

Early American Records Omaha TMG User Group May 21, 2009

I know not all of you have family lines that you can take back to what many consider to be the “early American” time period (the period prior to the 1790 U.S. census), but perhaps this will be of help to you sometime in the future.

I personally consider the period of records prior to the 1850 U.S. census to be “early American”. I know you are asking why I don’t consider the time period before the 1790 census rather than the 1850. My reason is this-the 1790 to 1840 censuses only list head of household, nothing else. Searching for someone like Daniel Richardson quickly becomes an interesting prospect when cousins, uncles, etc. all have the same name in the same geographical area.

When I refer to early American, more often than not, I am referring to the New England area. The states covered are primarily Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Delaware and Maryland.

Because census records are no longer in the mix, you have to start thinking a little more broadly. If extant, any (or all) of these will help in your research: land records (including deeds, land grants, etc.), wills, probate, inventories, church records, guardianship papers, ship manifests, school records, cemetery and sexton records, newspapers, military records, marriage, birth and death records, tax lists, societal and fraternal organizations, town minutes and meetings, local government records, court records, religious affiliations, etc.

So, then the question becomes where to search for these records. Many are available online, but most you will have to “work” for. Here are a few good websites (some are paid subscription sites):

New England Historical and Genealogical Society (NEHGS)
www.newenglandancestors.com

Footnote.com www.footnote.com

Ancestry.com www.ancestry.com

Google books <http://books.google.com>

Heritage Quest (via Nebraska Access with a Driver's License #)
www.nlc.state.ne.us/nebraskaaccess/logon.asp

Massachusetts Historical Society www.masshist.org

Massachusetts State Archives www.sec.state.ma.us/arc

Rhode Island Historical Society www.rihs.org

Rhode Island State Archives www.state.ri.us

New York Genealogical and Biographical Society
www.newyorkfamilyhistory.org

New York State Historical Association <http://library.nysha.org>

New York State Archives www.archives.nysed.gov

New Jersey Historical Society www.jerseyhistory.org

New Jersey State Archives
www.state.nj.us/state/darm/links/archives.html

The Historical Society of Pennsylvania www.hsp.org

The Pennsylvania State Archives digital collection
www.digitalarchives.state.pa.us

Virginia State Historical Association www.vahistorical.org

Virginia State Archives www.lva.virginia.org

New Hampshire Historical Society www.nhhistory.org
New Hampshire State Archives www.sos.nh.gov/archives

New Hampshire Historical Society www.nhhistory.org

Connecticut State Archives www.cslib.org/archives

Connecticut Historical Society www.chs.org

Delaware State Archives <http://archives.delaware.gov>

Delaware Historical Society www.hsd.org

Maryland State Archives www.msa.md.gov

Maryland Historical Society www.mdhs.org

Of course, this is only a small list to get you started. In addition, many states have state and county genealogical societies where you can find records online.

For those records that aren't online, you need to go to the courthouses, FHL microfilms, etc. The online card catalog for the FHL is located at www.familysearch.org/eng/library/FHLC/frameset_fhlc.asp

To further my notation about NEHGS above, here is an example of the resources that they have:

Database by Location

- [Canadian](#)
- [Connecticut](#)
- [England](#)
- [Ireland](#)
- [Maine](#)
- [Massachusetts](#)
- [New Hampshire](#)
- [New York](#)
- [Rhode Island](#)
- [Various](#)
- [Vermont](#)

As you can see, they are not limited to the United States, either. This is an example of their New York offerings:

New York Databases

CENSUS, TAX AND VOTERS LISTS

- [Estate Assessment Roll, Thurman, New York - 1806-1809, 1812](#)

CHURCH RECORDS

- [Records of St. Paul's \(P.E.\) Church, Syracuse, New York, 1830-53](#)

COURT RECORDS

- [Guardianship Records of Onondaga County, New York](#)

GENEALOGY AND BIOGRAPHY

- [Beekman Patent, The Settlers of the Beekman Patent, Volumes 1 - 4 \[Dutchess Co., NY\]](#)
- [Albany County First Settlers of, from 1630 to 1800](#)
- [First Settlers of Schenectady, from 1662 to 1800](#)
- [Jacob Benson, Pioneer, and his Descendants \(1915\), by Arthur T. Benson](#)
- [Genealogical and Biographical Notes on the Haring-Herring, Clark, Denton, White Griggs, Judd, and Related Families](#)

NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS

- [New Netherland Connections](#)
- [Death Notices from the New York Evening Post, 1801-1890](#)
- [Marriage Notices from the New York Evening Post, 1801-1890](#)
- [Record of Deaths and Marriages from the Albany Argus, 1826-1828](#)
- [Otsego County, New York, Newspaper Records](#)
- [Marriages Published in the Christian Intelligencer of the Reformed Dutch Church From 1830 to 1871](#)
- [Marriages and Deaths in New York State from the New Canaan \[CT\], Era](#)
- [Deaths Published in the Christian Intelligencer of the Reformed Dutch Church From 1830 to 1871](#)

PROBATE RECORDS

- [New York Wills, 1626-1836](#)
- [Abstracts of Wills, Administrations and Guardianships in NY State, 1787-1835](#)
- [Abstracts of Wills in Onondaga County, New York, 1791-1841](#)

VITAL RECORDS

- [Marriages Performed by Rev. Ezekiel W. Mundy in Syracuse, New York](#)
- [Marriages of Dutchess County, New York](#)
- [Death Records of Rensselaer County, New York, 1847-1851](#)

Now, let's go back to those types of records I listed earlier. Land records (as discussed last month) are a good source of information. However, in some areas, the land wasn't purchased directly from person to person or from the state/local/town government. Sometimes a large land patent was given to a single person, organization or land company, such as the Beekman Patent in Dutchess County, New York, or the Western Reserve in Connecticut. In that case, you would need to research the lists of those companies or organizations, depending on where your families were located.

As to societal and fraternal organizations there are many, and some kept great records. Many occupations had a fraternal organization tied to them. Here is a listing of a couple of them that come to mind:

Freeman lists
Masonic Order
Directory of Deceased American Physicians
Colonial Clergy of Colonial Churches of New England

Of course, there are also the lineage societies (remember that these are not comprised of original records, but of someone else's "research"):

Founders and Patriots
Sons of the American Revolution
Daughters of the American Revolution

With all that said, I would say that the most informative of the early records are still those that we use past 1790 (or 1850 for that matter); records generated by a birth, marriage, or death. Church records such as a baptism or christening, a marriage or death register. Many records are extant for early churches and their congregations.

In addition to church membership lists and records, depending upon the religious affiliation of your ancestors, there could also be records of their "comings and goings". Quaker records are quite detailed and thorough in this aspect.

On to government generated records such as a will, probate, inventory, or guardianship papers. I know some of you are saying, "but my family

wasn't wealthy enough to warrant a writing a will", but you might be surprised, I have been. If they really didn't have one, or the records are non-extant, then this is where the inventory or guardianship papers come in handy. If the last surviving spouse died before the children were at the age of majority, guardianship for the children would have been necessary, thus resulting in paperwork.

Perhaps your ancestor wanted to build a fence on their property. Depending on the location and time period, this might have been discussed at a town meeting, in the town minutes, or be in the local government records.

However, with all that said, sometimes, regrettably, the records just don't exist anymore at all. Then I would suggest casting a broader net- perhaps with siblings, cousins, uncles, etc. as your main searching point.