

# Church Records in Massachusetts

By Helen Schatvet Ullmann

Next to vital records, church records are perhaps the most sought-after resource in Massachusetts family history research. The Bay Colony having been founded partly for religious reasons, church records begin early in our state. But while many church records are readily available, others can be frustratingly difficult to find.

## **What sort of information can be found in church records?**

The earliest church records in Massachusetts are those of the Congregational Church. There are also early Episcopal records, but Quakers and Baptists were *personae non grata* in the Commonwealth, and many fled to Rhode Island. By the nineteenth century, though, we have the whole array of denominations. Different churches, of course, kept different kinds of records. While Congregationalists recorded infant baptisms, Baptists, to whom this practice was anathema, recorded only baptisms of youths and adults. Episcopalians and Lutherans often recorded confirmations, sometimes along with birth or baptism dates.

Besides baptisms, you will frequently find both marriage and death or burial records. In early colonial days, marriages were not usually a religious ceremony, so churches did not usually record them. As for deaths, it is often difficult to tell whether the date given is that of the death or of the burial. The difference could be important in some cases. While a child's baptism suggests that at least one of the parents was a church member, death records might be for anyone in the community.

Membership records are another important source of information. Sometimes notices of admission and dismissal appear in the records of church meetings. If a new member was admitted by letter from another church, you can often learn where that individual came from. Members were sometimes dismissed to other named churches or towns. Annotated membership lists can prove to be a treasure. Sometimes a death date was added, or the married surname of a woman who joined as a teenager. Sometimes these member records have been published in "Manuals" of the church. They can be found in libraries and historical societies. The original records may contain more detail.

The minutes of church meetings may also prove useful. All sorts of business was transacted in the meetings. The most interesting matters are usually disciplinary cases for everything from non-attendance to profanity, drunkenness, and fornication, but you will also find mention of people elected to office, paid for sweeping or repairing the meetinghouse, or permitted to build a pew. Often the church itself was a separate organization from the society that maintained the building and sold the pews. These latter records may be included in the town records. Those who argue today over separation of church and state seem to be ignorant of the fact that the Congregational Church was the established church of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts until 1833. The First Amendment evidently applied to Congress, not to the states.

## **How does one find church records in Massachusetts?**

Records of any particular Massachusetts church might be found in any number of places and in different formats. The original records may be at the church itself, in the town clerk's vault, or in an institution such as the Congregational Library in Boston, the Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston, the Harvard Divinity School Library, the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, or the Massachusetts Historical Society. You need to locate a central depository for that denomination.

Records may have been published or microfilmed. Transcriptions are often on deposit in any number of places. Abstracts may have been published in books, periodicals, and on microfilm; some may reside in libraries as manuscripts. Published abstracts will probably also be indexed. It's usually a good idea to look for a published transcription or abstract of the records first. That gives you the assistance of a transcriber who was probably very

familiar with the handwriting and organization of the original records. Then if you feel you need to look at the original, you have a head start. Check any or all of the following:

- [The NEHGS online catalog](#)
- Other catalogs in the NEHGS library. Walter Corbin's collection, [Vol1](#), [Vol2](#), [Vol3](#), of many types of town records is on NEHGS microfilm and is available many places.
- The Library of Congress [catalog](#).
- The Family History Library [catalog](#). This includes the Rollin G. Cooke Collection of the Berkshire Athenaeum, in Pittsfield, which contains transcriptions of many western Massachusetts church records.
- PERSI. Although few complete transcriptions of all records for a given church have been published, a journal may have published part of them verbatim or, more frequently, abstracts of baptisms, marriages, etc. The NEHG *Register* for example, published a new-found volume of Swansea Baptist Church records in vol. 139 (January 1985).
- [National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections](#) (NUCMC)
- Any other promising library or historical society.

Many of the published volumes of town vital records include church records of baptism, marriage, and death. However, in the "official series" (see [my previous column](#) on vital records) it appears that such records were included only when there was no corresponding record in town records or when the church record differed in some way. For example, the children of Nicholas Harris appear in the published Wrentham vital records, most of them with birth date, but a few with only baptismal date. All of them, however, appear in baptism records of the original Church of Christ in Wrentham.

Finding the original records of the church will take some detective work. Many churches have deposited their older records in an institution that has a vault: a denominational archive, a library, historical society, or even a bank. The easiest way to find them is probably to contact someone in the town: the church itself, a reference librarian, the town clerk, or a local historian. Do not take "There are none" for a final answer until you are certain you are talking with someone who really knows. Recently I had occasion to look at the records of a small town. Having checked with Worthley's inventory of Congregational Church records (cited below), I knew, or thought I knew, that they should be in the town clerk's vault. Over the phone the town clerk told me she did not have them. The church secretary had no idea where they were. Needing a look at town records as well, I went to the clerk's office anyway. Eventually she let me look in the vault myself, and there, in a small black metal box in a very awkward place, I found the church records.

Sometimes the church is no longer in existence. In this case, if the references given below fail you, a local historian may still be the best person to check with. Churches often merged, and the present church office may have the records. If not, the records may have ended up in the vault of an institution. Local and county histories usually provide some history of the churches, but they may or may not mention what has become of the records. City directories can help you pinpoint the name and location of churches.

You will find the following references helpful:

- See all the materials discussed in the first column of this series, particularly the [Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research](#), 4th ed., pp. 114-16. Look for information on denominational repositories.
- Elizabeth Petty Bentley, *The Genealogists' All-in-One Address Book*, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1998); also sold as Broderbund *Family Archives CD* #115.
- Family History Library Catalog, the Subject Section on microfiche only. You cannot search this online or on CD. Look for the name of the denomination.
- *Inventory of the Records of the Particular (Congregational) Churches of Massachusetts, Gathered 1620-1805 in Harvard Theological Studies*, vol. 25, Harold Field Worthley, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970) [at NEHGS: REF/BX7148/M4/W65/1970]. This covers, of course, only the Congregational Churches, but is much more detailed and up to date than Wright (see below).
- E. Kay Kirkham, *A Survey of American Church Records*, 4th ed. (Logan, Utah: Everton Publishers, 1978), pp. 149-58, tells where many, but not all, church records for specific Massachusetts towns are located.

- *Massachusetts Commissioners of Public Records, First Report* (1885), pp. 9-79 (this is the same as Wright, see below); *Tenth Report* (1897), pp. 1-189; *Twelfth Report* (1900), p. 10; *Fifteenth Report* (1902), pp. 14-16. (These last three reports are on the 5th floor at NEHGS, CD3290/A2.)
- Christina Kassabian Schaeffer, "Finding Religious Records in Colonial North America," *Family Chronicle* 4, no. 2 (Nov.-Dec. 1999): 19-28.
- Carroll D. Wright, Commissioner, *Report on the Custody and Condition of the Public Records of Parishes, Towns and Counties* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1889) [ REF/CD3290/A2, v. 1, in the reading room at NEHGS]. This is on FHL microfiche #6,046,869 and is part of the collection of 200 reference works in every Family History Center. Although it tells you for what dates records existed in 1889 and their condition, it does not tell you what type of information they contain or where they were located.