Mapping Rhode Island

By Maureen A. Taylor

After years of looking you have finally found your Rhode Island link living in a place called Biscuit City! You have never heard of Biscuit City and you are unsuccessful finding any information on the place. Congratulations, you have just discovered one of the reasons genealogical research in Rhode Island is so challenging. Although Rhode Island has only 37 cities and towns with geographical and political divisions, it has more than one hundred villages, many of which native Rhode Islanders still identify with. For instance, when you ask a resident of Glocester where they are from they may say Chepachet (a village). Many of these villages and post offices no longer exist except in public records, family documents, and oral histories. So what can a researcher do to find where an ancestor lived? A good map or gazetteer will certainly help, and there are plenty of them available to Rhode Island researchers.

Seventeenth and even eighteenth-century maps consisted of plat maps, boundary lines, or military campaign maps. One early map of Providence shows a rough outline of houses drawn by Brown University student John Fitch in 1790. Another early Providence map is known as the Powder Horn map, so called because it was drawn on one. Both of these items are in the collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society. Like most maps prior to 1800 they are hand drawn rather than printed. While interesting to look at, there is little information contained in the maps. A few houses and a street in the Fitch map make it identifiable as Providence, but for the genealogist these two examples are not very useful.

According to David Cobb in his essay "Windows to Our Past: Mapping in the Nineteenth Century" (*Mapping Boston*, Muriel G. and Norman Levanthal Foundation, 1999), the American map-making industry began in the mid-1800s when a growing middle class created a demand for printed maps in major cities such as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. During this time, new county and state maps were printed, including many genealogically important maps of nineteenth century Rhode Island. These maps are generally several feet in length and width and either varnished or attached to a wooden rod for hanging. Some of these oversize maps also feature a list of businesses and prominent citizens.

One of the earliest state maps useful for genealogists is James Stevens' *A Topographical Map of the State of RI and Providence Plantations* (1831). On this map, small dots appear to represent houses along the major roads, but there are no names alongside the dots. For the Civil War period consult Henry F. Walling's *Map of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (1862). Walling began his career in Rhode Island, and became one of the nineteenth century's most productive cartographers. His maps reveal names of the occupants of houses that Stevens represented as unnamed dots on his earlier map. Congested areas are shaded, but if your ancestor lived in a rural area you might be able to find out approximately where their house stood. This map includes insets of larger villages such as Slatersville (Smithfield) and Greenville (Gloucester) along with a business directory. There is a Rand McNally & Company map of Rhode Island (*Atlas of the World*, 1895) showing many small villages that is viewable online.

Atlases

Late in the nineteenth century, atlases became popular because they were able to accommodate larger and more detailed maps. In addition to maps, these volumes often contain local history, business directories, and even lithographic portraits of prominent citizens. They frequently show property ownership. Another type of atlas developed and used by the Sanborn Insurance Company assessed the fire risk of urban areas. They generally just included the center city and surrounding residential blocks of towns and cities with a population of over 2,000. The information gathered about building composition (shown in color coding) and function is valuable to present-day genealogistsand environmental engineers. Sanborn maps from 1867 to 1970 can now be viewed online by subscription. Environmental Data Resources, Inc. (EDR) acquired the Sanborn maps in 1996. For more information on these maps and details on how to order them, contact EDR at 800-352-0050 or visit their website. Sanborn maps of Rhode Island cover the period 1884 to 1984 depending on the town.

Four Rhode Island atlases extremely useful to genealogists are:

- *Atlas of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations: from actual surveys and official records*, compiled by D.G.

Beers & Co., 1870
- *Atlas of the City of Providence and Environs*, G. M. Hopkins, 1882
- *New Topographical Atlas of Surveys, Southern Rhode Island*, Everts and Richards, 1895
- *New Topographical Survey of Northern Rhode Island*, Everts and Richards, 1895

Panoramic Maps or Bird's Eye Views

While not a map in the traditional definition, these "aerial" views show a three dimensional outlook of a particular city including buildings and street patterns. Very popular in the post-Civil War era, you can find panoramic maps for both small towns and large cities. Local Chambers of Commerce regularly sold them to promote civic pride. Consult the Library of Congress online catalog or *Panoramic Maps of Cities in the United States and Canada: A Checklist of Maps in the Collections of the Library of Congress* by John R. Hebert, compiler (revised edition, Library of Congress, 1984).

Gazetteers

To find background information and larger town locations for villages and post offices consult a gazetteer. *Gazetteer of the States of Connecticut and Rhode Island* (John C. Pease and John M. Niles, Hartford: W.S. Marsh, 1819) is a good one. The Peabody Museum at Yale University website allows you to search geographic features and town names.

Online Resources

American Memory Project
Railroad Maps, 1828-1900
Features two Rhode Island railroad maps.

Cyndi's List
For a comprehensive listing of map resources, consult her category "Maps, Gazetteers, and Geographical Information."

State of Rhode Island
Provides links and GPS information.

Rhode Island Digital Map Library
Want to help put more Rhode Island maps online? Find out how to become a volunteer coordinator for this site.

University of New Hampshire, Dimond Library
Search United States Geological Survey Maps (USGS) for Rhode Island

To find out if a map exists for a particular town call their local historical society, the Rhode Island Historical Society, or the Rhode Island State Archives. See my earlier article "A Rhode Island Research Directory," for more information about the various historical societies and libraries in Rhode Island.

An unpublished typescript by Linda Cranston, *Rhode Island in Maps: A Cartobibliography up to 1920* (M.A. Thesis Geography, University of Rhode Island, 1988) updates Howard M. Chapin's *Check List of Maps of Rhode Island* (Preston & Rounds Co., 1918). A copy of Cranston's typescript exists at the Rhode Island Historical Society and at the University of Rhode Island.

Since multiple copies of these maps exist, it is not always necessary to visit a Rhode Island library or archive to view them. Consult David K. Carrington and Richard W. Stephenson's *Map Collections in the United States and Canada* (New York: Special Libraries Association, 1984) to find a collection near you. Anyone interested in Rhode Island maps will definitely want to view the large collection of published and manuscript maps at the Rhode Island Historical Society in Providence. Due to limited space, an advance appointment is required to view this collection and most of the maps cannot be copied due to their fragile condition.

While maps are most useful when locating place names, they can also lead you to new discoveries. You can use them to track down an ancestral homestead, cemeteries, and even follow migration routes. Whatever you do, don't forget to include maps as part of your genealogical research. As for Biscuit City, it no longer exists, but at one time it was a small village in North Kingstown at the junction of two roads.