

## RESEARCH GUIDE

# CONNECTICUT

by BRYNA O'SULLIVAN



FOR SOME FAMILIES, CONNECTICUT WAS A LONG-term base; for others, it was just a starting point. Some—particularly from indigenous communities—immigrated to New York state in the years surrounding the Revolutionary War. Still others went to Vermont. In the decades that followed, migrants from Connecticut would arrive in Ohio and Pennsylvania as well.

No matter your family's story, these sources can help you document your Connecticut roots.

### TIDAL RIVER OF HISTORY

Connecticut's name is said to come from the Algonquian word *Quinnehtukqut*, which describes the tidal river that has shaped the life of the region for centuries. To study the history of the Connecticut River is to study the history of the state itself.

Indigenous communities used the river for trade, navigation, and to support the food supply. Notable tribes in the region include the Pequot, Mohegan, Quinipiac and Nipmuc.

To the Europeans, the river offered the opportunity to build a trading network. The Dutch arrived first in 1614, followed shortly after by the English. Windsor, Wethersfield and Hartford became the first permanent English settlements in the state in the 1630s, with Connecticut becoming an English colony in 1636.

Smaller settlements including New Haven and Saybrook Colonies merged with Connecticut over the next several years. The colony's land claims at various points extended far into the west including through northern Pennsylvania. (By statehood, Connecticut claimed only a large strip of land called the Western Reserve in northern

Ohio, but settlers from the state had already moved there and into northern Pennsylvania.)

The start of the American Revolution shifted the use of the Connecticut River. Instead of sending goods abroad, Connecticut supplied the Continental Army. In the process, it earned the nickname of the "Provision State." After independence, state representatives developed the "Connecticut Compromise" that moved the Constitution forward, and Connecticut ratified the Constitution in 1788.

In the 19th century and early 20th century, the river offered the means to power industry (especially textiles and firearms, with notable resident Eli Whitney and manufacturing companies Colt and Winchester). The rise of new factories drew immigrants from French Canada and throughout Europe, especially Italy and Poland.

Today, the Connecticut River still supports a vibrant community—one that has many descendants.

### LIVING IN THE NUTMEG STATE

Government officials mandated registration of births and marriages at the town level as early as the 1630s. But recording was irregular, with some towns having excellent compliance while others didn't. This changed in 1897, when the government began enforcing stiff penalties for failure to report these and deaths. Town clerks sent copies of vital records to the state beginning that year. Because vital records were recorded at the town level, knowing the location where an event occurred is key to finding the record.

For vital events prior to 1850, consult the Barbour Collection (an index and abstract) online on FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)>, American Ancestors <[www.americanancestors.org](http://www.americanancestors.org)>.

### FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:  
1788

FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:  
1790

BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:  
from establishment (town); 1897 (state)

MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:  
from establishment (town); 1897 (state)

CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:  
Connecticut Dept. of Health,  
State Vital Records Office

and Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)>. Coverage may vary by location, and sites may offer different versions of the collection; learn more at <[libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/vitalrecords/barbour](http://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/vitalrecords/barbour)>.

There is no such central index to records between 1850 and 1 July 1897. But you can find birth, marriage and death indexes including from this time period to the present on FamilySearch and Ancestry.com. The Connecticut State library has marriage and death indexes from 1897 to 2001 <[libguides.ctstatelibrary.org](http://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org)>.

Whether and how you can order original records depends on the year the event took place. FamilySearch has digitized images of some older original records (generally pre-1890), and you can reach out to municipalities to request records kept there. You can also obtain post-1897 records from the state vital records office <[portal.ct.gov/DPH/Vital-Records/State-Vital-Records-Office--Home](http://portal.ct.gov/DPH/Vital-Records/State-Vital-Records-Office--Home)> (though this service is generally slower than getting the record through the town).

Birth records less than 100 years old are closed to the public, although they can be purchased by a descendant or member of an authorized genealogical society. (There are not such privacy laws for marriage or death records, though any Social Security numbers will not be revealed to requesters who don't meet certain criteria.)

## COUNTING CONNECTICUT

Despite its Colonial roots, Connecticut has little early census information to document specific inhabitants. One exception, the 1669–1670 grain inventory for Hartford, Wethersfield and Windsor, names heads of household. Transcribed as part of *Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society, Volume 21* (1924), it has been digitized by FamilySearch. Other enumerations taken the 1670s and mid-1700s survive only in statistical form.

The state has participated in the federal census since 1790, but has never taken state-level census enumerations. Federal censuses are widely available at sites like FamilySearch and Ancestry.com; state-level copies of some Connecticut enumerations are also available at the Connecticut State Library. Portions of a 1798 direct tax can be found at the National Archives branch in Massachusetts.

## LAND OF STEADY HABITS

Like most of New England, Connecticut was settled by Europeans using the proprietor system. The colony granted a group of settlers the right to shares in a new community if they settled there—or the settlers claimed those rights themselves and sought approval later. Once settled, the proprietors divided the land up between them in proprietors' divisions, with each having the right to sell their share. Proprietors' records are generally only accessible through the town clerk's office of the original settlement.

Transfers after the initial sale are recorded in the town clerk's office in the jurisdiction in which the property was located *at the time of the transaction*. That detail is key. Though Connecticut's state borders have largely stayed the same since the late 18th century, the same cannot be said for Connecticut's town borders. Town boundaries moved, but the land records did not.

To find the town that holds the land records you're looking for, refer to the table offered by the Connecticut State Library at <[ctstatelibrary.org/cttowns/counties](http://ctstatelibrary.org/cttowns/counties)>. The table lists the current town name, the county, the year established, parent towns from which the town was created, and any history of incorporation.

Once you've determined the correct town, consider the time period. Older (generally pre-1900) land records can be accessed through the Connecticut State Library or the FamilySearch catalog using a place-name search. Look to individual towns' clerk offices for indexes of grantors and grantees.

More-contemporary records may be available through clerks' websites. While some towns have digitized their entire holdings, most have a gap period for which records are only available on paper and can only be accessed onsite.

## OTHER RECORDS

Look for your Connecticut ancestors in these other kinds of documents:

- **Probate Records:** Connecticut's probate courts operate on the district (rather than county) level, with each district covering one or more towns. District boundaries have been revised multiple times in the state's history. To

## TIMELINE

**1614**

The Dutch explore the Connecticut River

**1634**

The English enter the region and found settlements at Windsor and Wethersfield

**1636**

Connecticut Colony is established

**1644**

Saybrook Colony merges with Connecticut

**1664**

New Haven Colony merges with Connecticut



determine which probate court covered your ancestor's town of residence, see the Connecticut State Library's finding aid <[cslarchives.ctstatelibrary.org/repositories/2/classification\\_terms/7](http://cslarchives.ctstatelibrary.org/repositories/2/classification_terms/7)>. Ancestry.com has a collection of estate papers (copies of wills, administrators' and executors' bonds, etc.) <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9049](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9049)>. Docket books, which summarized each case reviewed by a court, generally include abstracts of the documents in

estate papers. Search for them by place name in the FamilySearch Catalog.

● **Church Records:** The Connecticut State Library has microfilmed the records of many Connecticut churches, notably of the Congregational church (the state church until 1818). These microfilms have been digitized by FamilySearch and can be found in the catalog using a place name search. An abstract and index on Ancestry.com covers

## 1783

The United States secures independence from Britain; Connecticut relinquishes its claims to some western land a few years later

## 1788

Connecticut becomes the fifth state to ratify the Constitution

## 1800

Connecticut officially cedes the Western Reserve territory in Ohio

## 1872

The New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad opens, connecting New York City to Springfield, Mass., by way of New Haven and Hartford

## 1960

The state government abolishes counties for most operational purposes

## TOOLKIT

### Websites

**Connecticut Digital Archive** <[www.ctdigitalarchive.org](http://www.ctdigitalarchive.org)>

**Connecticut State Library: Genealogy Guides** <[libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/home](http://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/home)>

**ConnecticutHistory.org** <[www.connecticuthistory.org](http://www.connecticuthistory.org)>

**CTGenWeb Project** <[www.ctgenweb.org](http://www.ctgenweb.org)>

**Cyndi's List: Connecticut** <[www.cyndislist.com/us/ct](http://www.cyndislist.com/us/ct)>

**FamilySearch Research Wiki: Connecticut**  
<[www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Connecticut,\\_United\\_States\\_Genealogy](http://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Connecticut,_United_States_Genealogy)>

**Linkpendium: Connecticut** <[www.linkpendium.com/ct-genealogy](http://www.linkpendium.com/ct-genealogy)>

### Publications

**Connecticut Town Meeting Records, Volumes I and II** by Jolene Roberts Mullen (Heritage Books)

**Finding Early Connecticut Vital Records: The Barbour Index and Beyond** by Linda MacLachlan (Clearfield)

**History and Genealogy of the Families of Old Fairfield**, 3 volumes by Donald Lines Jacobus (Clearfield)

**Families of Ancient New Haven**, 9 volumes compiled by Donald Lines Jacobus (Clearfield)

### Archives & Organizations

**Connecticut Ancestry Society** <[www.connecticutancestry.org](http://www.connecticutancestry.org)>

**Connecticut Historical Society** <[www.chs.org](http://www.chs.org)>

**Connecticut Society of Genealogists** <[www.csginc.org](http://www.csginc.org)>

**Connecticut State Library** <[www.ctstatelibrary.org](http://www.ctstatelibrary.org)>

**Godfrey Memorial Library** <[www.godfrey.org/scholar/godfrey-home.html](http://www.godfrey.org/scholar/godfrey-home.html)>

**Middlesex County Historical Society** <[www.mchsct.org](http://www.mchsct.org)>

**Mystic Seaport Museum** <[research.mysticseaport.org](http://research.mysticseaport.org)>

**National Archives at Boston** <[www.archives.gov/boston](http://www.archives.gov/boston)>

**New Haven Museum** <[www.newhavenmuseum.org](http://www.newhavenmuseum.org)>

**New London County Historical Society** <[www.nlchs.org](http://www.nlchs.org)>

approximately 25% of the collection <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3032](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3032)>. Note that Catholic and Jewish records were not included; access these records through each religion's governing body.

● **Gravestones:** Recent extremes in weather have done significant damage to the brownstone tombstones that were so popular in early Connecticut. Thankfully for researchers, two projects worked to preserve tombstones before they fade away. Authorized as a Works Progress Administration Project, the Hale Collection transcribed dates and relationships from headstones in cemeteries throughout the state <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2900](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2900)>. The second, the Godfrey Memorial Library's Ed Laput Cemetery Collection <[www.godfrey.org/scholar/godfrey-home.html](http://www.godfrey.org/scholar/godfrey-home.html)>, includes photographs of gravestones.

● **Military Records:** While the Connecticut State Library holds a number of records related to the military service of Connecticut residents, only a few collections have been digitized. The library has finding aids by conflict, notably for the Revolutionary War <[libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/militaryrecords/revwar](http://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/militaryrecords/revwar)>. FamilySearch has digitized its microfilms from that conflict; you may need finding aids to navigate the scans. Other collections cover later conflicts such as World War I, for which collections of enumerations of nurses and military-age men have been added to FamilySearch and Ancestry.com. After World War I, the state solicited written narratives from veterans, some of them including photographs <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2278](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2278)>.

● **Naturalization Records:** Connecticut naturalization records have been transferred to the National Archives branch in Massachusetts. Many of these records have been digitized by Ancestry.com and FamilySearch. A Connecticut State Library guide <[libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/naturalization](http://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/naturalization)> provides an excellent overview of these records and how to access them.

● **Newspapers:** Newspapers can provide the details of daily life in Connecticut's communities. The Connecticut State Library has a tool <[libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/newspapers](http://libguides.ctstatelibrary.org/hg/newspapers)> that allows users to search by town and time period for newspapers most likely to cover a specific event. Major papers, such as *The Hartford Courant*, can be found on subscription sites. The state library has been uploading smaller papers to Chronicling America <[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov)>, and local libraries have contributed to their own websites as well as Connecticut Digital Archive <[ctdigitalarchive.org](http://ctdigitalarchive.org)>.

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