

Histories of Connecticut Written Since 1960

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Did an event in Connecticut history affect the life of one of your ancestors? Or are you writing a family history and, following standard guidelines, placing the lives of your Connecticut ancestors in historical context? In either case a general history of Connecticut might provide helpful insights and information. The purpose of this article is to review several Connecticut histories written since 1960. Even though most are out of print, they are available in local libraries, through interlibrary loan, or by purchase from publishers or used book dealers, both online and in stores.

Connecticut is very fortunate to have had a significant number of dedicated historians who, since the 1960s, have studied and written about the state's history. While their dissertations and journal articles may be too specialized for genealogists, their more general state histories serve our needs.

Albert E. Van Dusen, former Connecticut State Historian and professor of history at the University of Connecticut, wrote my favorite state history: *Connecticut*. Comprehensive and beautifully illustrated, *Connecticut* will provide answers to most of your questions within its carefully crafted overview of important events in Connecticut's history. The chapter "Migrating Yankees," for example, explains why, beginning in the 1750s and continuing for more than 100 years, Nutmeggers left Connecticut for destinations north, south, and west. Among the reasons Van Dusen cites were a rapidly growing population, poor land, inadequate transportation, the end of the French and Indian Wars, and the lure of speculation in cheap land available elsewhere. On the other hand, if your ancestor migrated into Connecticut to work in a munitions factory during World War I or II, you can learn about the importance of that industry to the state's economy – and to the nation.

A more scholarly study of Connecticut history can be found in Harold J. Bingham's four-volume *History of Connecticut*. The first two volumes deal with state history; the third covers histories of Connecticut business and industrial firms up to 1950; and the fourth focuses on family and personal records of several hundred prominent Nutmeggers who were alive in 1962. Although I would choose Van Dusen's volume to provide background information about specific historical topics, Bingham's volume could be very helpful if your Connecticut ancestor was in business or industry or was a leading light.

David Morris Roth, former professor of history at Eastern Connecticut University and director of The Institute for Connecticut Studies there, wrote *Connecticut: A Bicentennial History* as part of The State and Nation series. Easy to read and shorter than the other histories (and therefore lacking in detail), Roth's volume provides an accurate overview of Connecticut history. Possibly easier to locate than the previous publications, this volume might answer your questions.

Bruce Fraser, longtime director of the Connecticut Humanities Council, wrote *The Land of Steady Habits: A Brief History of Connecticut* as a contribution to the 200th anniversary of Connecticut's statehood. His goal was to provide the general reader with a brief, analytical overview of the state's diverse history. Emphasis is on such characteristics of the state as conservatism, local control, and ethnic and social diversity. Fraser also brings up contrasts in Connecticut. One of the wealthiest states in the nation, Connecticut has three of the nation's poorest cities, its political influence has always far exceeded its small geographic size, and Connecticut's diverse ethnic and social mix contrasts with its Yankee reputation.

The Miracle of Connecticut by Ellsworth S. Grant, Hartford businessman, historian, and descendant of an old Connecticut family, is a study of important achievements in Connecticut history as seen through the eyes of those who made that history happen – the state's movers and shakers. Chapter headings include Connecticut Yankees, Government, Enterprises, Preachers and Teachers, Manufacturing and Invention, and Arts and Culture. A list of 100 representative Connecticut personalities begins with early- to mid-1600s Reverends Thomas Hooker and John Davenport and ends with mid-twentieth-century inventors Edwin Land and Igor Sikorsky. While Grant's study is definitely not a social history that focuses on the lives of ordinary people, it provides insights into the diverse contributions of the state's prominent residents.

David Roth edited the five-volume Series in Connecticut History, which, while written for high school history

students, covers Connecticut's history in considerable detail with the use of specific examples and case studies. Each of the professional historians who contributed to the series wrote about the period in Connecticut history that he or she knew best. The five volumes are *Puritans against the Wilderness, Connecticut History to 1763; From Revolution to Constitution, 1763-1818; Preachers, Rebels, and Traders, 1818 to 1865; From Yankee to American, 1865-1914; and A Diverse People, 1914 to Present*.

Each volume begins with a list of dates important in one period of Connecticut history. Within these well-indexed books, researchers will find information on most important topics in Connecticut history. Extensive information on Connecticut's border disputes with Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and New York is included. Or if you seek information on the immigration of Irish into Connecticut during the potato famine, you will not be disappointed. A chapter on the Civil War features descriptions of life on both the homefront and battlefield.

Between 1973 and 1979 the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission of Connecticut published thirty-five monographs in its Connecticut Bicentennial Series. Edited by former Trinity College Professor of History Glenn Weaver and written by scholars and historians, each booklet deals with one aspect or person of importance during the Revolutionary era (1763-1787). Several volumes contain biographies of Revolutionary leaders. Others consider such topics as Connecticut Loyalists, black soldiers in the Revolution, and the role of Connecticut women during the Revolution. Anyone with ancestors in Connecticut during the eighteenth century, and particularly during the Revolutionary years, will find these volumes of interest. Possibly difficult to locate elsewhere, these slim volumes can be purchased from the Institute for Connecticut Studies, Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic, CT 06226, telephone 877-587-8693.

The Literature of Connecticut History, compiled by Connecticut State Historian and professor of history at the University of Bridgeport, Christopher Collier and Bonnie B. Collier, is not a comprehensive history but rather an extensively annotated bibliography that covers published scholarship in the field of Connecticut history through 1981. Brief, informative historical essays introduce most sections.

Omitted from the bibliography are town histories, histories of churches and graveyards, genealogies, city directories, and historic house surveys.

Following a short introduction, the section on "Witchcraft in Connecticut," for example, contains a list of eleven books or articles on that subject. If Connecticut's Loyalists are of interest, you will find three pages of references to that subject. Or if you wonder how your ancestors got around, every mode of transportation is covered in a separate chapter. Do you need information on Connecticut occupations such as raising tobacco, oystering, or clock making? You will find references to these jobs and many more. And if, heaven forbid, an ancestor served time in a Connecticut prison, references to that subject are also included.

Within one of these very readable, yet scholarly volumes you should be able to find information about important events in Connecticut history that affected the lives of your Connecticut ancestors. You will learn what life was like in the past, the factors that may have led ancestors to migrate or remain, and the challenges and opportunities Nutmeggers faced in their daily lives during nearly four centuries.

Books discussed in this article:

Bingham, Harold J. *History of Connecticut*. New York: Lewis History Publishing Co., 1962. 4 volumes, 975 pages.

Collier, Christopher and Bonnie B. *Literature of Connecticut History*. Middletown: Connecticut Humanities Council, 1983. 376 pages.

Fraser, Bruce. *The Land of Steady Habits: A Brief History of Connecticut*. Hartford: Connecticut Historical Commission, 1988. 80 pages.

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Roth, David Morris, editor. Series in Connecticut History. Chester, Conn.: Pequot Press, 1975. 5 volumes.

I. Van Dusen, Albert E. *Puritans against the Wilderness, Connecticut to 1763*. 150 pages.

II. Roth, David M. and Freeman Meyer. *From Revolution to Constitution, Connecticut 1763-1818*. 111 pages.

III. Trecker, Janice Law. *Preachers, Rebels and Traders, Connecticut 1818 to 1865*. 95 pages

IV. Andersen, Ruth O.M. *From Yankee to America. Connecticut 1865 to 1914*. 110 pages

V. Jannick Jr., Herbert F. *A Diverse People, Connecticut 1914 to Present*. 124 pages

Van Dusen, Albert E. *Connecticut*. New York: Random House, 1961, 470 pages.

Weaver, Glenn, editor. Connecticut Bicentennial Series. Hartford: American Revolution Bicentennial Commission of Connecticut, 1973-1979, 35 booklets.

I. Barrow, Thomas C. *Connecticut Joins the Revolution* (1973)

II. Collier, Christopher. *Connecticut in the Continental Congress* (1973)

III. Callahan, North. *Connecticut's Revolutionary War Leaders* (1973)

IV. White, David O. *Connecticut's Black Soldiers, 1775-1783* (1973)

V. Destler, Chester M. *Connecticut, the Provisions State* (1973)

VI. East, Robert A. *Connecticut's Loyalists* (1974)

VII. Frost, J. William. *Connecticut Education in the Revolutionary Era* (1974)

VIII. Tucker, Louis Leonard. *Connecticut's Seminary of Sedition; Yale College* (1974)

IX. Roth, David M. *Connecticut's War Governor: Jonathan Trumbull* (1974)

X. McDevitt, Robert F. *Connecticut Attacked: A British Viewpoint, Tryon's Raid on Danbury* (1974)

XI. Daniels, Bruce Colin. *Connecticut's First Family: William Pitkin and his Connections* (1975)

XII. Stark, Bruce P. *Connecticut Signer: William Williams* (1975)

XIII. Hayes, John T. *Connecticut's Revolutionary Cavalry: Sheldon's Horse* (1975)

XIV. Cutler, Charles L. *Connecticut's Revolutionary Press* (1975)

XV. Fennelly, Catherine. *Connecticut Women in the Revolutionary Era* (1975)

XVI. Warren, William Lamson. *Connecticut Art and Architecture: Looking Backwards Two Hundred Years* (1976)

XVII. Cohen, Sheldon S. *Connecticut's Loyalist Gadfly: Reverend Samuel Andrew Peters* (1976)

XVIII. Parker, Wyman W. *Connecticut's Colonial and Revolutionary Money* (1976)

XIX. Willingham, William F. *Connecticut Revolutionary: Eliphalet Dyer* (1976)

XX. Gerlach, Larry R. *Connecticut Congressman: Samuel Huntington, 1731-1796* (1976)

XXI. Main, Jackson Turner. *Connecticut Society in the Era of the American Revolution* (1977)

XXII. Niven, John. *Connecticut Hero: Israel Putnam* (1977)

XXIII. Myer, Freeman W. *Connecticut Congregationalism in the Revolutionary Era* (1977)

XXI. Kuslan, Louis I. *Connecticut's Cannon: The Salisbury Furnace in the American Revolution* (1977)

XXV. Ifkovic, John W. *Connecticut's Nationalist Revolutionary: John Trumbull, Junior* (1977)

XXVI. Wallace, Willard M. *Connecticut's Dark Star of the Revolution; Benedict Arnold* (1978)

XXVII. Rome, Adam Ward. *Connecticut Science, Technology, and Medicine in the Era of the American Revolution* (1978)

XXVIII. Steiner, Bruce E. *Connecticut Anglicans in the Revolutionary Era: A Study in Tensions* (1978)

XXIX. Walsh, James P. *Connecticut Industry and the Revolution* (1978)

XXX. Littien, Ronald John. *Connecticut's Young Man of the Revolution: Oliver Ellsworth* (1978)

XXXI. Wilson, Ruth Mack . *Connecticut's Music in the Revolutionary Era* (1979)

XXXII. Warfle, Richard T. *Connecticut's Western Colony: The Susquehanna Affair* (1979)

XXXIII Thompson, Marvin G. *Connecticut Entrepreneur: Christopher Leffingwell* (1979)

XXXIV Rommel, John G. *Connecticut's Yankee Patriot; Roger Sherman* (1979)

XXXV. Cummin, Katherine H. *Connecticut Militia General: Gold Selleck Silliman* (1979)

Hankins, Jean F. *Index to Vol I-XXXV, Connecticut Bicentennial Series*. Hartford: American Revolution Bicentennial Commission of Connecticut, 1982.