

Connecticut Women: Not Completely Hidden from History, Part I: Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Women

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Have you attempted to learn more about your female Connecticut ancestors? Discovering a maiden surname sometimes seems like a major achievement. Connecticut's extensive collection of early public records contains little information about individual women, and few personal papers of Connecticut women survive from the pre-Revolutionary War era. Women of this period were for the most part poorly educated and seldom legally permitted to own real property if married. Those women that were married often signed away their dower rights to land with a mark on the deed. Courts sometimes denied widows guardianship rights for their children. Few women were employed outside their homes, and those who were could not claim and control their own earnings, which were instead paid to their fathers or husbands. Women had no formal role in and little influence over town government, and speaking out in public was considered unsuitable behavior. Take heart! The following records and publications **do** contain information about Connecticut women — possibly even about your ancestor(s)!

Seventeenth-Century Connecticut Women

Winthrop's Medical Journal

The medical journal of John Winthrop, Jr., is one of the earliest surviving documents containing an abundance of information about mid-seventeenth-century Connecticut women.

A physician, Winthrop traveled around Connecticut to treat patients, noting dates, locations, names, brief biographical information, symptoms, and prescriptions. His one thousand-page medical journal begins on March 10, 1656/7 and ends on July 26, 1669, with a gap of two years from 1661 to 1663 when he was in England.

Winthrop's original journal, at the Massachusetts Historical Society, is the subject of a feature article, written by Robert Charles Anderson in the *Great Migration Newsletter* (vol. 9, no. 1 [Jan.-March 2000]). At the time the article was written, Anderson was transcribing the journal for future publication. Until this work is available, researchers can refer to a series of articles prepared by Col. Charles E. Banks and published in *The American Genealogist* (vol. 9, pp. 54-61, 64; vol. 23, pp. 62-64, 124-128, 231-34; and vol. 24, pp. 41-47, 108-15). They feature an alphabetical listing of abstracts of journal entries containing genealogical information.

Since Winthrop lived in New Haven when he began keeping his journal, many entries refer to patients living near the Connecticut coast and even in Southampton, Long Island. He moved to Hartford in 1657 and began tending to the residents of that town, as well as the towns of Windsor, Farmington, Wethersfield, Middletown, and even Springfield.

In his article, Robert Charles Anderson emphasizes the valuable genealogical information that relates to Winthrop's male patients. My focus is on information about Winthrop's female patients. In fact, the majority of journal entries mention female family members by name. Genealogical information includes family relationships, ages, number and names of children, marital status, and if married, sometimes both maiden surname and husband's name.

I recall my delight in finding an entry that refers to my husband's ancestor Deborah (Wathen) Joy. Her entry from Banks' abstracts indicates the abbreviated format he devised:

JOY. p 32. Walter, his wife. Milford, 1657 (TAG 23:233). (Page numbers refer to the page in the original journal.)

This short entry tells me that Walter Joy was still alive in 1657 and that his wife (and possibly Walter) was then in Milford and not Massachusetts where they previously lived. Another entry may provide genealogical information not found elsewhere:

BROWNE. p. 726. 1667. Mary, 12 yrs., dau. of Francis of Stamford, lives with Nathl Reskue of Hartford as his adopted dau. (TAG 9:59).

In fact, Stamford vital records include only the marriage of Francis Brown and Martha Chapman on 17, 10, 1657. This

raises questions about a previous marriage for Francis Brown as well as what happened to Francis and Martha (Chapman) Brown. One may also wonder why his daughter was in Hartford with Nathaniel Reskue, a name that does not appear in Stamford records.

Winthrop identified some of his patients as servants. For non-English patients Winthrop usually stated ethnic background (Scottish, French, Dutch, Irish) or race (Native American or African American), indicating the varied nature of Connecticut's early population. Anderson estimates that several hundred patients were Native American, mainly Podunk Indians living near Hartford, and that several dozen patients were African American.

In his *Great Migration Newsletter* article, Robert Charles Anderson cautions that in addition to abstracting only a portion of journal entries and omitting medical diagnoses and prescriptions, Banks erroneously transcribed some words. Until a complete transcription is available, Banks' abstracts can help researchers decide whether to consult the original journal.

Deviant Behavior

Behavior considered socially deviant attracted attention in the seventeenth century as it does today. One of my favorite publications about seventeenth-century New England women is Lyle Koehler's *A Search for Power, The "Weaker Sex" in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980). Koehler describes and then analyzes the limitations and oppression women faced in their daily lives and their varied responses. A series of appendices at the end of the text provide quick reference to the names of women whose behavior may have deviated from seventeenth-century norms. You might find your Connecticut ancestor's name listed there!

A list of petitions for divorce in New England from 1620 to 1699, arranged by colony, is found in Appendix 1 of Koehler's book. Forty-seven petitions were from Connecticut residents. Koehler indicates the dates of petitions (1655-1699), names of petitioners and spouses (seventy percent of the Connecticut petitioners were wives), causes (primarily desertion, adultery, bigamy, or impotence), disposition of cases (nearly eighty percent of petitions were granted), and sources of information. Residences of petitioners are not included. Two listings from 1680 are for the same Connecticut couple. First, James Wakely petitioned for divorce from his wife Alice for "refusal to accompany her husband to Newport." His petition was denied. Then Alice petitioned for divorce from James for "desertion." The disposition of her case is unknown.

Only one Connecticut name, a Mrs. Guilbert of Hartford, is included in Appendix 2, "Female Innkeepers and Liquor-Sellers in New England, 1620-1699." Appendix 4, "Suspected Killings of Children (Mostly Infants) by Their Mothers in New England, 1620-1699," includes four Connecticut women: Ruth Briggs of New Haven (1667), an unidentified woman from Hartford (1668), Mercy Brown of Connecticut (1690), and Amy Mun of Farmington (1699).

Witchcraft

Names of Connecticut women accused of witchcraft from 1620 to 1699 are included in Appendix 5. Of the three hundred fifteen New England individuals Koehler lists as accused, only thirty-nine were from Connecticut – twenty-six women and thirteen men. In seven Connecticut cases both husbands and wives were accused. While the majority of accusations in Massachusetts were made in early 1692, in Connecticut most occurred in the Hartford area before 1670 or in the Fairfield-Stamford area after the 1692 frenzy in Salem died down.

A booklet by Ronald Marcus, "Elizabeth Clawson...Thou Deseruest to Dye" (Stamford: Stamford Historical Society, 1976) is an account of the June 1692 Stamford trial of a woman who was accused and acquitted of being a witch. Marcus describes in detail the accusations of a young Stamford servant, Katherine Branch, against five area women. Of special interest to genealogists with late seventeenth-century Stamford ancestors is the photocopy and transcription of an affidavit attesting to the innocence of Elizabeth Clawson, one of the accused. Among the names of the seventy-six individuals who signed the document are the signatures or marks of twenty-nine Stamford women, who by their courageous stand in defense of their friend and neighbor have also proved to us that they were living in Stamford on June 4, 1692.

Additional sources of information about witchcraft cases in Connecticut include:

- Karlsen, Carol F. *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, Witchcraft in Colonial New England*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987.

In this volume based on her Yale doctoral dissertation, historian Karlsen includes the names of many Connecticut women.

- Levermore, C.H. "Witchcraft in Connecticut, 1647-1697." *New Englander and Yale Review*, XLIV (1885): 792-815.
- Taylor, John Metcalf. *The Witchcraft Delusion in Colonial Connecticut, 1647-1697*. New York: Grafton Press, 1908.
This volume is a classic in the field.
- Wyllys Papers. Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society, XXI. Hartford: Connecticut Historical Society, 1924.
- Wyllys Papers. Records of Trials for Witchcraft in Connecticut. Annmary Brown Memorial, Brown University Library, Providence, Rhode Island. (Original documents)
- Wyllys Papers Supplement: Depositions on Cases of Witchcraft Tried in Connecticut, 1662-1693. Annmary Brown Memorial, Brown University Library, Providence, Rhode Island. Copy at Archives, History and Genealogy Unit, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, Connecticut.

The Wyllys Papers contain the most comprehensive study of witchcraft in Connecticut.

Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, 1636-1776

The University of Connecticut has digitized the fifteen volumes of the *Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, 1636-1776* (Hartford, 1850), and has made them available [online](#) with an A-Z subject index that includes surnames. Although the majority of index entries refer to Connecticut men, some entries are for women, so enter your ancestor's surname and see what comes up.

Eighteenth-Century Connecticut Women

While eighteenth-century women were somewhat better educated than their seventeenth-century ancestors, their roles and power outside the home remained limited. Since few women stand out as individuals whose public activities are on record, discovering details about the lives of specific women is challenging.

Divorce Records

Divorce records can be found at the Connecticut State Library in Hartford. Record Group 1 (Lotteries and Divorces), covering the years 1718–1820, is indexed and contains various documents, legal and otherwise, relating to women's efforts to free themselves from unsuccessful marriages. Included are petitions, resolves, depositions, and court orders, as well as descriptions of events leading to the court actions. Record Group 3 includes Superior Court records with unusually complete files on divorce for the following counties:

County	Dates
Fairfield	1711–1798
Hartford	1740–1849
Litchfield	1752–1922
Middlesex	1786–1797
New Haven	1712–1900
New London	1719–1875
Tolland	1787–1910

Town Records

Connecticut town records contain occasional references to women. Early records of only a few towns have been transcribed and published. Usually it is necessary to read original records, photocopies or originals, or microfilms of the originals. Among published town records are:

- Burr, Jean Chandler. ed. and comp., *Lyme Records 1667–1730* (Stonington, Conn: The Pequot Press, Inc., 1968).
- Gannett, Michael R. transcriber, *Cornwall Documents: Town Meeting Minutes 1740–1875* (Cornwall, Conn.: Cornwall Historical Society, 1984)

The every-name index to *Lyme Records 1667–1730* includes the names of several women. For the most part, their entries concern land transactions, property of widows that abutted proposed new town roads, and town support of poor women. A more unusual entry, dated August 16, 1705, states:

“At the same metting wharas Thomas Lord Seiner [senior] complained of for the enteraning of a widdow Hanah Boothe lat of Long Island and after warning given by the Select men of the Towne Still the same widow is entertained by said Lord . and to prevent any damadge I the said Thomas Lord doe by these presents bind myself my hairs . . . exempt . . . the sume of one hundred pounds in current paye...to be paid to the Towne upon any dammidge the said Towne shall sustaine by sd widdow wither for her maintinac in sickness or in health ...Thomas Lord.”

Names of more than twenty women appear in the index to *Cornwall Documents*. Although while most entries refer to issues of property or poverty, two brave Cornwall women, Mary Allen and Mary Horsford, signed a petition in 1757 protesting against a town vote to increase taxes.

Revolutionary War Era Records

Two very different books, both written by historians, pertain to Connecticut women during the Revolutionary War era. One provides general information about the lives of Connecticut women of that era, while the other contains detailed information about one woman’s life, family, and surroundings.

- Fennelly, Catherine. *Connecticut Women in the Revolutionary Era*, A Publication of the American Revolution Bientennial Commission of Connecticut (Chester, Conn.: Pequot Press, 1975).
- Buel, Joy Day and Richard Buel Jr., *The Way of Duty: A Woman and Her Family in Revolutionary America* (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984).

Catherine Fennelly’s study describes various aspects of the lives of Connecticut women during the mid- and late-eighteenth century: their education, work, health, dress, lack of legal rights, and social activities. The last chapter covers, in detail, contributions of Connecticut women to the Revolutionary War effort, both as Patriots and as Loyalists. Although Fennelly mentions several Revolutionary War era women by name, she explains, “Tales of individual contributions by Connecticut women are few indeed.” Nevertheless, general information found in this study can help build historical context for your ancestor’s life story. Unfortunately, the volume lacks an index.

The Way of Duty is the biography of Mary Fish (1736–1818), who was born in Stonington and lived in both the New Haven area and in Fairfield County during her three marriages. Her biography is based on documents from the Silliman Papers at Yale University Library and the Noyes Papers at New Canaan Historical Society. Surviving documents include Mary (Fish) Noyes Silliman Dickinson’s correspondence, ledgers, and journals. While her life was in many ways similar to the lives of her contemporaries, her education, character, family, and associates set her apart and enabled her to achieve an independence that eluded most Connecticut women of her era.

Information about some (primarily widowed) late eighteenth-century Connecticut women can be found in Revolutionary War damage claim lists, grand [tax] lists for Connecticut towns, and the 1790 Connecticut United States Census. Analyzed together, these sources can provide considerable information about households headed by women.

Residents of several Connecticut towns, especially along the coast opposite Long Island, lost personal property during Tory raids. Soon after the Revolutionary War ended, such individuals filed damage claims for the purpose of state tax abatement. After languishing in the basement of Stamford Town Hall for more than one hundred fifty years, the Stamford damage claims were rediscovered and given to the Stamford Historical Society. In 1968, the Society published the lists as *Stamford Revolutionary War Damage Claims*, edited by Ronald Marcus. Names of twenty-five Stamford women, mostly widows, are included. Rebecca Brown, a widow and mother of a large family whose husband died in 1772, filed claims on December 5, 1781 for losses incurred on June 3, 1779 and during 1780 (pages 10-13). Her long list of plundered household goods and clothing suggests the nature and extent of domestic possessions at that time, while her losses of poultry, animals, grain, farm equipment, and tools, as well as a boat and sails suggest the varied economic activities of her household. For damage claims from other towns, check historical society manuscript collections and the Revolutionary War Series at the Connecticut State Library in Hartford.

After the Revolutionary War, Connecticut required towns to compile annual grand lists of residents' real and personal property for tax purposes. Surviving town grand lists can be found in Record Group 62 at the Connecticut State Library, at the Connecticut Historical Society, or at local historical societies. The Stamford Historical Society has grand lists for most years between 1781 and 1819. Towns levied poll taxes on males of voting age. Property taxes were levied on

- The number of oxen, cows, horses, and swine
- The number of chimneys in the dwelling
- Various categories of land
- Personal property such as clocks, gold and silver watches, silver plate and carriages
- Occupations including attorney, tradesman, doctor, and tavern keeper

Grand lists are especially valuable to genealogists since they include the names of many widows who were heads of households. The name of Widow Rebecca Brown can be found in the Stamford Grand List of 1781. She was taxed on thirteen animals, two chimneys in her dwelling, and sixty-eight acres of land.

Information about heads of households (both men and women) found in Revolutionary War damage claims lists, grand lists, and listings in the 1790 Connecticut census can be correlated with information from vital records to provide considerable personal data for analysis. Continuing with the example of Widow Rebecca Brown, her 1790 census listing in Stamford indicates that her household included four males of sixteen years and older and three females (*Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States, 1790 Connecticut* [Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 1980], page 26). This information is consistent with information about the size of her family found in Stamford vital records. Perhaps Tory raiders considered her property a prime target. A widow without a male head of household, she probably lived near the shore (a boat and sails were taken) and may have been known to possess many valuable household items: pewterware, glassware, feather beds with sheets, pillows, coverlets, quilts and blankets, cooking utensils, axes and other tools, imported handkerchiefs, bonnets, shifts, gowns, fans, silver buckles, jackets, coats, hats, shirts, trousers, more than sixty yards of cloth, as well as many geese, hens, calves, horses, and sheep, and even currency, spectacles, razors, and an ink stand – all taken by Tories! The complete list of plundered items resembles an inventory and provides an intimate glimpse into the domestic circumstances of her family life. After the raids, as attested by the 1781 grand list, she had several animals, her house, and land, but no taxable luxury goods.

Creative correlation of information from several sources can significantly increase your knowledge and understanding of a female ancestor's experiences and circumstances.

Part II in this series will focus on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Connecticut women.