

Ancestral History in Massachusetts

By Maureen A. Taylor

Genealogical research fills in the branches on your family tree, but does it help you understand your ancestors' daily lives in Massachusetts? Probably not. Social history picks up where records research ends and enables you to learn about the times in which your ancestors lived. Re-creating their lives is an exciting pursuit and can actually uncover new avenues of research for you to add to your family tree. Social history is the study of everyday life and in order to learn more about your relatives you will want to look at photographs of people and places as well as study their hometowns, jobs, and what their home life was like. Here are some time-tested ways to do just that.

Start by creating a timeline of the facts of their lives, such as when they were born and married, and when they died. Include school attendance, year of immigration, dates they changed towns of residence and, of course, birth dates for their children. Then find out what was happening during those years, both in the towns in which they lived and in terms of world events. Plot those items on your timeline. The goal is to make your ancestor a real person, so immerse yourself in the history and culture of their lives. It will give you a whole new appreciation of those branches on your tree. It doesn't take a PBS reality show like *1900* to find out the details — just a sense of curiosity, library research, and some time to read.

Timeline Helps

A good resource for world events is *The Timetables of History* by Bernard Grun and Daniel Boorstin (Touchstone Books, 1991). For local events, read local histories or newspapers. Public libraries in Massachusetts have materials on the history of the areas they represent and some have copies of their town newspapers. The Boston Public Library (www.bpl.org) has a complete collection of all newspapers published in Massachusetts. A list of ethnic newspapers appears on the [Boston Family History](#) website. If you don't live in the area, consult their online catalog and see if your public library can help you obtain what you need through inter-library loan.

Finding Photographs

Once again, public libraries come to the rescue with their local history collections. Start there or use Elizabeth Petty Bentley's *Genealogists Address Book* (GPC, 1998) to find a historical society near where your ancestors lived. Consult an earlier Massachusetts column in this series, "Often-Overlooked Massachusetts Repositories" for some useful links. If you are looking for photographs of localities, try searching the expansive digital collection online at the [Library of Congress American Memory](#) site. The [Arcadia Publishing Company](#) specializes in illustrated histories and many Massachusetts towns are already included in their imprint under the Images of America series. Arcadia's website contains a list of what titles are available through most booksellers. Above all, don't forget to ask relatives for images!

Use your genealogical research skills to discover when a picture was taken by researching when a photographer was in business or by studying the clothing clues. Images can even provide you with a sense of your ancestors' personality based on their attention to fashion or their stance.

Examine Artifacts

Learning about daily life involves more than just researching the time period; it also involves looking at items that your ancestors owned — scrapbooks, silver, clothing, furniture, quilts, and myriad other objects. Those artifacts tell you something about what was important to your ancestors and provide clues to uncover their lives. *Antiques Roadshow* examines items to determine their value as historical artifacts, but often there are materials passed down through several generations that have added value to the family historian. Consult Joe L. Rosson and Helaine Fendelman's *Treasures in Your Attic* (Harper Collins, 2001) for additional information.

Historical Context

There are some great books to help you understand the times in which your ancestors lived. Type Massachusetts into an online bookstore search engine and you'll discover thousands of books either about the state or using it as a location for a work of fiction. Children's books provide a quick overview of the history of Massachusetts, supplying the basics

without overwhelming you with details. A good example is Sylvia McNair's *Massachusetts*, part of the "America the Beautiful" series (Children's Press, 1998). If you want a book intended for adults, read the informative *Massachusetts: A Concise History* by Richard D. Brown and Jack Tager (University of Massachusetts Press, 2000). Christopher Kenneally's *The Massachusetts Legacy: 150 Landmark Events that Shaped Our Nation* (Adams Publishing, 1995) spotlights events in Massachusetts history in which your ancestors might have participated. To find timelines on Boston neighborhoods and some ethnic groups consult www.bostonfamilyhistory.com.

There are also titles that focus on a particular time period. If your ancestors came over on the *Mayflower* then a must-read is *The Times of Their Lives — Life, Love and Death in Plymouth Colony*, by James C. Deetz and Patricia Scott Deetz (W.H. Freeman, 2000). Boston's role in the Civil War is covered in Thomas H. O'Connor's *Civil War Boston: Home Front and Battlefield* (Northeastern, 1999). The fact is that there are plenty of choices if you are trying to set your ancestors in historical context for a written genealogy or attempting to discover a fact that might lead to new genealogical discoveries. Use the following checklist to get the most out of your research.

- Use online card catalogs to find appropriate publications
- Ask your local reference department staff at your public library for help when you can't find the book you need.
- Borrow books from the NEHGS Circulating Library (It's a membership benefit!)

Use the Web

Find information 24/7 by using your Internet connection. Type a topic into an online search engine like google.com and see what turns up. Be as specific as possible when looking for information online. A very general search for "Massachusetts history" revealed more than 10,000 sites with pertinent information! Many of these hits were sites created by cities and towns that included historical data. One interesting site for Boston is [Boston History and Architecture](#), which has a Boston-specific "this day in history" as well as trip-planning tips.

Step Back in Time

There are a plethora of museums in Massachusetts that allow visitors to time travel. Of course, there is the world-renowned [Freedom Trail](#) that lets visitors walk through three centuries of Boston history, but I'll bet you can find a historical museum that covers some aspect of your ancestor's life. Below are a couple examples to start you on your way.

[Old Sturbridge Village](#)

Experience early nineteenth-century village life in western Massachusetts where guides answer your questions about their daily life and occupations.

[Plimoth Plantation](#)

According to their website, it is always 1627 at this living history museum featuring interpretive guides. Step back in time and even meet some of your *Mayflower* ancestors.

There are so many ways to make your family more than just names and dates on your family tree. Katherine Scott Sturdevant's *Bringing Your Family History to Life Through Social History* (Betterway, 2000) offers additional suggestions for making your ancestors real people. Have fun with your pursuit by trying ethnic foods, exploring neighborhoods, or even listening to period music. You might discover you have more in common with your ancestors than you could imagine.