

# The Index to Providence, Rhode Island Probate Database on NewEnglandAncestors.org

By Maureen A. Taylor

Searching for Providence probate records just got easier with *NewEnglandAncestors.org*'s new database, "Index to Providence, Rhode Island Probate, 1646–1899." Researchers can now locate case numbers and search for names, dates, and case types with just a few mouse clicks (and a NEHGS membership). The index, compiled by Edward Field, was originally published in 1902 and titled *Index to the probate records of the Municipal court of the city of Providence, Rhode Island. From 1646 to and including the year 1899* (Snow & Farnham). It quickly became a vital tool for anyone looking for ancestors with Providence connections, and is still one of the first reference volumes researchers consult when checking for such data. The published index is the result of efforts undertaken by the clerk of the Municipal Court in 1897 to organize all pre-1891 documents. Amazingly, this entire project only took three years to complete, and by 1900, the cumulative index from 1646 to 1899 was available for use. The online database contains almost 30,000 probate cases handled over the course of two and a half centuries. It is fully searchable by name, case number, date, or type of probate.

The easy-to-use search engine for the database provides genealogists and historians with a number of options. For instance, you can search by name—first, last, or both. There is a soundex option when you are unsure of how to spell a name. A general search for all individuals named "Brown" provides the expected results plus spelling variations such as "Browne." If you know the case number but not the name of the person it belongs to, you can search by the number alone. You can narrow your choices by selecting the year of the probate record or search for all cases in a particular time frame be it one year or a span of dates.

My favorite search feature is by type of case. It is important to remember that a probate document can contain more than just a will. There are administrations, affidavits, apprentices, inventories, etc. There are a total of fifty-two options, from absentees to wills. For example, if you are searching for an ancestor that might have been adopted you can search for such case types as adoption, dependent child, and guardianships. According to law, cases that involved children were administered by the probate courts in Rhode Island.

You may also search for dependent children cared for by the Rhode Island Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the State Board of Control by performing a search by organization. The results include the name of the child, the year their case entered the public record, and the relevant case number. Searching the records of Rhode Island Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children can help you reconstruct family groups. Since the Society removed children from unfortunate family situations, the date of the probate record for dependent children can be a first step in finding verification of family relationships and additional record sources.

So, how do you use the information in the index to find the documents? Well, it is a three-step process. First, find the document number in the index. In the case of Mary Rhodes, who died in 1728, the probate index provides a date for the administration of her estate and a case number—A 320. Next, consult the docket index or record index to see if it is just an administration or also contains a will available. These are found at the Providence City Hall Archives (City Hall, Providence, Rhode Island, 02903, [401] 421-7740), on microfilm at the [Rhode Island Historical Society](#) (121 Hope St, Providence, Rhode Island, 02906, [401] 331-8575), and at the NEHGS Research Library.

Arranged by case number, the microfilm identifies the volume and page of the case type including administrations, wills, and inventories. Sometimes the database indicates what type of record will be found. Abijah Potter died at sea on November 6, 1795, and his will appears in the index as being filed in 1796. Until 1818, the city of Providence ordered an inventory of belongings for each probate, regardless of the size of the estate. Since both Mary Rhodes and Abijah Potter died before 1818 there should be an inventory of property for each of them. After 1818, inventories were prepared only for individuals who died intestate. The final step in the process is looking at the actual documents. The microfilm covering the years 1646–1870 can be viewed at the Rhode Island Historical Society or at the NEHGS Research Library. Materials dated after 1870 are found at the Providence City Hall, including Providence probate records from 1900 to the present. Out-of-state researchers unable to visit Rhode Island must request copies from city

or town clerks, the Rhode Island Historical Society, or from the NEHGS Research Services department.

As you utilize the database and the probate records you will need to become familiar with some terminology.

**Intestate:** A person dies without a will and settlements are according to law.

**Guardianship:** A guardian appointed by the court to manage the estate of children when their father dies or because someone is unable to care for himself or herself. The remaining parent can be named a legal guardian.

**Administration:** The actions of an individual responsible for managing the settlement of the estate.

Understanding the historical context in which probate records were created is an important step. This can be done by researching the estate laws in existence at the time of death or creation of the document. In Rhode Island, the [Rhode Island State Law Library](#) (Frank Licht Judicial Complex, 250 Benefit Street, Providence, Rhode Island, 02903, [401] 222-3275) is a good place to start. If you live outside of the area, you can find copies of state laws, as at law libraries throughout the county. Most are open to the public.

As you will discover, probate records are the gateway to other types of material. These dockets can also include child custody decisions, manumissions, and name changes. In Arlene Eakle's chapter on "Research in Court Records" in *The Source* (Ancestry, 1997), there is a checklist of the types of other documents handled by probate courts. They can verify a death date, establish family relationships, identify professions, and lead to other records. When used in conjunction with colonial records, Providence city directories (starting in 1824), federal and state census records, and tax records, you can reconstruct the daily lives of your ancestors. While it is generally assumed that the majority of people left no probate documents, the law prior to 1818 ensured that those individuals unlikely to leave wills would have an inventory. One woman owned only a few pots and the clothes she wore, but an inventory existed because she died before 1818.

Researchers looking for probate documents in other communities within Rhode Island should visit the town halls or consult town records on microfilm at the Rhode Island Historical Society and the NEHGS Library. The dates of probate documents on microfilm for the other cities and towns vary, so it is best to consult the NEHGS online catalog for holdings, or the town clerk for the city or town of interest. You can also find out if such records exist by checking volume 16 of Nellie C. Beaman's *Rhode Island Genealogical Register* (Princeton, MA: Rhode Island Families Association, 1992), also known as the "will index" for probate records outside Providence, from 1636 through 1840.

The "Index to Providence, Rhode Island Probate, 1646–1899" database is a great tool for anyone looking for individuals who died in Providence during that time period. Follow the steps to reconnect to the original documents and you may uncover fascinating and revealing material about your ancestors that cannot be found elsewhere.