

## RESEARCH GUIDE

# RHODE ISLAND

by MAUREEN A. TAYLOR



ON TOP OF RHODE ISLAND'S STATEHOUSE IS A statue of the Independent Man, a symbol of the state's spirit. But it's the water—so important to the area's settlement and development—that inspired Rhode Island's nickname, the Ocean State. This smallest state in the Union is drivable from end to end in approximately an hour, and has hundreds of miles of coastline (despite most of the state not actually being an island).

Don't be fooled by Rhode Island's tiny size—it has bountiful family history resources dating back to the early years of settlement.

### RHODE ISLAND: A HISTORY

Rhode Island's four main original towns—Providence, Warwick, Portsmouth and Newport—were settled between 1636 and 1642 by individuals seeking religious asylum from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, notably English Puritans Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson. The Great Migration Study Project <[www.americanancestors.org/publications/great-migration-study-project](http://www.americanancestors.org/publications/great-migration-study-project)> at the New England Historic Genealogical Society contains many early Rhode Island families.

All those towns rest on land originally inhabited by the Narragansett tribe, who settled the area centuries before European exploration and settlement. Though most of that history took place before written records, evidence of the tribe still exists in place names. You can learn more about tribal history in the state through the Mashantucket Pequot Museum & Research Center in Connecticut <[www.pequotmuseum.org](http://www.pequotmuseum.org)> or via Access Genealogy's 1881 tribal list <[www.accessgenealogy.com/connecticut/1881-narragansett-tribal-list.htm](http://www.accessgenealogy.com/connecticut/1881-narragansett-tribal-list.htm)>.

In 1675, armed conflict ("King Philip's War") broke out between colonists and local tribes, including the Narragansett and Wampanoag. Native survivors who didn't merge with other tribes at the war's end were enslaved, split between settlers.

Rhode Island, like other colonies, participated in the Triangle Trade and allowed slavery. Abolition didn't happen all at once in the colony; slavery was phased out by the 1840s.

After the American Revolution, the Rhode Island colony was the last to sign the Constitution due to fears over taxation. A handful of towns initially shared state capital responsibilities, then two (Newport and Providence) beginning in 1854. Providence wasn't named the formal, permanent capital until 1900.

The state led the nation in the Industrial Age starting with Samuel Slater's factory for cotton thread in the city of Pawtucket. Immigrants from Asia, Canada and Europe settled in newly established mill towns. Notably French-Canadians, Huguenots, Germans, the Irish, Italians, the Polish, the Portuguese and Swedes brought their skills with them for making fabric, jewelry, silver goods, and tools. Existing residents often sought factory opportunities as well, leading to family resettlements as early as 1800.

The Civil War years brought a financial boon to Rhode Island's industries, as their goods were needed. After the Great Depression, orders for Rhode Island products, specifically fine jewelry and silver, declined, and the textile industry moved south.

### LIVING SEASIDE

A knowledge of Rhode Island geography is key. Ask someone from Rhode Island where they live, and they are likely to name a village. The residents, unless they

### FAST FACTS

STATEHOOD:  
1790  
FIRST FEDERAL CENSUS:  
1790  
BIRTH AND DEATH RECORDS BEGIN:  
1630s (local); 1853 (state)  
MARRIAGE RECORDS BEGIN:  
1630s (local); 1853 (state)  
CONTACT FOR VITAL RECORDS:  
R.H. Dept. of Health,  
Office of Vital Records

lived in a major city, identified with the mill village, farm village, or post office district in which they resided. Identifying exactly where your ancestors lived is one of the difficulties for research in the state, as some locales straddle towns and borders with neighboring states.

For Rhode Island towns have kept vital records back to the 1630s. Coverage varies by location; in some times and places, only half of vital events were recorded.

For events after 1853, when state-level civil registrations began, look for records on the town level, at state archives, or at the state health department. Public access to records depends on the year the event took place. Deaths are sealed to all but immediate family for 50 years, and birth and marriage records for 100 years; request records outside of those year restrictions via the Rhode Island State Archives <[forms.sos.ri.gov/VitalRecordsOrderForm.aspx](http://forms.sos.ri.gov/VitalRecordsOrderForm.aspx)>.

The secretary of state's office has online copies of vital record registers from 1853 to 1920 (births and marriages) or 1932 (deaths) <[sosri.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/so\\_aa84016c-a20c-4a02-8f03-eae14378f70a/](http://sosri.access.preservica.com/uncategorized/so_aa84016c-a20c-4a02-8f03-eae14378f70a/)>

### COUNTING RHODE ISLANDERS

Rhode Island has appeared in every US census, with no major record losses except for the general loss of the 1890 census. (Fortunately, the state's 1890 schedules of Civil War Union veterans and widows—a possible substitute for that census—*have* survived.) Federal censuses are available at FamilySearch <[www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)> and through commercial sites Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)> and MyHeritage <[www.myheritage.com](http://www.myheritage.com)>.

Researchers rejoice over the wealth of Colonial census records and those taken on the state level. A handful of Colonial enumerations survive: a 1730 head-of-household list, 1747–1755 lists of freemen, censuses in 1774 and 1782, and a 1777 military census (covering males 16 and over). Information recorded in Colonial censuses varies.

State censuses were taken every 10 years from 1865 to 1935 (though the latter is categorized as taken place in 1936). Only the 1895 census is missing. Most state census materials are available online at Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/4721](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/4721)> (1774, 1865–1935) and FamilySearch (1885–1935).

Don't be fooled by Rhode Island's tiny size—it has bountiful family history resources dating back to the early years of settlement.

### OCEANS OF RECORDS

Take advantage of these other key types of documents:

- **City directories:** City directories for Providence and Newport were published as early as 1824 and 1844, respectively. Household directories—organized alphabetically by street, then number, then occupant—for Providence from 1895 to 1935 are held by the Providence city archives <[www.providenceri.gov/cityarchives](http://www.providenceri.gov/cityarchives)>. The most complete collections are at the Rhode Island Historical Society <[www.rihs.org](http://www.rihs.org)> and the Library of Congress <[www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)> as well as Ancestry.com and Fold3 <[www.fold3.com](http://www.fold3.com)>.

- **Cemetery records:** Each town in the state is home to many small cemeteries that exist on land once owned by families. Some were moved to larger, more central burying grounds. The Rhode Island Historical Cemeteries Transcription Project <[www.theusgenweb.org/rigenweb/cemetery/cemindex.html](http://www.theusgenweb.org/rigenweb/cemetery/cemindex.html)> combines data from earlier manuscripts and printed cemetery reports with new information. You can find more online at Rhode Island Historical Cemetery Commission <[www.rihistoriccemeteries.org](http://www.rihistoriccemeteries.org)>.

- **Immigration records:** Some passenger lists for Rhode Island's primary ports of entry—Bristol and Warren, Newport, and Providence—date to 1798, with wider coverage starting in 1820. Records for 1872 to 1910 have been lost. You can find them in the U.S. Custom House Records at the Rhode Island Historical Society or on Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/49318](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/49318)> and the Family History Library. (Newport lists are at the National Archives.)

## TIMELINE

**1524**

According to legend, explorer Giovanni da Verrazzano compares an island in Narragansett Bay to Rhodes, inspiring the region's name.

**1636**

Puritan Roger Williams, banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony on religious grounds, founds Providence

**1644**

Providence, Portsmouth and Newport unite into a single Rhode Island colony

**1663**

Rhode Island is granted a royal charter

**1675**

Metacomet ("King Philip") leads an alliance of tribes in an armed conflict against European settlers. He's killed in Bristol in 1676

Lighthouse at Point Judith



## 1746

King George II intervenes in a border dispute between Rhode Island and Massachusetts

## 1790

Rhode Island is the 13th state to ratify the Constitution, the last of the original colonies to do so

## 1862

A Supreme Court ruling finally settles the Rhode Island-Massachusetts border, the last major change to Rhode Island county boundaries

## 1900

Providence becomes the sole state capital of Rhode Island

## 2020

Voters remove “and Providence Plantations” from Rhode Island’s official name

## TOOLKIT

### Websites

**Cyndi's List: Rhode Island** <[www.cyndislist.com/us/ri](http://www.cyndislist.com/us/ri)>

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

**Linkpendium: Rhode Island** <[www.linkpendium.com/ri-genealogy](http://www.linkpendium.com/ri-genealogy)>

**One Rhode Island Family** <[www.onerhodeislandfamily.com](http://www.onerhodeislandfamily.com)>

**Rhode Island Archival and Manuscript Collections Online (RIAMCO)** <[www.riamco.org](http://www.riamco.org)>

**Rhode Island GenWeb** <[www.theusgenweb.org/rigenweb](http://www.theusgenweb.org/rigenweb)>

**Rhode Island Historical Cemetery Commission** <[rihistoriccemeteries.org](http://rihistoriccemeteries.org)>

**Rhode Island History Online Directory Initiative** <[www.rihs.org/rhodi](http://www.rihs.org/rhodi)>

### Publications

**Research in Rhode Island** by Diane MacLean Boumenot and Maureen Alice Taylor (National Genealogical Society)

**Rhode Island Boundaries, 1636–1936** by John Hutchins Cady (Rhode Island Tercentenary Commission)

**Rhode Island in the American Revolution** by Eric G. Grundset (National Society Daughters of the American Revolution)

**Rhode Island State Census for Genealogists** by Diane Boumenot (Lost Leaves Press)

### Archives & Organizations

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

**Newport Historical Society** <[newporthistory.org](http://newporthistory.org)>

**Providence City Archives** <[www.providenceri.gov/cityarchives](http://www.providenceri.gov/cityarchives)>

**Rhode Island Genealogical Society** <[www.rigensoc.org](http://www.rigensoc.org)>

**Rhode Island Historical Society** <[www.rihs.org](http://www.rihs.org)>

**Rhode Island Judicial Records Center** <[www.courts.ri.gov/JudicialRecordsCenter](http://www.courts.ri.gov/JudicialRecordsCenter)>

**Rhode Island State Archives** <[www.sos.ri.gov/divisions/state-archives](http://www.sos.ri.gov/divisions/state-archives)>

● **Naturalization records:** Naturalization papers could have been filed in city, county, district courts or federal courts. The Judicial Records Center <[www.courts.ri.gov/JudicialRecordsCenter/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.courts.ri.gov/JudicialRecordsCenter/Pages/default.aspx)> maintains records beginning in 1793. Federal level court records are at the National Archives. Many naturalization records are also online at FamilySearch and Ancestry.com.

● **Land records:** Land evidence records (i.e., documents created from Colonial land grants) include early charters and can be found at the state archives, though early records might be held by the archives in Connecticut, Massachusetts or even the United Kingdom. Proprietor records and deeds are kept at the town level at city and town halls, and on microfilm at the Family History Library. The Rhode Island Historical Society has abstracted deeds from 1850 to 1905 <[www.rihs.org/mssinv/Mss174.htm](http://www.rihs.org/mssinv/Mss174.htm)> that were associated with the Title Guarantee Co., which sold title insurance.

● **Newspapers:** The first newspaper in the colony was published in 1732 in Newport. The Rhode Island Historical Society is the central repository for papers published in the state <[www.rihs.org/newspapers-and-periodicals](http://www.rihs.org/newspapers-and-periodicals)>. All have been microfilmed, but not many are available digitally. *The Providence Journal* (established in 1829) is available online <[providencejournal.newsbank.com](http://providencejournal.newsbank.com)>, as is *The Bristol Phoenix* (established in 1840) <[bristol.advantage-preservation.com](http://bristol.advantage-preservation.com)>. Look for more papers on GenealogyBank <[www.genealogybank.com](http://www.genealogybank.com)>, with smaller collections at Newspapers.com <[www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com)> and the Library of Congress' Chronicling America <[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov)>.

● **Probate records:** These (including wills) are at Ancestry.com <[www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9079](http://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/9079)>; consult One Rhode Island Family <[www.onerhodeislandfamily.com](http://www.onerhodeislandfamily.com)> for how to find and use probate materials in this collection. Records for adoptions can be found in guardianship papers on the town level in probate records.

● **Military records:** Records exist for Rhode Island for all Colonial conflicts. American Revolution records are spread out in various repositories including the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University <[www.jcblibrary.org](http://www.jcblibrary.org)>, the Rhode Island Historical Society (also on FHL microfilm) <[www.rihs.org/military-research](http://www.rihs.org/military-research)>, and the National Archives. Find Civil War records at the Soldiers and Sailors Database <[www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm](http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm)>.

---

**Maureen A. Taylor** <[maurentaylor.com](http://maurentaylor.com)> lives in Rhode Island and is a past president of the Rhode Island Genealogical Society. Her expertise is in identifying people and places in historical photos, and she is the author of *The Family Photo Detective* (Family Tree Books).