

STATE GUIDE

MASSACHUSETTS

by MAUREEN A. TAYLOR

MUCH OF OUR national identity has been shaped by happy accident. Case in point: In 1620, *Mayflower* passengers left England bound for Virginia, but a fluke of fate landed them in Massachusetts. (Learn more about those hardy souls from the Massachusetts Society of *Mayflower* Descendants <massmayflower.org>.) Whether or not your Bay State ancestors include pilgrims, plenty of fortunate genealogical finds await you around every corner.

STATE HISTORY

The *Mayflower* pilgrims didn't have the place to themselves for long. More than 20,000 people immigrated to New England from 1620 to 1642, during a period known as the Great Migration. Many settled in Plymouth Colony—today's Plymouth, Barnstable and Bristol counties—and in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, comprising the towns north of the Merrimack River plus Suffolk County and what's now New Hampshire. In 1691, a charter united the two colonies and added parts of Maine and Nova Scotia.

Gradually, Bay Staters spread across New England and the rest of the country. An estimated quarter of the US population has Massachusetts roots. Plenty of people stuck around, too: Post-Revolutionary War growth of cities and small towns, as well as an influx of Irish, French Canadian and other immigrants, made Massachusetts one of the most densely populated US states by the end of the 19th century. Due to boundary disputes with bordering Rhode Is-

land, New Hampshire and Maine, ancestors who lived near state lines often left records in multiple locations, so you may need to check more than one state.

GENEALOGICAL RESOURCES

Few states match Massachusetts' bounty of records. Before delving into them, let's dispel a myth: Not everything about early residents is in print or online. Orderly Puritan town clerks' sheer amount of documentation means it'd take ages to publish it all. But more records than ever before are being digitized or added to databases, and you'll find plenty of family history fodder in these records:

★ THE GREAT MIGRATION STUDY

PROJECT: The New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS) in Boston <americanancestors.org> has created comprehensive accounts on these early settlers. Search a database for the 1620-to-1633 era (under the Study tab). Learn more about this era at The Great Migration website <greatmigration.org>.

★ **CENSUS:** Federal census records for Massachusetts cover 1790 (the first US head count) through 1940, with two exceptions: The 1800 census lacks Boston and parts of Suffolk County, and the Union Civil War veterans schedule is all that's left of the 1890 count. (Use the Massachusetts and Maine Direct Tax List of 1798 as a substitute for the latter.) You can find federal census records on the free FamilySearch.org <familysearch.org> and subscription site [Ancestry](http://Ancestry.com) <ancestry.com>. It's on

FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1788
- ★ **First federal census:** 1790
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1841
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** 1841
- ★ **State-land state**
- ★ **Counties:** 14
- ★ **Contact for vital records:** Registry of Vital Records and Statistics, 150 Mount Vernon St., First Floor, Dorchester, MA 02125, (617) 740-2600, <mass.gov/orgs/registry-of-vital-records-and-statistics>

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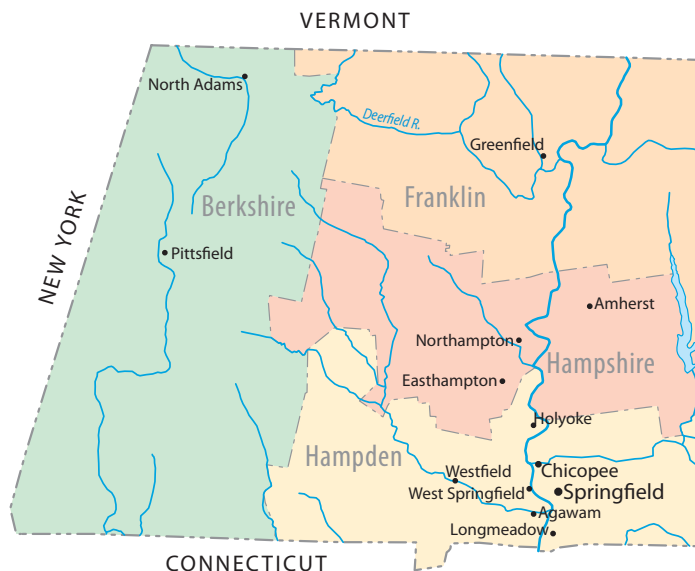
microfilm at the Family History Library (FHL), and also in an NEHGS members-only database.

The only surviving state censuses, taken in 1855 and 1865, let you trace ancestors during a peak immigration period and list everyone in a household. The state archives and FHL have them microfilmed. An index and record images for both are on FamilySearch.org.

★ **TOWN:** As in other New England states, you'll find most Massachusetts records on the town level, not in county offices. Birth, marriage and death records date from the colony's founding. Contact town clerks using a directory at <www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/eleclk/clkidx.htm>. Many town records through 1850 or later have been published and/or microfilmed: Try the FHL and the Boston Public Library (BPL) <bpl.org> collections. Ancestry has an enormous col-

lection of Massachusetts town records, and a supplemental one of just town birth records. Boston didn't record births from 1800 to 1849; use city directories, dating to 1789, to fill the gap (Ancestry.com has many Boston directories).

In 1841, the state required towns to submit copies of vital records. Request records through 1920 from the state



PLYMOUTH ROCK: DIANES9/ISTOCK / GETTY IMAGES PLUS; CRANBERRIES: ANA LUKASZUK/MOMENT/GETTY IMAGES

timeline

1620
The Mayflower lands in Plymouth with 102 passengers

1636
The New College, later named Harvard, is established

1675
King Phillip's War between colonists and American Indians breaks out

1704
John Campbell publishes the *Boston News-Letter*, America's first regular newspaper

1775
The battles of Lexington and Concord begin the Revolutionary War

1845
Five Boston merchants start the New England Historic Genealogical Society

MASSACHUSETTS



archives (the website lists available records), and request post-1920 records from the state registry of vital records (see Fast Facts).

Towns also kept school and tax records, business licenses, meeting minutes, livestock earmarks (to show ownership and for voting purposes) and lists of freemen (landowning men of legal age—usually 21 but as young as 16). Call your ancestral town clerk to learn the records' whereabouts. Search a descriptive index and catalog for 18 volumes of documents from the state archives at www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arcsrch/RevolutionarySearchContexts.html.

★ **PROBATE AND LAND:** These records, which counties keep, pose an exception to the New England town-records quirk. But pinpointing your ancestors' county at a given time can be tricky due to changing borders. For example, Suffolk County originally included parts of Norfolk and Worcester counties—in 1793, residents of the town Dedham “moved”

from Suffolk to Norfolk county. Use Massachusetts GenWeb magenweb.org or Historical Data Relating to Counties, Cities and Towns in Massachusetts (searchable at the Internet Archive archive.org) to sort out the details.

1850
Salem native Nathaniel Hawthorne publishes *The Scarlet Letter*, about scandal in a Puritan town

1876
Alexander Graham Bell makes the first two-way phone call in Boston

1897
John J. McDermott wins the first Boston Marathon

1917
35th US President John F. Kennedy is born in Brookline

1919
Boston's Great Molasses Flood kills 21 people Jan. 15

TOOLKIT

Websites

Cyndi's List: Massachusetts <cyndislist.com/us/ma>

The Great Migration <greatmigration.org>

Historic Burying Grounds Initiative <boston.gov/departments/parks-and-recreation/historic-burying-grounds-initiative>

MA GenWeb <magenweb.org>

Old Maps Online: Massachusetts <oldmapsonline.org/en/Massachusetts>

Plymouth Colony Archive <www.histarch.uiuc.edu/plymouth>

Publications

Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research, fifth edition, by Michael J. Leclerc (NEHGS)

The Great Migration: Immigrants to New England 1634-1635, 3 volumes, by Robert Charles Anderson, George F. Sanborn and Melinde Lutz Sanborn (NEHGS)

Guide to Massachusetts Cemeteries by David Allen Lambert (NEHGS)

Massachusetts: A Concise History by Richard D. Brown and Jack Tager (University of Massachusetts Press)

Revolutionary Boston, Lexington, and Concord by Joseph L. Andrews Jr. (Commonwealth Editions)

Archives & Organizations

Archdiocese of Boston Archives 66 Brooks Drive, Braintree, MA 02184, (617) 746-5897, <www.bostoncatholic.org/Archives>

Boston Public Library 700 Boylston St., Boston, MA 02116, (617) 536-5400, <bpl.org>

Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston Box 610366, Newton, MA 02461, (866) 611-5698, <jsgsb.org>

Massachusetts Archives 220 Morrissey Blvd., Boston, MA 02125, (617) 727-2816, <www.sec.state.ma.us/arc>

Massachusetts Historical Society 1154 Boylston St., Boston, MA 02215, (617) 536-1608, <masshist.org>

Massachusetts Society of Genealogists Box 215, Ashland, MA 01721, <msoginc.org>

National Archives at Boston 380 Trapelo Road, Waltham, MA 02452, (866) 406-2379, <archives.gov/boston>

NARA Pittsfield Federal Records Center 10 Conte Drive, Pittsfield, MA 01201, (413) 236-3603, <archives.gov/frc/pittsfield>

New England Historic Genealogical Society 101 Newbury St., Boston, MA 02116, (617) 536-5740, <www.americanancestors.org>

Most counties held on to original land and probate records. Published or microfilmed indexes for probate records in several counties, including Middlesex, Norfolk, Suffolk and Worcester, are available at NEHGS, the FHL and other libraries. Several county-level datasets are on Ancestry. You'll find county-specific information on the whereabouts of probate and land records in *The Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research*, fifth edition, by Michael J. Leclerc (NEHGS). Note that five Bay State counties had multiple deed offices.

★ **MILITARY:** Massachusetts men served in all the Colonial wars, including conflicts with American Indians (such as King Phillip's War), and those involving European nations (the French and Indian War, for example). John Adams and other local sons stood at the forefront of the revolutionary fervor. Paul Revere's April 18, 1776, "midnight ride" is well-known, as are the next day's shots "heard 'round the world" from Lexington and Concord.

Research patriot ancestors in the 17-volume Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War, available on Ancestry.com and on CD. The state archives' military records span the 17th through 20th centuries, including military rolls and accounts, state pensions, Maine bounty-land grants for Revolutionary War veterans and Civil War muster rolls—see <www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arcgen/genidx.htm#military> for more details. The state National Guard Military Museum and Archives <massnationalguard.org/national-guard-museum---archives.html> has records of the Massachusetts National Guard, which dates to 1636, including soldiers and sailors (1775 to 1940) and Civil War volunteer regiments.

Check Cyndi's List <cyndislist.com/us/ma/military> for links to online rosters and regimental histories. You'll also find microfilmed records, such as Revolutionary War muster rolls and Massachusetts Civil War volunteers, in the FHL's online catalog.

★ **IMMIGRATION:** Massachusetts ports such as New Bedford, Gloucester and Boston (the second-largest immigration port after New York) welcomed newcomers from all over the world during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Digitized passenger lists are on Ancestry. You can search a free, in-progress database of Boston arrivals (1848–1891) at the state archives website. Browseable passenger lists for 1820 to 1943 are on FamilySearch.org. Microfilmed passenger lists are available at the two NARA facilities in Massachusetts (see the Toolkit) and at the FHL.

You can do a lot of research from afar, but offline resources at the state archives, BPL, NEHGS and town historical societies are excellent reasons to plan a trip to the Bay State. Add the ambiance of history, and you won't need any happy accidents to discover your Massachusetts roots. ●