

# A Picture Perfect Past: Finding Rhode Island Family Portraits

By Maureen A. Taylor

Looking for ancestral portraits can be like looking for a needle in a haystack. I would love to have a picture of everyone on my family tree from the advent of photography in 1839 to the present, but apparently many of my ancestors didn't seek out the services of a professional photographer. There were undoubtedly other ancestors that could not afford a camera. That doesn't mean I have given up. If your relatives are like mine, it makes the search more difficult, but don't assume you will not find anything. Several years ago, my father suddenly appeared with a framed, oversized charcoal portrait of my great grandfather that he rescued from a cousin. As with all types of family research you never know what you are going to find until you start to look.

There are several ways to discover those long lost visages. Contacting family, searching libraries (both online and traditional), digging through auctions and flea markets, and looking at family and photo reunion websites are all wonderful ways to discover those family photographs. Locating images is all about learning how to use the tools at your disposal.

## Family Collections

The most likely place to uncover new family images is in the collections of relatives. They may have albums of carefully labeled photographs of weddings, family gatherings, and other events, or they may just have piles of unidentified and identified images in boxes. The good news is that some of the unidentified subjects in your collection might be identified in their collection.

It is important to set up appointments to go through private photographic collections, so you have the time to carefully look at every photograph and hopefully make copies of some of them. Some individuals decide the best time to exchange photographs is by planning a family reunion. If you have lost track of family, you can use the Internet to locate distant cousins by posting queries on message boards requesting images of ancestors. There is usually no fee to use these message boards. See my article on searching manuscript collections online in this website's "Computer Genealogist" column (also in summer 2002 issue of *New England Ancestors*) for advice on finding family photographs hidden in manuscript materials. You might actually add other documents to your family archive in addition to photographs.

## Libraries

There are two types of libraries-the traditional bricks and mortar variety and the electronic libraries found on the Internet. Many libraries have now digitized their holdings for their websites, enabling you to search collections from home. I am unaware of any Rhode Island-based libraries with digitized picture collections online as yet, but there could very well be plans in the works for such a project. Remember to search traditional libraries for biographical encyclopedias and family histories, as these may contain engravings. For instance, the *Biographical Cyclopedia of Rhode Island* contains beautiful steel engravings of notable citizens along with information.

## Traditional Libraries

### [Rhode Island Historical Society](#)

121 Hope St.  
Providence, RI  
02906  
(401) 331-8575

The largest collection of images in the state can be found in the Graphics Department of this library. Beautifully organized and well cared for, the collection is open to the public, but only by appointment due to a lack of seating space. The knowledgeable staff will bring material to you from vertical files arranged by subject, location, or surname. Separate family collections called "lots" and group portraits are also available. If you ancestor belonged to a particular organization, let the staff know so you can make the most of your limited time. General research is done by looking

through files of photocopies, rather than original images to decrease the wear and tear on the photographs. You can order duplicates for a fee.

If you do not live in the area, it would be worth hiring a researcher to conduct a search on your behalf. Contact the RIHS Reference Department for a list of local researchers. You can write to them directly, but because of the hundreds of requests the Graphics Department receives it could take a while to get a response.

#### [Newport Historical Society](#)

82 Touro St.  
Newport, RI  
02840  
(401) 846-1853

This historical society also maintains a photographic department that focuses on individuals and organizations from the Newport area. Their website has an online guide to its larger photographic collections and graphic materials.

#### [The New England Historic Genealogical Society](#)

101 Newbury St.  
Boston, MA  
02116  
(617)-536-5740

Many people join the NEHGS to use its manuscript collections without being aware that many of those family manuscripts also contain photographs. If an inventory exists for a particular collection, check to see if there is a box of images listed. For further confirmation, ask a member of the staff of the Manuscripts Department, or a staff librarian.

Local public libraries usually also maintain local history collections that might contain ancestral portraits. See the article on this website titled "[A Rhode Island Research Directory](#)" for more information on public libraries.

### **Online Libraries**

There are two websites with digital collections that you must include in your search because they are nationwide in scope.

#### [The Library of Congress](#)

The American Memory Project is a collection of over seven million digital images from more than 100 collections on a vast variety of subjects. Every time I look there is something new to see. Their search feature enables you to either search all the collections at once or pick a single collection.

#### [United States Army Military History Institute](#)

Attn: Special Collections  
22 Ashburn Dr.  
Carlisle, PA 17013-5008  
<http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usamhi/photoDB.html>

If one of your Rhode Island ancestors served in the military you will want to search this organization's online image collection. This library has photographs from the Mexican-American War of 1846 to the present, but the bulk of the material dates from the Civil War. They have both group and individual portraits. If you locate a relevant image you can write to them for copies.

### **Additional Online Options**

### **Search engines**

Try typing your ancestors surname into a standard search engine and see if you find any hits. You might discover a family website with pictures. Now attempt it again using one of the following image search engines. Instead than finding websites associated with your search terms, image search engines find images that contain your search words in nearby text and file names.

### **Google Image Search**

### **Altavista Image Search**

If you want more options, [Quickfound.net](#) reviews the various image search engines available on the Internet.

### **Photo Reunion Sites**

You are not alone in your search for family pictures. Every day another family collection ends up being discarded or sold. There are a few websites whose purpose is to reunite these "lost images" with the rightful family. The advantage with these sites is that you might find just what you are looking for. [Cyndi's List](#) features a good selection of photo reunion sites under "Lost & Found" from the above link.

### **Family Websites**

Find photographs on family websites by either using a standard search engine or by using one of the larger websites like [Myfamily.com](#), [Genealogy.com](#), or [Familytreemagazine.com](#). If you locate a site without images that contains family data, send email to the webmaster inquiring about photographs and see what turns up.

### **Auctions and Flea Markets**

It takes patience to look for family photographs in auctions and flea markets but some friends have made amazing discoveries. I actually found an identified portrait of one of my husband's distant ancestors at a photo antique sale for one dollar! Serendipity rules when looking through piles of images. Don't forget to use the online auction sites like [eBay](#). Scouring antiques shops for images is a good way to spend the day, but be prepared to find fifty unidentified images for every identified one.

Face it, the only reason you want to find a picture of an ancestor is to get a sense of what they looked like. There are ways to fill in those details without photographic evidence. I may never find a portrait of my great-great grandfather, but his Civil War Pension application contains a description of a man with red hair and green eyes. Expand your search for photographs to include prints, paintings, and even descriptive documents and you'll increase your success. So go back and reexamine your genealogical documents and see if you can find a physical description of your ancestor and then use your imagination. Your mind won't be able to show you exactly how they looked like in an actual photograph, but you'll get the general idea.