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Your Guide to
the *Mayflower*
400th Anniversary



A GUIDE TO PROVING

Mayflower Ancestry

In September of 1620, 102 passengers—men, women, and children—and a crew of approximately 30 left England aboard the *Mayflower*. While nearly half of the passengers who arrived on the shores of Massachusetts died during the first winter, 26 *Mayflower* families are known to have left descendants. An estimated 35 million people can trace their ancestry to the *Mayflower*. Are you among them? Use this guide to search your ancestry for *Mayflower* connections.



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Generations 1–5: Don't reinvent the wheel!

Before he retired, NEHGS Senior Genealogist David Curtis Dearborn often reminded visitors to our library that “seventeenth-century New Englanders were arguably the most studied group on the planet.” With that fact in mind, we recommend that researchers use the work of past genealogists and begin verifying lineages with reliable published sources for early *Mayflower* generations. Specifically, *Mayflower Families Through Five Generations* (the “silver books”), a multi-volume series published by the General Society of *Mayflower Descendants* that systematically traces most *Mayflower* passengers with known descendants through five generations. This series is the most important *Mayflower* resource, as the research relies on original material and has been vetted by expert genealogists.

Because these books provide the most comprehensive study of *Mayflower* families, they can be used when applying for membership in the General Society of Mayflower Descendants.

The names of fifth generation descendants listed in these volumes are available as a searchable database, “Mayflower Families Fifth Generation Descendants, 1700–1880,” on AmericanAncestors.org. When completed, the database will contain information from 31 volumes. Currently, the 23 digitized volumes include about 6,600 pages and 356,800 searchable names.

However, if your ancestors were not included in *Mayflower Families through Five Generations (MF)*, investigate the possibility that they were missed when genealogists compiled later generations. Omissions are most likely in the fifth generation, as many of these individuals took part in migrations to New York or Canada—areas that are sometimes genealogical “black holes.”

One method of identifying fifth-generation descendants is to examine the most recent *Mayflower* scholarship, which may have appeared after the publications of a passenger’s *MF* volume. The *Mayflower Descendant*, first published in 1899 by George Ernest Bowman, is a highly regarded scholarly journal on *Mayflower* and related families, their origins in England, and

their lives and places of residence in America, from the earliest settlements to their migrations north and westward. Past volumes of *Mayflower Descendant* can be searched on AmericanAncestors.org, while new issues published by NEHGS are available by subscription. Additionally, articles in *The American Genealogist*, *Mayflower Quarterly*, *The Genealogist*, and the *Register* also feature *Mayflower* families.

Generations 6–10: These can be tricky!

Once you arrive at Generation 6—note that birth information for Generation 6 is often included in *MF*—a variety of resources can be used to verify each subsequent generation. Ideally, vital records should connect the generations, but these records are often incomplete during this time period and additional sources are needed.

The single biggest event causing this lack of record-keeping is the massive migration out of southern New England. Land away from the coast began opening for settlement: interior Maine, northern and western New Hampshire, Vermont [the New Hampshire Grants], and northeastern New York above Albany. Within another generation, lands in central

New York and Pennsylvania and points west into the Old Northwest Territories were available.

With large groups of people on the move, locating vital records can be challenging. During this period, you are likely to find births recorded in family groups, sometimes long after the last child was born. These group records can sometimes reveal the family migration route, if birthplaces and birth dates were recorded. In the best case scenario, the parents’ marriage and births were recorded as part of the group. The worst case scenario is that births were not recorded at all—a frequent occurrence in this period.

To find documentation on your ancestors in these generations, learn about the history of the places where your ancestors lived. Study local histories to see if you can identify groups who arrived when your ancestors did. Settlers commonly arrived in new locales in groups, and knowing how the group was connected—through family, religion, military service, or place of origin—can be useful. If your ancestor’s past has been obscured, look for others in their group who might have left a better paper trail.

Consult Susan E. Roser’s *Mayflower Births & Deaths: From the Files of George Ernest Bowman at the*

Previous page: Arlington, Massachusetts, residents dressed as Pilgrims for the dedication of a new town hall, June 1913. Courtesy of Robbins Library, Arlington, Massachusetts. *Right:* “The Mayflower in Plymouth Harbor,” postcard ca. 1898–1931.



Massachusetts Society of Mayflower Descendants [MSMD](1992), and the other books she transcribed from the Bowman files at MSMD. These volumes provide vital record information on many *Mayflower* families into the sixth, seventh, and eighth generations. Entries are organized by family and include source citations. If your family member is not included, the geographic area should guide the next stage of your research. Because many *Mayflower* families scattered to places that kept limited vital records (such as New York and Maritime Canada), you must learn what is available by region.

New England resources

If your family remained in New England after Generation 5, published vital records collections should be consulted first. The best documented state is Massachusetts, which has the *Vital Records to 1850* series, which covers 247 of 351 cities and towns, plus the Holbrook Collection (on microfiche and on Ancestry.com). *Maine Vital Records Prior to 1892* includes 80 of the 488 incorporated municipalities in the state. New England statewide collections are available in print, on microfilm, and online (at AmericanAncestors.org, Ancestry.com, and FamilySearch.org). These include, at a minimum, *Massachusetts Vital Records to 1850*, *Maine Vital Records Prior to 1892*,

Connecticut's *Barbour Collection*, Rhode Island's *Arnold Collection*, *New Hampshire Vital Records Early to 1900*, and *Vermont Vital Records to 2008*.

If you don't find your ancestor in vital records, explore church records. These collections can be challenging to locate, as you must first determine your ancestor's religious denomination and then identify area churches. Some states have more comprehensive collections, such as the *Connecticut Church Records Abstracts* for Congregational Church records, found in print at the NEHGS and Connecticut State libraries and online at Ancestry.com. Massachusetts collections include *An inventory of the records of the particular (Congregational) churches of Massachusetts gathered 1620–1805* (1970) by Harold Worthley and the database *Massachusetts: Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston Records, 1789–1900*, available on AmericanAncestors.org. Church records are also part of the *Vital Records to 1850* series.

In areas of New England with fewer vital and church records—such as northern New England and western Massachusetts—consult manuscript collections and study projects compiled by expert genealogists. For example, the Corbin Collection at NEHGS includes transcriptions of a variety of original records compiled by Walter E. and

Lottie S. Corbin, mainly of material from central and western Massachusetts from approximately 1650 to 1850. This collection is scheduled to be available on FamilySearch.org.

The Elmer Irwin Shepard Collection, held at the Berkshire Athenaeum in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and available on microfilm at NEHGS, consists of index cards with material pertaining primarily to families in Berkshire, Franklin, Hampden, and Hampshire Counties in western Massachusetts. Organized by location and surname, the cards feature information from both primary and secondary sources, abbreviated at the bottom of each card.

Western Massachusetts Families in 1790, a database on AmericanAncestors.org and a book series (3 vols. to date) published by NEHGS, provides genealogical sketches of families listed in the 1790 census for Berkshire and Hampshire Counties (an area that now includes Franklin and Hampden Counties). These sketches also provide information on the children of heads of household, which is helpful when tracking that generation to areas further west. The print volumes *Maine Families in 1790* (11 vols. to date), *New Hampshire Families in 1790* (1 vol.), and Scott Andrew Bartley's *Vermont Families in 1791* (2 vols), are similar to *Western Massachusetts Families in*

1790 in arrangement and scope, and are invaluable for capturing families on the move in New England. *Early Vermont Settlers to 1784* is an ongoing study project managed by Scott Andrew Bartley. Sketches can be found on AmericanAncestors.org and in book form.



Birthplace of Gov. William Bradford, Austerfield, England. Postcard ca. 1898–1931. New York Public Library Digital Collections.



Documenting Your Mayflower Ancestry

Once you have determined descent from a *Mayflower* passenger, how do you properly document the lineage in order to meet the requirements of the General Society of Mayflower Descendants? Although you likely developed this lineage by starting with yourself and moving backward, the documentation process is easier to explain in reverse order, from the passenger to you.

The key element in this process is having a primary document that links one generation to the next. This document should be evaluated for the quality of the data. For example, a contemporary birth record provides a better source for linking parents to a child than a death certificate that lists the deceased's parents.

Generations 1–5: The first five generations are relatively easy to document, since you can provide citations on your application for the relevant volumes and pages from *Mayflower Families through Five Generations*.

Generation 6–present: For these generations you will want to gather as many birth, marriage, and death records as possible for the “line carrier” and any spouses. (The introduction of modern vital records varied from state to state. Massachusetts, the earliest, began statewide vital record registration in 1841. Other start dates are: Connecticut, 1897; Maine, 1892; New Hampshire, 1866; Rhode Island, 1853; Vermont, 1857; and New York, 1881.)

- **Birth records:** A birth record published by a town, city, or county is best, as the record will likely provide accurate information about a child's parents. Provide GSMD with a clear photocopy of the entire original record; do not send original records! If a record was included in a reliable published or microfilm collection, send a photocopy of the relevant page as well as the title page.
- **Marriage records:** Again, a civil record published by a town, city, or county is ideal—and should be documented with a photocopy of the original. This is especially true if a civil marriage records were required by law at the time. Generally speaking, if a record should exist, GSMD wants a photocopy of the original. Additionally, if one or both spouses were married more than once, you must provide proof of the additional marriages, even when no children were born of the union.
- **Death records:** The civil record is best, as it helps to support the chronology you present. However, when a death record is unavailable, you can rely on a gravestone, Bible record, or obituary as an alternative. If you plan to cite a gravestone, provide a clear photograph of the stone, as well as a landscape view that shows the gravestones surrounding your ancestor's marker.

Ideally, you should present a vital record for every event for each person from the sixth generation forward. However, this level of documentation is not always possible so some vital record substitutes are permitted (see page 42 for examples).

Above: The Mayflower, John Bach McMaster, School History of the United States (1897), from Wikimedia Commons.

Although not every family in western Massachusetts, Vermont, or Maine is included in these series, these sources should be consulted. If you don't locate your ancestors in them, you might discover other sources to check for your research.

New York

In New York State, where the registration of vital records did not begin until 1881, finding documentation of births, marriages, and deaths can be tricky. Censuses from 1850 onwards can provide valuable information—the names of all household members from 1850 and relationships from 1880. (For earlier years connections can be difficult to verify.)

New York study projects and databases can also be useful. Frank Doherty's thirteen-volume series *The Settlers of the Beekman Patent* (available on AmericanAncestors.org), contains genealogies of the early inhabitants of Dutchess County's Beekman Patent, including many families that migrated into that area from Connecticut and Massachusetts. Particularly valuable to *Mayflower* researchers is a section at the end of each surname sketch that lists “Other and Unplaced” individuals who appear throughout the state.

Another AmericanAncestors.org database, *New York: Abstracts of Wills, Admins. and Guardianships, 1787–1835*, is helpful in placing family members in New York. Created from the Eardeley Genealogy Collection at the Brooklyn Historical Society, this database contains abstracts of estates in 52 (of 62) New York counties. Included in these records are family relationships and witnesses.

Nova Scotia/New Brunswick

Some *Mayflower* descendants moved to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. An essential resource is *Planters and Pioneers* (rev. ed. 1982) by Esther Clark Wright, which covers more than 4,000 heads of households who moved to Atlantic Canada between 1749 and 1775. The volume includes births and



The Pilgrim procession—a scene daily enacted during the Plymouth tercentenary. Plymouth, Mass. Postcard ca. 1898–1931. From the New York Public Library Digital Collections.

deaths, as well as spouses, parents, and children, if available.

New Englanders in Nova Scotia, a manuscript collection compiled by Fred E. Crowell, contains genealogical articles and research material on 48,165 names from more than 650 families of New England Planters and Loyalists who settled in Nova Scotia beginning in 1759. The collection is available on microfilm and as a database on AmericanAncestors.org.

Peter Wilson Coldham's *American Loyalist Claims* (1980) is sometimes overlooked by researchers of Canadian *Mayflower* connections. Although the claims primarily focus on property lost by Loyalists during the American Revolution, some entries also name wives, children, extended family members, and places of origin. This information can provide more evidence for generations that follow those covered in the *Mayflower Families* volumes.

Generation 10+: Prove with modern vital records

Depending on the age and length of the generations in your line,

Generation 10 is approximately the point at which documentation and verification becomes easier. From this generation forward, you will likely be able to use birth, marriage, and death records created by a civil authority.

The location, availability, and accessibility of vital records vary from state to state, so check what you have at home or ask family members for copies of these more modern records. And, if the records are not in your possession, contact a local town, city, or county clerk. For information about New England records, consult *Genealogist's Handbook for New England Research*, 5th ed. (NEHGS, 2012). For vital records outside New England, consult the Family Search Wiki, at familysearch.org/wiki.

Each state has specific procedures for vital records requests. A state may require a copy of the applicant's photo identification, a return envelope, a written request, or a signed application. Payment methods likewise vary by state. Be sure to learn and adhere to all requirements before submitting an application.

Due to privacy restrictions on sensitive information (including social security number or cause of death), certified copies of some vital records may be unavailable. In this case, a non-certified "informational" or "genealogical" copy may be offered at a lesser charge.

Fully proving a *Mayflower* line can be a daunting endeavor, as you will likely face locating documentation for twelve to fourteen generations in total. But taken one step at a time—beginning with your own generation and working back—the process can be satisfying and rewarding. If you succeed, you can join the General Society of Mayflower Descendants (themayflowersociety.org). You will also have documented your lineage for your family and future generations, and when 2020 arrives you will have conclusively established your *Mayflower* credentials! ♦

A checklist of vital record alternatives for proving *Mayflower* ancestry

Rarely can researchers document their lines of descent using only vital records. Therefore, using alternative records or secondary sources to prove the connection between generations is essential.

Bible records: Although family Bible records don't exist for many families, they can be of great help when available. To locate a Bible record specific to your ancestors, contact the local historical societies, archives, and genealogical societies that might be associated with the family. Large collections of Bible records are also held at NEHGS, the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and other repositories. Revolutionary War and War of 1812 pensions can contain original Bible records. You can also search for Bible manuscripts on the free database ArchiveGrid (beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid).

Census records: Before 1850, only heads of household were named in U.S. federal censuses, and other household members were designated by tally marks according to age and gender. From 1850, censuses name each member of a household; from 1880 U.S. federal census records state the relationship of each household member to its head. Family Search, American Ancestors, and Ancestry.com have searchable collections of U.S. federal censuses from 1790 to 1940. Some state census records are also available.

Cemetery records/inscriptions: Gravestone inscriptions can be used not only for births and deaths, but also for evidence of relationships. Look for close relatives in the same plot as your ancestor, and read cemetery markers for biographical information such as a maiden names, spouses, and places of birth. National cemetery databases include Find A Grave, grave-records.mooseroots.com, BillionGraves, and Interment.net. Also look for regional cemetery data on sites such as CapeCodGravestones.com and the Maine Old Cemetery Association (moca-me.org).

Probate Records: Probate files, such as wills and guardianships, often reveal much about the deceased—as well as the names of heirs (usually a spouse, children, grandchildren, or siblings). NEHGS maintains a large collection of New England and Atlantic Canada probate records on microfilm and offers Massachusetts probate file papers (by county) on AmericanAncestors.org. Other U.S. town and county probates are available at town and county offices and on FamilySearch.org and Ancestry.com.

Deeds: Land records sometimes identify specific relationships between grantor (seller) and grantee (purchaser). Also, when married men sold property, the records often listed

the first name of the grantor's wife. Most deeds for New England states are available on microfilm at NEHGS, and FamilySearch.org has many U.S. land records, including Massachusetts Land Records, 1620–1986.

DNA: DNA evidence can be used to corroborate lineage, but cannot be used as sole proof for a lineage society application. DNA testing with companies such as 23andme, Ancestry.com, and Family Tree DNA can also lead you to distant cousins who may have more knowledge about your shared lines.

Local histories and well-documented genealogies: Although local histories and genealogies are typically not accepted by lineage societies as the lone source connecting two generations, properly cited sources can provide supplemental proof. If you use a published source for your lineage application, always include a photocopy of the title page. You can use the online NEHGS library catalog to identify published genealogies. Several free sites have digitized out-of-copyright (generally pre-1922) published genealogies and local histories, including Internet Archive, Google Books, Hathi Trust, and Family History Books (books.familysearch.org). You can borrow post-1922 genealogies for free at Internet Archive through Open Library—just remember to digitally return your book when you are finished.

Military pensions: Pension records often provide specific genealogical information about a soldier (as well as other family members), including dates and places of birth, marriage, and death. Fold3, Familysearch.org, and Ancestry.com have searchable/browseable collections of Revolutionary War, War of 1812, Mexican War, Civil War, and the Spanish-American War pension files and indexes.

Obituaries: In addition to providing facts about the deceased, obituaries regularly identify names of immediate (and sometimes extended) family members. Occasionally death notices will state that the deceased was a native of a particular place. Large collections of digitized historic newspapers are available at subscription sites, such as GenealogyBank.com, NewspaperArchive.com, or Newspapers.com, and free sites, like Google News Archive, Elephind.com, and [Chronicling America](http://ChroniclingAmerica) (chroniclingamerica.loc.gov).

Above: "The Gurnet Light from Burial Hill," Plymouth. *Mayflower Memories of Old Plymouth* by Louis K. Harlow (L. Prang & Co., 1889). New York Public Library Digital Collections.

