

Early New Hampshire Town Records

By Edward F. Holden

The microfilm collection of Early New Hampshire Town Records is an important resource for researching families who lived in the Granite State more than a century and a half ago. Many of the collection's 363 reels contain two and even three volumes, and they are available at the Genealogy and Local History Room at the [New Hampshire State Library](#) or through the numerous [Family History Centers](#) of the Church of Latter-day Saints. The State Library staff will also accept reasonable requests for searches of the records by phone ([603] 271-6823), fax ([603] 271-2205), e-mail (zmoore@library.state.nh.us), and traditional mail (NHSL Genealogy Section 20 Park St., Concord, NH, 03301). If the information is found, the library will send 8.5 x 11 photocopies of the images at 10 cents per sheet with a one-dollar minimum for mailing the information via USPS.

The key to the host of information contained in the thousands of pages of this collection is the microfilm index, which is arranged alphabetically by surname. Some of the types of records found in these films are vital records, tax records, listings of residents by districts within a town, offices to which men were elected, town meeting minutes, and more.

For example, a family historian searching for information about Amos C. Clement of Plaistow, NH, would find these entries typed on the image of the 5 x 3 card appearing on the the index reel:

Clement, Amos C. Plaistow

Volume 2: p. 324, p. 523, p. 808 (M.R.) p. 808 (F.R.)

Going next to the above microfilm of Plaistow, the researcher would discover the following information about Amos C. Clement:

p. 324 - In 1817 Amos Clement received \$50.00 from the town in return for boarding William Dow for one year.

p. 523 - Amos Clement was elected Fence Viewer in 1819

p. 808 - Amos C. Clement married Sarah Dow April 29, 1817

p. 808 - The children of Amos and Sarah Clement were

Amos Carlton born November 26, 1819

Hannah born December 29, 1821

Isaac born April 16, 1824

Louise born March 17, 1826

Except for births and marriages the index itself does not provide any clues about the nature of the entries to which it refers. A marriage record is indicated on the index cards as a page number followed by (M.R.). Researchers intending to use a marriage record to trace their ancestors back another generation are usually thwarted in using the information in this collection because the town clerks almost never listed the names of the parents of the bride and groom in these early town records. The symbol (F.R.) rather than the more logical (B.R.) signals a birth record. Some death notices do appear in the town records, but they are not indexed by (D.R.) or any other symbol. In very rare instances deaths are included and are also referenced on the index card by (F.R.).

A small number of individuals rate only one entry on a single index card. At the other end of the scale are 182 entries for Matthew Patten spread over five towns with 165 of those entries being in his hometown of Bedford. Just one of those page numbers is followed by the symbol (F.R.) and no entry indicates a marriage record. To determine the event to which the other 181 Matthew Patten entries refer requires examining each one individually.

There are two precautions to observe when studying these early town records.

Caveat one: To avoid potential disappointment, patrons should not approach this collection with the firm belief that it is the nirvana of early New Hampshire vital records. As indicated above, some births and marriages can be found therein, but several years of staff experience with the data in this collection indicate that the odds of finding records of births and marriages are about four or five to one. Nevertheless, on many occasions these microfilms do yield the date and place for a previously elusive record of a birth or marriage that occurred in New Hampshire prior to about 1840.

Caveat two: Be aware that two different systems are employed in numbering the pages of these records. Handwritten numbers appear in the margins of the pages, while stamped numbers appear in the upper corners of the pages. The indexes refer to the stamped numbers.

To the experienced researcher these records can be revealing in aspects other than simply providing possible information about births and marriages. A person's changing economic status can be traced by following his tax assessments from year to year. A Warning Out Of Town notice often includes not only the name of the family head, but also lists other members of the family, and indicates their previous residence. When minors are involved these warning notices usually state their ages. School district numbers are also listed in many of these records, thereby pinpointing the part of town in which an ancestor lived.

"The Every Name Index" is the erroneous and misleading title that is often applied to "The Index to Early New Hampshire Town Records." By no stretch of a wishful imagination does this collection contain the name of every New Hampshire resident who lived during the two centuries it covers. The records of seventeen towns (including the seminal communities of Exeter and Dover) were not indexed due to reasons for which no documentation has been found. These unindexed towns are identified in a loose-leaf binder with the cumbersome title "Catalog of Ancient Towns, Parishes, and Other Divisions of the State as Recorded in the Office of the Secretary of State," which can be found with the filing cabinet that houses the microfilms in the New Hampshire State Library.

The other fifteen towns not indexed are:

- Brookline
- Dublin
- Fitzwilliam
- Goffstown
- Keene
- Litchfield
- Lyndeborough
- Manchester
- Marlborough
- Merrimack
- Milan
- Nashua
- New Boston
- Pembroke
- Swanzey
- Tamworth

Indexes to these volumes are also missing:

- Conway 2, 3, 4
- Deerfield 3
- Hollis 7
- Lisbon 2, 3
- Meredith 2
- Newcastle 1, 3
- Northumberland 2
- Rye 2

- Springfield 2
- Stratford 2
- Whitefield 2.

Another fact contradicting the "Every Name Index" title is the scarcity of Native American and African American names. Only 54 slaves and 4 Indians are indexed for the entire two centuries these records encompass, yet the 1790 census indicates that the "colored" population in New Hampshire in that year alone was 150. Other African Americans were among the 620 people under the category "All other free persons," also in the 1790 census.

The indexing was rumored to be funded by a WPA project during the Depression of the 1930s. It is quite possible that the funds ran out before the work was completed. The volumes themselves are contained in the microfilm collection of the library, so anybody willing to wade through hundreds of pages may find relevant information about their unindexed ancestor.

On page 8 of *Digging For Treasure in New England Town Records* (NEHGS, 1996) Ann Smith Lainhart writes that the New Hampshire State Library borrowed these volumes and made transcript copies. Documented facts seem to provide much stronger evidence that the New Hampshire Secretary of State called these records in from the town clerks throughout the state to be copied or, in some instances, photostated.

1. These lines appear on the Madbury page of the "Catalog of Ancient Towns, Parishes, and other Divisions of the State as Recorded in the Office of the Secretary of State":

"Original records returned to Town Clerk Feb. 25, 1919. **Same volume returned to Secretary of State for recording, September 2, 1948.**"

2. Until three years ago, researchers could borrow only the indexes through the many Family History Centers. When the Mormons filmed these records in Concord during the middle of the twentieth century, the New Hampshire Secretary of State permitted them to do so only if public access to the films were restricted to the Genealogy Library in Salt Lake City. Through the combined efforts of the author of this article and Dr. Frank Mevers, Director of the New Hampshire State Archives (a division of the Office of the Secretary of State), the restriction was lifted in 1999. Since the current Secretary of State had authority to revoke the order of a previous holder of that office, it seems reasonable to assume that the early town records were copied by the authority of that office, rather than by the State Library.

In conclusion it should be emphasized that despite the shortcomings of the Early New Hampshire Town Records, family historians who ignore this source of genealogical data do so at their own risk. Used intelligently, this collection of microfilms may very well provide information that cannot be found in any other source.

This is an expanded version of an article which appeared in the January, 2002, issue of Granite State Libraries newsletter.

Edward F. Holden is a staff genealogist at the New Hampshire State Library.