

Hidden Treasures in Town Records

© Carol Prescott McCoy, Ph.D. (2022)

Web: www.Find-Your-Roots.com

Email: Cmccoy3333@aol.com

71 Willow Grove Road, Brunswick, ME 04011 Phone: 207-373-0318

Why Aren't Town Records Used More Frequently?

- They're hard to find.
- Archives and town clerks are very protective of them.
- They're usually not indexed and often hard to read.
- We stop looking for records after we find the basic vital statistics.

Why Use Town Records in Genealogy?

- Vital records and lists of families of first settlers
- Historical documents
- Town officers identified
- Cattle marks provide clues to settlers
- Lists of legal voters for various elections and election results
- Road descriptions, property descriptions, deeds, and maps
- Town ordinances
- Miscellaneous vital records may provide more detail
- Mill and water rights and licenses for taverns, inns, retailers of strong liquors, ferries
- Pauper's records regarding paupers and people who helped them

Creation of Towns in New England

- New England looked appealing to European explorers
- Permanent fishing stations and trading posts with Indians
- Need for wood for masts, building supplies, and firewood
- Some early settlers wanted religious freedom
- Settlers in Maine were more interested in fishing than praying
- Massachusetts and the New England Coast became very crowded
- Good farm land was taken. Remote areas and northern wilderness had available land
- Often large sections of towns moved together for a new start
- Good sites for new towns discovered on military marches
- Soldiers and their heirs given lands as rewards for military service
- Land was often a good investment
- Old towns became too populous or divided over issues and split into new towns

Proprietors and Town Development

Proprietors “original grantees or purchasers of a tract of land, usually a township, which they and their heirs, assigns, or successors, together with those whom they chose to admit to their number, held in common ownership.” (Roy Akagi, *Town Proprietors of the New England Colonies*)

- **Proprietors:** interested in settling a town; well-to-do and educated; may have been 60-120 proprietors; sometimes could purchase right of proprietorship
- **Rewards:** right to free land, influence, new home, investment
- **Proprietor Responsibilities**—petition for a town, attract enough settlers to come and stay, survey the land, build highways and streets, sub-divide the land, distribute lots, subject the meadow and forest, manage the town’s development, get mills built, build a church, get a minister, built a school, keep records and report on progress

Challenges in Developing New Towns in New England

- A lot of work for proprietors and no guarantee of success
- Dangerous because of French and Indian wars and wild animals
- Harsh, cold climate made farming difficult and life uncomfortable
- Settlers were slow to come and quick to abandon settlements
- Only York, Kittery and Wells Maine stayed permanently inhabited from 1689 until 1713
- Settlers had to do everything themselves and clearing wilderness was arduous
- Difficult to find and convince a trained, legitimate minister to come and stay
- Government was far away and often provided minimal, if any, support
- Land disputes due to overlapping grants and proprietors demanding payment from squatters

Typical Town Officers (See Ann Smith Lainhart’s book in resources.)

- Town clerk key post (often served for years)
- Selectmen, wealthy, educated, influential; served many functions; often served for years
- Appraisers
- Constables
- Tax Collector
- Tithingman (collected money for church)
- School district agents
- Hog and deer reeves
- Field drivers
- Pound keepers
- Surveyors of the highways
- Fence viewers
- Sealers of weights and measures
- Cullers of hoops and staves
- Cullers of fish

Where to Find Town Records

- Town or City Office for old town books, tax records
- Historical societies for old town books and loose papers of old town records
- LDS Library and www.familysearch.org for microfilms of town records
- Local library's regional collection
- Maine Historical Society—books, microfilm, and manuscript collections
- Maine State Library and Maine State Archives (microfilms of many town records)
- Massachusetts State Archives (early Maine records prior to 1820 generally)
- New England Historic Genealogical Society Library, Newbury St., Boston, Mass.
- Town Histories (in libraries and sometimes on Googlebooks or other online books)

Keys to Success in Researching Town Records

1. **Become Familiar with the Town's Development.** When was it settled? What were its names? What were the neighboring towns? How did the boundary change over time? What counties did it belong to?
2. **Become Familiar with the Town Inhabitants and Districts in Town.** Keep track of everyone with the same last name. Check tax, school, and highway records to identify districts in town.
3. **Find Old Cadastral Maps to Locate Where People Lived.** Be Careful of Border Areas. The records of border settlers may be in several different towns.
4. **Check for Town Records in Several Places.** (www.familysearch.org; town hall; historical societies; archives; New England Historic Genealogical Society, Internet, Googlebooks, experts.)
5. **Use Original Records.** (Check original and typed versions; be considerate of the Town Clerk.)
6. **Check for a Table of Contents or Manuscript Guide (index).** Look through the whole book or manuscript collection index. Contents were often not in a reasonable order either by subject or date. Clerks added entries wherever space permitted.
7. **Read as Much as You Can, at Least Several Meetings, in the Town Record.** This helps you understand the town's process, decipher handwriting, learn about key players/officers, learn about roads, discover paupers, and uncover main disputes and issues facing the town.
8. **Take Good Notes and Make Good Copies.** Take photographs and photocopies. Check them for clarity. Pay the repository something even if you photograph or scan records yourself.
9. **Cross Check Town Records with Other Sources.** Census, church records, deeds, probate, etc.
10. **Be Persistent and Thorough.** You'll get better at understanding the records over time!

Learning More

Read about Massachusetts and Maine History to learn about events, key proprietors, county development, early settlement, wars and economic development, land disputes due to conflicting claims

Read Town Histories

- What was the reason for starting the town?
- Who were the proprietors and where did they come from?

- When did settlement occur? Was the town ever abandoned?
- What were the major town disputes?
- Did the proprietors fight with squatters? What happened?
- What were the town offices over time? Who were the major town officers?
- When was the town meeting?
- What were the main religions? Was their divisiveness or mostly tolerance?
- Did the town ever divide? When? Who got what?

Suggested Resources (Mostly Maine; Some New England)

- Akagi, Roy H. *Town Proprietors of the New England Colonies* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1963)
- www.Americanancestors.org. Web of the New England Historic Genealogical Society. Fee.
- Attwood, Stanley Bearce, *The Length and Breadth of Maine* (Orono, Maine: University of Maine Press, 1977)
- Barber, John Warner, *History and Antiquities of Every Town in Massachusetts*, (Boston: NEHGS, 1839, 2014)
- Clark, Charles E., *The Eastern Frontier: The Settlement of Northern New England 1610-1763* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970)
- Denis, Michael J. *Maine Towns and Counties: What Was What, Where and When* (Oakland, Maine: M.J. Denis, 1981)
- Eichholz, Alice, editor, *Red Book—American State, County and Town Sources*, 3rd edition. (Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2004.)
- Judd, Richard W., et al. editors. *Maine—the Pine Tree State from Prehistory to the Present* (Orono, Maine: University of Maine Press, 1995.)
- Kennebec Proprietors Papers, Maine Historical Society manuscript collection.
- Kershaw, Gordon E. *The Kennebeck Proprietors 1749-1775* (Somersworth: New Hampshire Publishing Co.; Portland: Maine Historical Society: 1975)
- Lainhart, Ann Smith, *Digging for Genealogical Treasure in New England Town Records* (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1996)
- McClure, Rhonda, ed. *Genealogists Handbook for New England Research*, 6th edition (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 2022)
- McCoy, Carol P., “Hidden Treasures in Town Records,” *Essex Genealogist* Vol. 41 No. 4, Nov. 2021
- Pejepscot Proprietors Papers & Brunswick Town Records, Pejepscot Historical Society manuscript collection.
- Maine Genealogical Society. www.maineroots.org. List of vital records published by MGS.
- Maine State Archives, *Microfilm List--Early Maine Town and Vital Records* (Augusta, Maine: Maine State Archives, 1980 revised)
- Taylor, Alan, *Liberty Men and Great Proprietors* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990)
- www.familysearch.org. Site of the Church of Latter Day Saints. Many town records online

Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

eight hundred

In the year of our Lord one thousand and nine teen, An act to
incorporate the second parish in Ipswich into a Town by the name
of Essex.

Sec. 1. Be it enacted by Senate and house of representatives in general Court
assembled, and by the authority of the same; that all that part
of the Town of Ipswich, in the County of Essex, called the second parish
lying within the boundaries herein after mentioned, together with
the inhabitants thereof, be, and the same is hereby incorporated,
into a town by the name of Essex, and invested with all the powers,
privileges, and immunities, and subject to all the duties and
requisitions to which towns in this Commonwealth are by
law entitled or subjected; the said town of Essex, being bounded and
described as follows. *Begin* Beginning at the Northwesterly
corner of William Cogswells land, at a small stone bridge, at the
head of Choates brook, so called, thence running Southwesterly
on the boundary of said second parish, to Hamilton line
thence ~~thence~~ running on different courses Easterly and South-
erly, by said Hamilton line, till it comes to Manchester line
thence running Easterly by said Manchester line, to a heap of Stones
on Gloucester line thence by said Gloucester line to the sea. Thence
beginning again at the bounds first mentioned and running down
said brook to the creek, so called, thence continuing down said
Creek to the river, thence down the Channel of said river on the
North side of Hog Island to the sea.

Sec. 2. Be it further enacted, that the said town of Ipswich, shall have
hold and enjoy to their own use and benefit forever, the Court-
house situate in said town, the powder-house with the
Military stores, therein, the Grammar School-house with the
lands, hereditaments, rents and profits heretofore received
and belonging to the said Grammar school, and also the farm
with the buildings, stock and utensils, and all other per-
sonal property thereon, and thereto belonging lately purchas-
ed by said town of Ipswich, for a public poor-house.

Sec. 3. Be it further enacted, that the said town of Essex, shall pay to the
treasurers of the town of Ipswich, within the term of six months
their proportion of the debts due by and from said town of Ipswich,
and outstanding at the passing of this act, in the proportion

Essex Town Meeting 1 March 1819, www.familysearch.org, Town Records of Essex Vol. 1, 1819-1835, microfilm 00877749, image 240. Founding and naming of the town of Essex.

At a Meeting of the Freeholders & Other Inhabitants of the District
of Harpswell Regularly Assembled on May 25th 1762

James Booker Chose Moderator

- 1 Voted to Raise Six Pounds for the Use of the District this year
- 2 Voted to Raise Sixty five Pounds for the Use of the Parish this year
- 3 Voted to Raise twenty Pounds for a School this year
- 4 Voted to Raise Nine Pounds for the use of the Poor this year
- 5 Voted the Select Men Should Stand Committed to Settle District and Parish
Affairs this year
- 6 Voted to Clear the Road by a Rate this year
- 7 Voted Men should have three Shillings p^r Day for Work Done on F. Way
and too Shillings & Eight Pence p^r Day for ^{roads} and Materials
- * 8 Voted the Treasurer should have twenty Shillings yearly for Service
- * 9 Voted Jonathan Flint one Pound Eleven Shillings & Eight Pence
for Service Done in the year 1761
- + 10 Voted Walter Myraman one Pound five Shillings & Six pence for
the Like Service
- + 11 Voted ^{And} Duning Seven Shillings & Eight Pence for Records
Put in the Town Book before March 1760
- 12 Voted to give too Pence p^r Head for all the Crows that Shall
be killed on the Neck before the twentieth Day of Oct^r. Next

Town Meeting of Harpswell 25 May 1762, Harpswell Town Records Book 1, I-Phone picture by Carol P. McCoy, courtesy of the Town of Harpswell, Maine. "Voted to give too Pence p^r Head for all the Crows that Shall be killed on the Neck before the twentieth Day of Oct^r. Next"