

Massachusetts State Research Guide



Family History Sources in the Bay State

Massachusetts History

Their original destination was Virginia, but in 1620 the Mayflower arrived in the New World with 120 passengers. Mostly English Puritans and Separatists, more than half of those original settlers were dead before the first winter was over.

A year later a second ship arrived with 37 new settlers for Plymouth Colony. A year and half after that another two ships arrived carrying 96 passengers. Several settlements were created over the course of the next few decades in this colony that occupied most of what is now southeastern Massachusetts.



Boston from Dorchester Heights, circa 1845 (image courtesy of Library of Congress)

The Massachusetts Bay Company, after a failed attempt in 1623, attempted settlement again in 1628 and were successful with about 20,000 people migrating there before 1630. They occupied the area around what is now Boston and Salem. Soon other settlements were created and thriving.

Although the colonists initially had decent relations with the Native populations, cultural differences led to friction which eventually led to war – first the Pequot War (1636-1638) and then King Phillip's War (1675-1678). At that point most of the natives in southern New England had been pacified, killed, or driven away.

In those years following the landing of the Mayflower, the majority of colonists arriving in Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay Colony were from England. Unlike the settlement of Virginia, Maryland and New Amsterdam, the majority of New England settlers immigrated for religious reasons rather than economic reasons. Most of them were middle class, skilled craftsman and merchants, rather than nobility. This environment created a hardy people living in a harsh climate who developed what would come to be called Puritanical values. It is in this environment that the famed Salem Witch hysteria broke out in February 1692 affecting that community and several surrounding communities.

Until 1756, immigration into Massachusetts continued. New religious traditions were embraced. Diversity increased. However, during the French and Indian War, the British government became more demanding of the American colonies – enforcing trade acts, Indian policies, and ever increasing taxation without representation. By 1763, Massachusetts, though unique in its own way, was united with the other colonies in throwing off the oppression that was continually put upon them by England. From that time forward, Massachusetts played a pivotal role in the American Revolution including the Boston Massacre, the Boston Tea Party, and the revolutionary outbreak at Lexington and Concord.

Massachusetts became the sixth state to ratify the U.S. Constitution and be granted statehood by the new union in 1788. Four United States Presidents were born in Massachusetts: John Adams, John Quincy Adams, John F. Kennedy, and George H.W. Bush.

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Massachusetts Census Records

Federal censuses for Massachusetts exist from the first census in 1790, and are available through 1940, with the exception of the mostly destroyed 1890 census. The 1800 census does not include enumerations for Boston and much of Suffolk County. However, the 1798 U.S. Direct Tax lists serves as a partial substitute.

Massachusetts state censuses were taken in 1855 and 1865. Original state copies of the federal population, mortality, industry and agriculture schedules are held by the Massachusetts State Archives.

The following census collections are available on Ancestry:

- [Massachusetts State Census, 1855](#)
- [Massachusetts State Census, 1865](#)
- [Selected U.S. Federal Census Non-Population Schedules, 1850-1880](#)
- [U.S. Federal Census Mortality Schedules, 1850-1885](#)
- [U.S. Federal Census - 1880 Schedules of Defective, Dependent, and Delinquent Classes](#)
- [U.S. Special Census on Deaf Family Marriages and Hearing Relatives, 1888-1895](#)
- [1890 Veterans Schedules](#)
- [1930 Census of Merchant Seamen](#)
- [U.S. Enumeration District Maps and Descriptions, 1940](#)

Massachusetts Vital Records

Most births, marriages and deaths were recorded at a town level from 1635. Statewide collection of vital records began in 1841.

Of the 351 towns in Massachusetts, records from 315 of them were microfilmed by Jay and Delene Holbrook over the course of 30 years and now make up the 23 million records available in the [Massachusetts, Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988](#) collection.

Vital Records on Ancestry.com

- [Massachusetts, Town and Vital Records, 1620-1988](#)
- [Massachusetts, Town Birth Records, 1620-1850](#)
- [Massachusetts, Town Marriage Records, 1620-1850](#)
- [Massachusetts, Town Death Records, 1620-1850](#)
- [Massachusetts Death Index, 1970-2003](#)
- [Massachusetts, Marriages, 1633-1850](#)
- [Massachusetts, Birth Records, 1840-1915](#)
- [Massachusetts, Marriage Records, 1840-1915](#)
- [Massachusetts, Death Records, 1840-1915](#)

<i>Population</i>	
1790	378,787
1800	422,845
1810	472,040
1820	523,287
1830	610,408
1840	737,699
1850	994,514
1860	1,231,066
1870	1,457,351
1880	1,783,085
1890	2,238,947
1900	2,805,346
1910	3,366,416
1920	3,852,356
1930	4,249,614
1940	4,316,721



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Immigration & Travel

- [Book Indexes to Boston Passenger Lists, 1899-1940](#)
- [Boston, 1821-1850 Passenger and Immigration Lists](#)
- [U.S. Atlantic Ports Passenger Lists, 1820-1873 and 1893-1959](#)
- [Massachusetts Passenger and Crew Lists, 1820-1963](#)
- [Massachusetts, Petitions and Records of Naturalization, 1906-1929](#)
- [Massachusetts, Naturalization Records – Originals, 1906-1929](#)
- [New England, The Great Migration and The Great Migration Begins, 1620-1635](#)

Military Collections

- [Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors in the Revolutionary War](#)
- [Massachusetts Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines in the Civil War](#)
- [Massachusetts Spanish American War Records](#)
- [U.S., Union Soldiers Compiled Service Records, 1861-1865](#)
- [U.S., World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918](#)
- [U.S., World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942](#)

Other Collections

- [The Pioneers of Massachusetts \(1620-1650\)](#)
- [The Planters of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1620-1640](#)
- [Massachusetts Application of Freeman, 1630-1691](#)
- [Massachusetts City Directories](#)
- [Massachusetts, Mason Membership Cards, 1733-1990](#)
- [Massachusetts, Order Sons of Italy in America, Membership Applications, 1925-1955](#)
- [U.S. Map Collection, 1513-1990](#)
- [U.S. City Directories, 1821-1989](#) (Use the browse box in the upper right corner to determine what directories are available for your ancestor's area. If they lived in a rural area, check to see if that area was included with a larger city in the vicinity.)
- [U.S. School Yearbooks, 1880-2012](#) (Search by name or use the browse box on the right-hand side of the page to look for yearbooks from your ancestor's school.)

[View all Massachusetts collections on Ancestry](#)

Other State Resources

The organizations listed below provide information about Massachusetts history and genealogy. In addition to these state-level resources, many counties and towns maintain important genealogical collections in local libraries, genealogical societies, or historical societies, so check for a local resource when researching.

- [Massachusetts Archives Division](#)
 - [Genealogy and Family History](#)
 - [Databases](#)
- [State Library of Massachusetts](#)
 - [Genealogical Resources](#)
- [Massachusetts Historical Society](#)
- [Massachusetts GenWeb](#)
- [American Antiquarian Society](#)
- [The National Archives at Boston](#): This facility maintains records from Federal agencies and courts in Massachusetts, including census, military, court, naturalization, and immigration records.

Local and Regional Research

- [Boston Public Library](#)
 - [Genealogy and Family History Resources](#)
- [New England Historic Genealogical Society](#): NEHGS holds a wide range of records on New England states, including Massachusetts.

Help and Advice

- [Map of Massachusetts](#)
- [Massachusetts Family History Research](#)
- [Massachusetts County Resources](#)

Significant Dates (through 1919)

- 1498 – Italian explorer John Cabot explored the coast for the English.
- 1604 – Samuel de Champlain French explorer and navigator mapped the coast.
- 1606 – King James I granted charter to Plymouth Company to establish colonies in America.
- 1620 – The Mayflower set sail from Plymouth, England. After a journey of 66 days, it anchored in Plymouth (America) harbor and the passengers established a settlement.
- 1621 – The Pilgrims celebrated the first Thanksgiving in Plymouth.
- 1628 – John Endicott founded a Puritan settlement in what is now Salem.
- 1629 – Massachusetts Bay Company was chartered.
- 1630 – John Winthrop and a group of settlers founded Boston.
- 1632 – Boston became the capital of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

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- 1634 – Boston Common became the first public park in America.
- 1636 – Harvard became the first American college.
- 1636 – Boston passed the first warning-out laws, intended to prevent non-residents from getting public assistance.
- 1675-1676 – King Philip's War, a series of skirmishes and battles between the Narragansetts and white settlers. The war ended with the death of Narragansett chief Metacomet (called "King Philip" by the settlers).
- 1691 – Massachusetts was granted a new charter by the crown of England and became a royal colony that included Maine and Plymouth.
- 1692 – The Salem Witchcraft hysteria spread through that town and several surrounding communities.
- 1756 – The Seven Years War (French and Indian War) due to disputes over land is won by Great Britain. France gives England all French territory east of the Mississippi River, except New Orleans. The Spanish give up east and west Florida to the English in return for Cuba.
- 1773 – A political protest by the Sons of Liberty in Boston destroyed a shipment of tea in defiance of the Tea Act.
- 1775 – The first battle of the American Revolution was fought at Lexington and Concord.
- 1776 – On 4 July 1776 the United States issued a Declaration of Independence.
- 1778 – France declared war against Britain and made an alliance with American Revolutionary forces.
- 1788 – Massachusetts becomes the 6th state admitted to the Union. The motto of the new state is translated as "By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty."
- 1790 – The first American public library was founded in Franklin.
- 1820 – Maine was separated from Massachusetts.
- 1826 – The first American railroad was built in Quincy.
- 1831 – The Liberator, an anti-slavery newspaper, began publication in Boston.
- 1832 – William Lloyd Garrison founded the New England Anti-Slavery Society.
- 1842 – Massachusetts enacted the U.S.'s first child labor law regarding working hours.
- 1846 – Boston and New York City were connected by telegraph.
- 1852 – Massachusetts enacted a law that all school-age children must attend school.
- 1855 – The Married Women's Property Act was passed, which allowed women married after 1855 to have their earning treated as separate from their husband's.
- 1861-1865 – The U.S. Civil War was fought. Massachusetts sent 159,165 men to serve the Union. Springfield Armory was a major supplier of weaponry to the U.S. Army.
- 1897 – The first subway in the United States opened in Boston.
- 1897 – The first Boston Marathon was held. Runners ran 15 miles from Ashland to Boston. It was extended to 26.2 miles in 1924.
- 1908 – A fire destroyed approximately 1,500 buildings in Chelsea; thousands were left homeless.
- 1912 – To fight working conditions and low pay, more than 20,000 textile workers in Lawrence went on strike. The "Bread and Roses" strike lasted for three months.
- 1913 – Massachusetts enacted a law prohibiting non-residents from marrying in the state if their marriage would not be legal in the state where they lived. This was repealed in 2008.
- 1918 – A German U-boat fired on a tugboat and four barges off the coast of Orleans on Cape Cod.
- 1919 – The Great Molasses Flood occurred in Boston when a tank holding nearly 2 million gallons of molasses exploded; 21 people were killed.