



GENEALOGY BASICS: EARLY AMERICAN ANCESTORS

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PURPOSE

As the colonizing powers arrived on America's shores, the kind, number, and nature of records varied, which continued in the early days of the American Republic. Later, waves of interest in U.S. history, especially around anniversary events, have led to the creation of useful compilations. Knowing where to find them, and what kind of records were and weren't created, can help you focus your research.

SCOPE

We focus on accessing primary records, and compilations of data pulled from primary records, with an overview of how and what the colonial powers and the early federal government were keeping track of.

STEPS

1. Knowledge of U.S. colonization and settlement expansion will direct your records search

When the first European settlers arrived on North American shores, there were numerous indigenous cultures throughout the country. Over the period of colonization, three countries were the most dominant: Spain (1490-1898), Britain (1607-1776), and France (17th Cen-1803). Three other countries had footholds: the Dutch (1614-1655), Swedish (1638-1655), and Russia (1784-1867).

As colonial powers landed, got established, lost space, gained space, ceded space after conflict, different powers kept different records. For example, copies of Spanish colonial records are in archives in Spain, whereas many British settlement records remained in local hands. In small settlements without a "government" presence, priests or pastors often recorded births, deaths, and marriages.

Three things to help understand what records may exist:

- **Why were the colonizers there?** Conquest, resource exploitation, trade, settlement, evangelizing
- **Who was paying?** Government, religious institutions, business/entrepreneur, societies/fellowship
- **What sort of people were there?** Administrators, military, business owners, workers, enslaved people, single, married

2. Context for efficient & effective research

It is a regular recommendation to learn as much as you can about a particular time period and location to search effectively, and to make the most of the information you find. This context will help you figure out whether the kinds of records you seek were created, how and where to look.

A great way to start is by using sites like the FamilySearch Research Wiki. Since you can search by geographic location, or by topic, it's a solid starting point to learn more with a clear connection to genealogy. For example, they have a page on "United States Colonial Records" that would be a good starting point for understanding the breadth and depth of records and resources available.

3. General searches on specific topics

Don't overlook using everyday search engines such as Google. You can look for records ("California mission records") or for something more specific ("Palatine settlers in Stone Arabia NY"). These searches will find websites including both scholarly and personal, and also typically turn up archives, museums, kinship groups, videos on sites like YouTube, and more. With the ability to ask questions in a "natural language" style, you can tailor the inquiries as you see what kind of initial results you're getting.

4. Some of the most studied people in our history

When tracing ancestors, one starts with oneself, and works back, generation by generation. Typically, the search gets tougher the further back one goes, and often people run into real challenges documenting things before about 1840. The interesting thing about the colonial period and the early time after the Revolutionary War is that these are some of the most studied people in our history. Particularly in the British colonies, records were kept in every town, often by both the church and the local government, however rudimentary.

There have been waves of interest in colonial roots. Founded in 1845, the New England Historic Genealogy Society is known as the oldest genealogical society in the US. The celebrations of America's Centennial in 1876 stirred interest in family history. Records were studied, transcribed, indexed, and made available in ways they had never been before.

THE THIRTEEN ORIGINAL COLONIES IN 1774.





By the end of the 1800s, interest in proving relationships to the country's founding generations led to the formation of groups such as the Sons of the American Revolution; the Daughters of the American Revolution was formed shortly afterward when the Sons refused to let women join. The same decade saw interest in the Mayflower lead to the founding of the Mayflower Society in 1897. There are still challenges, but if your research reaches this era, there are more resources than one might expect to help with this early period.

Many of these organizations have digitized their information. Even the sites that have paid membership may have some information available for free, or tutorials on best research practices. It can also be useful to seek out "explainer" info, such as when a YouTube genealogy channel interviews staff from sites, giving a chance for a more thorough understanding of what resources are available.

With America's 250th Anniversary coming July 4, 2026, the "semiquincentennial" celebrations may spark a new wave of information and interest in early American ancestors. Series such as Ken Burn's documentary on "The American Revolution" also help build knowledge and context.

5. Build your deciphering skills for the handwriting of the period

While there are great strides in the ability of software to create transcripts of handwritten documents, they don't replace the importance of building your deciphering skills. Depending on the original document, the computer-created transcript may be very legible, or practically useless. Keep an eye out for classes and books that can help, and make good use of your time by reviewing documents before and after the one you are interested in, to build practice.

RELATED AREAS/SKILLS

Building skills in deciphering old handwriting and the basic approach to transcribing documents will make your research more effective and enjoyable, reducing frustration and confusion.

RESOURCES

There are many fine resources about researching Early American ancestors, from books to websites to YouTube videos. Even a simple search with "early American records for genealogy research" will produce many useful results. Be sure to check the resources of websites and organizations focused on the time period, to see if their area of focus matches yours; this will help you judge whether subscription sites are worth your investment.

CONTACT



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