

Help Wanted: Researching the Employment History of Your Ancestors

By Maureen A. Taylor

There are several places to look for business and employment information for your ancestors — it's just a matter of knowing where to look and how to use the material. In his research chapter written for the popular guidebook *The Source*¹, Kory L. Meyerink tells how business records can be used to “provide important genealogical information in the absence of traditional genealogical records, [and to] provide clues that lead to new discoveries.” Business records can also be used to fill in biographical details to help you understand your ancestors and the times in which they lived.

Locating Collections

Start with home sources and see if you can find an account book, employment card, or photographic evidence of your ancestors' working life. I recently rediscovered my great-grandfather's account book for the family house painting business, which contains lists of the people he worked for as well as their payments and debts. Surprisingly, some of the names were familiar to me. He worked for friends and neighbors and his record keeping provides me with a sense of where he worked as well as new clues to investigate.

The great news for Rhode Island genealogists is that the Rhode Island Historical Society has been collecting business records since their founding in 1822. Their manuscripts curator, Richard Stattler, has compiled a list of the companies represented in their collections, arranged by topic and with dates of coverage. There is an amazing breadth and depth to the collection, which represents everything from individual artisans to the records of multinational corporations based in the state. The manuscripts date from the early eighteenth century through the twentieth century. His inventory does not include individual account books or apprenticeship documents mixed in with personal papers also found in the collections. Whether your ancestor was business owner, an employee, or a customer, this extensive collection of material may be of value to you.

Additional business records can be located using the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUMUC) that can be searched [online](#). Each entry includes a brief description of the collection and where it is located. You can then write to that institution to learn about the full scope of the material and their usage policies.

Books

Peter Coleman's *Transformation of Rhode Island, 1790-1860* (Brown University, 1963) provides an overview of Rhode Island's participation in the Industrial Revolution. If your ancestors worked in manufacturing, consult the *Biographical History of the Manufacturers and Business Men of Rhode Island at the Opening of the Twentieth Century* (J.D. Hall, 1901) for a history of larger companies and profiles of their owners.

Directories

City directories include a person's occupation and sometimes the name of their employer. Directories are also a great way to trace the growth of a company or its demise. Before deciding that the business your ancestors worked for is defunct, try to find out through directories and incorporation papers (see below) whether the business was acquired or merged into another company.

Business directories listed the names and locations of businesses within their area of coverage. Providence city directories began publishing business listings in the back as early as 1847, arranged by business or profession. Separate business directories for Providence and Rhode Island began publication in 1872.

Employment records

Some modern business records include a list of employees and what they were paid. In some cases, there is additional information. At the Rhode Island Historical Society, the majority of records related to business and employment are kept in business collections within their manuscripts department. I recently asked RIHS manuscripts curator Richard Stattler about the types of information found in employment records in their collection. He replied, “First of all, not all of the business collections at the Rhode Island Historical Society have employment records. Finding them would

involve reading through each of the respective finding aids. Employment records generally are limited to payroll — who was paid, and how much. In unusual cases, RIHS might have applications or pension records giving more data. Individual production records can sometimes be found for workers paid for piecework. Some of the modern records have seniority lists, showing date of hire. Some early mill records occasionally list workers by family, demonstrating a relationship, because they were hired as a group.”

Journals and Newspapers

The Providence Magazine and Board of Trade Journal (1889 –1934) was a monthly journal published by Providence Chamber of Commerce that reported on happenings in the business community. The Rhode Island Historical Society Library and the Providence Public Library have complete runs of this publication, and RIHS keeps a partial index to it. Don’t forget to look for company periodicals and magazines. For instance, during World War II, the Kaiser Shipyard in Providence published *The Yardarm* that included a profile in each issue on one of the women employed there.

Legislative Charters and Incorporation Papers.

From the 1700s to 1900, businesses frequently applied for charter from the Rhode Island General Assembly. These charters are indexed by subject and business name at the Rhode Island State Library (State House, Room 208, Providence, Rhode Island, 02903, 401-222-2473). The index references the citation for the charter that appears in the Acts and Resolves of the General Assembly. The staff of the State Library accepts phone and mail requests for information. The website of the State of Rhode Island features a [database](#) of businesses that applied for incorporation papers from 1984 to the present. A card index organized by business name for the colonial period through 1983 is located at the Corporations Division building (100 North Main St., Providence, Rhode Island, 02903 401-222-3040). They accept mail inquiries and up to three questions via phone.

Manufacturing Census

Individuals who owned their own businesses were categorized in a special decennial census taken in the same year as the federal population census. Consult Meyer H. Fishbein’s *The Censuses of Manufactures, 1810-1890*, *Reference Information Paper 50* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1973); and Kathleen Hinckley’s *Your Guide to the Federal Census for Genealogists, Researchers, and Family Historians* (Betterway, 2001). Rhode Island industry and manufacturing censuses exist for the years 1810, 1820, and 1850 through 1860. Since photographers were considered manufacturers in 1850, they appear in the manufacturing census. No business was too small for inclusion. Each listing contained the name of the owner, location, number of employees, and additional information varying by census.

Unions

Through the efforts of the Rhode Island Labor History Society, the Rhode Island Historical Society has been collecting union papers for the last twenty years. "A Guide to the Historical Study of R.I. Working People," by Scott Molloy, et al (RILHS, 1996), features a description of this particular collection. Richard Stattler noted that most of the union records included dues and membership books, but that it varies on a case-by-case basis.

With so many resources to choose from there is no reason not to research your ancestors’ working lives. Why not start today?

1. Kory L. Meyerink, “Research in Business, Employment, and Institutional Records” (*The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy*, Ancestry, 1997)