

STATE GUIDE

VERMONT

by MAUREEN A. TAYLOR

VERMONT IS KNOWN for brilliant fall foliage, snow-covered slopes and cow-dotted pastures. But there's more to the Green Mountain State than bucolic beauty. Genealogy resources, for example, are as thick as its pine forests. But if you're hoping to find your family here, you'll need a healthy respect for the role of geography and climate in state history. Harsh winters and high elevations discouraged people from moving in. Even today, traversing the second-least-populous state from its Canadian border to the southern foothills involves dodging mountains. Of course, you'll want to see the Green Mountain State's loveliness in person—but with our research tips, you won't have to scale mountains to climb your Vermont family tree.

STATE HISTORY

As the first state to grant voting rights to all men regardless of race and to abolish land-ownership requirements, the Green Mountain State is known for its political independence. During the 17th century, the established colonies of New York and New Hampshire both awarded land grants in wide-open Vermont. New York, meanwhile, ignored the state boundary at the Connecticut River. Continuing land disputes led Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys to try to drive out New Yorkers and, in 1777, declare Vermont an independent republic. It became the 14th state in 1791, with Montpelier as its capital.

To avoid the mountains, many migrants seeking agricultural oppor-

tunities traveled up the Connecticut River from that waterway's namesake state. But Vermont's brutal winters and a depressed economy sent them to kinder environments. In the 1820s, approximately half the state's population left—many for New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin, as well as Lower Canada (the British colony in what's now southern Quebec and the Labrador region). Out-migration was such a problem that a few towns even changed their names to sound warmer: Bromley, for example, became Peru.

During the late 19th century, newcomers from Quebec and Scotland arrived to farm and work stone from the state's plentiful quarries. Irish immigrants built canals, including the 1823 Champlain Canal.

French Canadians came, too, to work in mills and operate abandoned farms. Today, their descendants make up more than 20 percent of Vermont's population. Track their immigration—and that of other immigrants from Canada—in Canadian border crossings from 1895 to 1954, available on subscription site Ancestry <ancestry.com>. The free FamilySearch.org has an index to these crossings. The records are on microfilm at National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) <archives.gov> facilities and the Family History Library (FHL) <familysearch.org>.

GENEALOGICAL RECORDS

The following records will figure prominently into your Vermont research:

FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1791
- ★ **First federal census:** 1790
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1857
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** 1857
- ★ **State-land state**
- ★ **Counties:** 7 in 1791, 14 today
- ★ **Contact for vital records:**
Vermont State Archives,
1078 US Route 2, Montpelier, VT
05633, (802) 828-3280,
<www.sec.state.vt.us/archives-records/vital-records.aspx>

VERMONT



timeline

1609

Samuel de Champlain explores Vermont

1775

Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys capture Fort Ticonderoga from the British

1777

Delegates from across the state declare an independent Vermont Republic

1816

Snow falls throughout the summer of "Eighteen hundred and froze to death"

1823

The Champlain Canal opens

1864

Confederates raid St. Albans in the Civil War's northernmost battle

You may find yourself drawn to those tucked-in-the-hills towns (and their records), just as your own relatives were.

★ **VITAL:** Your ancestor's town name is important because the majority of Vermont records are kept at the town level. Although most town clerks ignored a 1779 vital records law, some records prior to 1820 list births (including birthplace) and deaths of whole families. Statewide civil registration officially began in 1857, when the state required town clerks to forward birth, marriage and death information.

In 1919, legislation gave the state power to get copies of vital records from towns and churches. Communities with incomplete pre-1870 death records had to compile the data from gravestone inscriptions. Research the resulting statewide data at the Vermont State Archives Reference Room or request informational copies from the office (see the Fast Facts box for info).

But these records aren't complete: Your ancestor's vital data may appear only in town records. Fortunately, digitized Vermont town records dating to 1732 are now searchable at FamilySearch.org. Ancestry has statewide indexes to births, marriages and deaths since 1909.

★ **CHURCH:** Use church membership lists, baptisms, marriages, deaths and removals (lists of parishioners who transferred to other churches) to trace Vermont families before civil registration. Start with the Vermont Historical Records Survey of town and church record inventories, online at <vermonthistory.org/documents/findaid/histrecordssurvey.pdf>. It's also worth searching the Vermont Historical Society's (VHS) online catalog with the keywords *church records*.

You can find cemeteries using the maps in *Burial Grounds in Vermont*, 4th edition, edited by Arthur L. and Frances P. Hyde (Vermont Old Cemetery Association). Look for published indexes in *Index to Known Cemetery Listings in Vermont*, 4th edition, by Joann H. Nichols, Patricia L.

Haslam and Robert M. Murphy (VHS). Many cemeteries are also indexed on Find A Grave <findagrave.com>.

★ **LAND:** Colonial disputes mean early land transactions may be recorded in New York, New Hampshire or Vermont. Run a place search on *Vermont* in the FHL's online catalog and look for a Land Records heading to find microfilmed land claims from these states. Many of these are browsable on FamilySearch.org, and indexing is underway. Land records after Vermont became a republic are in town clerks' offices; most are on microfilm at state repositories such as



1864

Naturalist George Perkins Marsh, born in Woodstock, publishes *Man and Nature*

1874

Manchester's Charles Orvis patents a fly-fishing reel

1934

The United States' first ski tow debuts in Woodstock

1944

The von Trapp family opens a music camp in Stowe

1995

Vermont is the last state to get a Walmart store

2011

Tropical Storm Irene causes widespread flooding

TOOLKIT

Websites

Article Archive of NEHGS <americanancestors.org/browse/articles> (select location, then choose Vermont)

Cyndi's List: Vermont <cyndislist.com/us/vt>

The University of Vermont Libraries Digital Collections <cdi.uvm.edu>

University of Vermont Special Collections Library <scfindingaids.uvm.edu>

US GenWeb: Vermont <sites.rootsweb.com/~usgenweb/vt/vtfiles.htm>

Vermont in the Civil War <vermontcivilwar.org>

Vermont Digital Newspaper Project <vtnp.uvm.edu>

Vermont Northeast Kingdom Genealogy <nekg-vt.com>

Virtual Vermont <virtualvermont.com>

Publications

The Family Tree Sourcebook by the Editors of *Family Tree Magazine* (Family Tree Books)

The History of Vermont: From Its Discovery to Its Admission Into the Union in 1791 by Hiland Hall (Andesite Press)

New Hampshire Vermont: Atlas of Historical County Boundaries edited by John H. Long (Simon & Schuster)

Two Vermonts: Geography and Identity, 1865–1910 by Paul M. Searls (University of New Hampshire Press)

Vermont: An Illustrated History by John J. Duffy and Vincent Feeney (American Historical Press)

The Vermont Encyclopedia by John J. Duffy, Samuel B. Hand and Ralph H. Orth (University Press of New Hampshire)

Archives & Organizations

Genealogical Society of Vermont 2962 Vermont Route 12A, Braintree, VT 05060, <www.genealogyvermont.org>

Middlebury College Library 110 Storrs Ave., Middlebury, VT 05753, (802) 443-5501, <www.middlebury.edu/academics/lib>

New England Historic Genealogical Society 101 Newbury St., Boston, MA 02116, (888) 296-3447, <americanancestors.org>

University of Vermont Silver Special Collections Library 48 University Place, Room B201, Burlington, VT 05405, (802) 656-2138, <specialcollections.uvm.edu>

Vermont Department of Libraries 109 State St., Montpelier, VT 05609, (802) 828-3261, <libraries.vermont.gov>

Vermont Historical Society 60 Washington St., Barre, VT 05641, (802) 479-8500, <vermonthistory.org>

Vermont State Archives Office of the Secretary of State, 1078 US Route 2., Middlesex, VT 05633, (802) 828-2308, <sec.state.vt.us/archives-records.aspx>

VHS (there's no statewide index). Look for names of individuals issued land grants from 1763 to 1803 in Jay Mack Holbrook's microfiche *Vermont's First Settlers* (Holbrook Research Institute).

★ **COURT:** To find probate documents, you'll need the name of the probate district, not the county. Use a reference such as *Red Book*, 3rd edition, by Alice Eichholz (Ancestry) to find it. Records up to 1850 (and a few to 1900) are on microfilm and indexed at the state archives and the New England Historic Genealogical Society <americanancestors.org>. Indexes also are available at the FHL, and Ancestry has an index that covers 1749 to 1999. Since the microfilms don't include all the papers in a probate file, you'll want to track down the originals. There was no effort to microfilm post-1850 court records, so seek originals at the court's district office. District courts often have card indexes focusing on estates and guardianships, too.

★ **CENSUS:** Jay Mack Holbrook compiled an early enumeration of sorts from land grants and other sources in *1771 Census* (Holbrook Research Institute). Use his citations to find the original sources and verify whether your ancestor actually lived in Vermont or was just awarded land there.

Vermont's 1790 federal was actually taken in 1791, when the state ratified the US Constitution. You might find families who moved during this time enumerated twice, once elsewhere and once in Vermont. The 1791 census data are also in the two-volume *Vermont Families in 1791* edited by Scott A. Bartley (Genealogical Society of Vermont).

★ **MILITARY:** Unfortunately, a fire destroyed most of Vermont's original military service records predating 1920; the state archives has the remnants. Miscellaneous records are in town clerks' offices or VHS (contact VHS staff to request a lookup). VHS keeps an index to graves of veterans from the Civil War through World War II; see its online index of Civil War manuscripts and digitized diaries and letters

★ **NEWSPAPERS:** These are especially useful for ancestors who predate statehood-era records. The free Vermont Newspaper Project <vtnp.uvm.edu> catalogs more than 1,000 papers dating to the 1700s, and lets you search digitized issues of 15 titles.

ONSITE RESEARCH

A few key repositories like VHS and the state archives can make your genealogical climb through the state's rough terrain fairly easy. But you may find yourself drawn to those tucked-in-the-hills towns (and their records) anyway, just as your own relatives were years ago. ●