

People-Locators: Census and Tax Records and City Directories

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When you are trying to locate a person or family in a specific place and time period, all three of these kinds of records can work together. Fortunately, federal census records for Massachusetts are available from 1790 to 1920, with the exception of the 1890 census, which burned, and part of Suffolk County in 1800. In addition, we have state census records for 1855 and 1865. Then there are many tax records, in particular a published collection for 1771 and the Direct Tax of 1798, which is available on microfilm. When census indexes are incomplete, city directories can often guide us to the right page on the right film. But they also work well in their own right, filling us in with details for the years between censuses.

The Federal Census, 1790-1920

With the beginning of the nation, the federal government decreed that a census should be taken every ten years, beginning in 1790. Each census has its own features. Perhaps the most important thing a new researcher should know is that the 1850 census is the first one in which the name of each individual (at least each white individual) in the household was listed. Before that, from 1790 to 1840, the census taker recorded only the name of the head of household and followed it with a series of marks in various age categories and usually a few categories describing race or occupation, e.g. agriculture or manufacturing.

Census records are available on microfilm in many places:

- The National Archives, their regional branches, and the Family History Library in Salt Lake City
- Many local libraries have at least some films for the local area. NEHGS has a complete collection of the federal censuses for New England
- Online, GenealogyLibrary.com has images of some censuses, including the 1850 Massachusetts census. One can also purchase this on CD from Brøderbund at FamilyTreeMaker.com or Genealogy.com. Another series is at HeritageQuest.com.
- Interlibrary loan. Go to www.nara.gov/publications/microfilm/micrent.html.
- Reference works, such as *The Source* and *Ancestry's Red Book* give a great deal of detail about what is included in each census. But before using the census, one usually wants to use an index. For the features of all the various indexes, see these reference works. These indexes may be found in various places.
- On the Internet one can look at Ancestry.com and FamilyTreeMaker.com or GenealogyLibrary.com
- LDS Family History Centers have an earlier edition of the Accelerated Indexing Systems (AIS) 1790 to 1850 indexes on microfiche. Here all the indexes for the various states for a given year are compiled into one nation-wide list
- The National Archives and its various branches and the Family History Library in Salt Lake City have many of the indexes available as books and/or CDs

When searching, remember that indexes from 1790-1870 must be searched for each possible different spelling. From 1880 we have Soundex indexes. Also remember that the index includes only the head of household and, beginning in 1850, others in the household with different surnames. Thus if you are looking for a wife or child, you will need to know the name of the family head. The exception for Massachusetts is the new index to the 1870 census, which seems to include every individual. However, the indexers evidently took some shortcuts. I found, for example, that "Jos. Page" in the index turned out to be "Joseph Page" in the census itself. A new index to the 1880 census should be available at FamilySearch.org sometime in 2001.

The 1910 census for Massachusetts presents a special challenge, as there is no index. Some volunteers started out to do it, but the project was too large and soon stopped. For a place of any considerable size, it would be helpful to sit down with city directories from, say, 1908 to 1912, locate the family's address and ward and then use a detailed town map of surrounding streets while rolling through the film. See the bibliography below for three helpful resources.

Mortality Schedules

The 1850 to 1880 mortality schedules, taken along with the federal censuses for those years, should perhaps have been included in the previous column on vital records. This record of deaths, which includes ages and cause of death, for the year previous to each census, that is, for example, from 1 June 1849 to 1 June 1850, is found on National Archives microfilm T1204, cataloged at the Family History Library as 1421015-023.

An index, which appears on both microfiche at many Family History Centers and on Family Archives CD #164, does not include Massachusetts (and is incomplete for the states it does cover).

The 1890 Veterans' Census

Massachusetts is among the states for which the special veterans' census of 1890 survived, National Archives number M123. Massachusetts is on FHL films #338170-175. However, Worcester Co. is missing. Not only is this census on microfilm, it has been indexed. See Bryan Lee Dilts, *1890 Massachusetts Census Index of Civil War Veterans or their Widows* (Salt Lake City: Index Pub., 1985). It is important to look at the actual census film, because the entry will give a great deal of information which can lead you to various war records, particularly of the Civil War, but also occasionally of the War of 1812 or the Mexican War.

The State Censuses of 1855 and 1865

The original schedules of these censuses are at the Massachusetts State Archives. However, even there one must use the microfilm. NEHGS has copies of the 68 films, which are also available at any LDS Family History Center.

Most towns are unindexed, but Ann S. Lainhart has transcribed, indexed, and published some 73 towns. Copies are at many libraries. Search the NEHGS library catalog by author's name and town [here](#) or the [Family History Library Catalog](#) by author's name for a list.

The 1771 Tax

Original schedules for about half of the towns in the state survive and are in the State Archives, but Betty Pruitt has published a massive computerized index volume available in many libraries. Not only does this give the name of the landowner, it also lists buildings, livestock, and produce. See Betty Hobbs Pruitt, *The Massachusetts Tax Valuation List of 1771* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978).

The 1798 Direct Tax

This federal tax identifies both owner and tenant of each individual property, plus some additional descriptive information. Only parts of Norfolk and Suffolk Counties are missing. The original schedules for this federal tax are owned by NEHGS and were filmed by them in 1978, along with an index and guide. They are available on microfilm at the Family History Library but are not available for circulation to Family History Centers. However, the film may have been purchased from NEHGS by other libraries. See also Michael H. Gorn, ed., *An Index and Guide to the Microfilm Edition of the Massachusetts and Maine Direct Tax Census of 1798* (Boston: NEHGS, 1979). The Boston list was published in volume 22 of the Boston Record Commissioners series of city records.

Other Tax Records

Every town compiled tax lists every year. There were town, church, school and county taxes as well as colony or state taxes. These may sometimes be found among the town records, often on microfilm. Not only do these lists give some idea of the individual's real estate and wealth relative to other townsmen, they may indicate how many males over 21 were in the household. In fact, many individuals were only taxed on their polls, so they provide a good check on the birth year when a young man appears for the first time.

Many lists other than those for 1771 are at the State Archives. Look also under the category "taxation" in the Family History Library Catalog (FHL) as well as under "town records" for the town being searched. Copies of most, if not all, of the microfilms of Massachusetts town records in the FHL are at the State Archives on Columbia Point.

Other lists appear in various places. The Massachusetts State Library has some lists from 1780 to 1811 in their Special Collections in Room 55 in the basement of the west wing of the State House. See the bibliography below for some specific published records.

Brøderbund's Family Archive CD #136, the old GRS version, has records, probably mostly tax lists, for many Massachusetts towns. Unfortunately it does not identify the list itself beyond giving the year and the place. On the

other hand, these old GRS CDs can be searched by given name and played with in ways the newer search engine does not permit. The new version is CD #310, ambiguously labeled *Census Index: Colonial America, 1607-1789*. At Genealogy.com one can see a description of it and see how many entries it contains from each of twelve Massachusetts counties. One still does not know exactly what records it was compiled from, but it is nevertheless useful. Ronald Vern Jackson, *Records Indexed by AIS* ([Salt Lake City]: Corporation of the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of L.D.S., c1984, c1983), FHL microfiche 6067399, may contain the answer needed.

City Directories

As noted above, city directories can be a great help in locating individuals, particularly in the 1880 and 1910 censuses, but, since indexes are not perfect, they may also prove useful when someone cannot be found in 1900 or 1920. NEHGS has a large collection of Massachusetts city and town directories on microfiche. A joint project with Ancestry.com will put these on-line over the next few years.

Of course, one must have an inkling of what town to look in, but once one does, an individual can be followed from year to year (sometimes at two-year intervals). Not only does this provide a name and address, it often gives the occupation, the place of business as well as the home, the deceased husband of a widow and sometimes even information about death or removal to another town!

Don't overlook other features of these directories. Use the street directory to pinpoint between which cross streets a house number falls and the description of wards to identify which census microfilm to consult. Look at the business directories, advertisements and other supplementary pages, which may differ from year to year and publisher to publisher.

City directories are available in many places: NEHGS to begin with, also the Boston Public Library, the Massachusetts State Library, local libraries and the Family History Library, The American Antiquarian Society in Worcester and the Library of Congress.

A Bibliography

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