the timeline of occurrences during your migratory ancestor’s lifetime. Another classic is Stewart Hall Holbrook’s *The Yankee Exodus, An Account of Migration from New England* (New York: Macmillan, 1950). In it he covers the various places New Englanders migrated to, as well as how and why. Some people, encouraged by advertisements from various emigration companies, sought economic opportunity elsewhere. Other folks just liked to wander.

## Rule #2

### Follow the transportation systems and trade routes.

Highways were necessary for commerce, but they also carried individuals away from their original point of settlement. Some of these colonial highways became the turnpikes of the nineteenth century and are still there today (such as Post Road [Route 1]). Remember that travel was slow even after 1750, when old Indian paths became wagon routes with most travelers averaging twenty miles a day in good weather.

Transportation into and out of Rhode Island also occurred along the major waterways, both man-made and natural. Narragansett Bay and the Blackstone River both carried settlers and traders. With so many islands in Narragansett Bay it is not surprising that some Rhode Island families held land in several locations. For instance, those operating plantations along the western edge of Narragansett Bay often owned additional land in Jamestown (Conanicut Island) or had business connections in Newport. Traversing the waterway was necessary to oversee management of their estates. Steamboat travel between major cities began in various cities between 1812 and 1816, linking Rhode Island with Connecticut and New York via the Long Island Sound. The Blackstone Canal primarily carried goods (and probably a few people) between Providence, Rhode Island, and Worcester, Massachusetts, starting in 1828, but it was replaced by the railroads in the 1840s. The advent of railroads enabled the transporting of large groups of people between states and immigrating to other geographic areas became even easier. Passengers made connections to different lines and most small towns had stations.

Maps are the best way to trace the transportation routes used by your ancestors. You can find some online at the [Library of Congress website](#) under the American Memory page, and in libraries. The graphics division of the [Rhode Island Historical Society Library](#) has the most complete set of maps in the state, followed by the [Rhode Island State Archives](#). Also consult William Dollarhide’s *Map Guide to American Migration Routes, 1735-1815* (Bountiful, Utah: Heritage Quest, 1997) and Douglas Waitley’s *Roads of Destiny: The Trails that Shaped a Nation* (New York: Robert B. Luce, 1970).

## Rule #3

### Discover your ancestors’ reasons for migrating

Most families migrated due to the following:

## **Economic opportunity**

Plentiful land in the South and West brought young men seeking farmland while the availability of jobs enticed them to travel into Rhode Island. According to the 1865 census of Rhode Island, men from Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, South Carolina, Florida, Alabama, and Mississippi were living in the state.

## **War**

Military conflict resulted in soldiers serving in areas outside their hometowns. In addition, political upheavals may have caused populations to flee. For instance, during the American Revolution, many of the loyalists living in Newport, Rhode Island, fled Aquidneck Island to Canada where they established a city of the same name in Nova Scotia. Revolutionary War general Nathaniel Greene, a Rhode Island native, spent time commanding campaigns in Georgia and South Carolina. In 1785 he decided to move his family to the plantation awarded him by the government of Georgia. Some pensioners of the Revolutionary War received bounty land in Ohio for their service, which encouraged many to settle there.

## **Education**

Established southern families sent sons north to study at elite universities, so don't be surprised to find your Rhode Island ancestor with southern roots. After the Civil War, Bathsheba A. Benedict of Pawtucket purchased a plantation near Columbia, South Carolina, to educate freed slaves under the auspices of the American Baptist Home Mission Society. Benedict College, founded as Benedict Institute in 1870, originally trained teachers and ministers. Many of those students migrated north after they graduated.

## **Seasonal Travel**

Wealthy families and their servants often traveled during the social season. Newport families went to Saratoga Springs, New York, and New York City families migrated to Newport, building many of the mansions still in existence today. There was seasonal travel among the families on the Social Register and many of those individuals intermarried, dividing their time between Rhode Island and their homes.

## **Relatives**

Marriage between prominent families formed business and social connections regardless of location. These marital alliances meant that records regarding the families — including vital records, census documents and land records — are in at least two locations. While one of General Greene's children grew up in the south, Nathaniel returned to Rhode Island when he married Ann Clarke.

Just as immigrant families often settled in the same areas as their homeland neighbors, migrating groups of Rhode Islanders did the same. Many people from small towns banded together to settle towns and cities in the West. The best resource is Holbrook's *Yankee Exodus*.

## **Religion**

Many of the original settlers of New England were refugees from religious persecution, but in later generations traveling missionaries established new communities of believers. For example, a group of Newport Quakers traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, to form a religious community. A good source of information on migratory Quakers is William Wade Hinshaw's *Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edwards Brothers, 1936). Search for parish records for evidence of where your ancestors went. Sometimes you can find a paper trail dismissing them from one church to join another.

## **Rule #4**

### **Research all collateral lines**

It makes sense when you have trouble tracking that migrant member of your family to go back to your family tree. The clues may be in the papers you locate for a collateral relative. Those emigrant ancestors might have sent home letters or photographs so make sure to use online resources like message boards to connect with distant cousins and look at published genealogies for clues. Don't forget to research periodicals using the Periodical Source Index (PERSI) online

at [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). The *Rhode Island Genealogical Register* ran a column called “They left Rhode Island.” You never know where you’ll find the information to solve your research puzzle.

If your ancestors were restless you might have difficulty finding them because there were multiple migrations. Look for clues in family papers, photographs (check the photographer’s imprint), and research each family member to see if you can find out where they went. Online research makes it easier to search large groups of records at one time (census, city directories, etc) or place a query on a message board. While you’ll have to double-check all the online information you find with traditional research and original source material, looking online makes sense when you don’t know where to find a person. Once you’ve completed your research, tell the story of your search and what you found for future generations.