



# NEW ENGLAND ONLINE

Massachusetts Vital Records Debut Online at [www.NewEnglandAncestors.org](http://www.NewEnglandAncestors.org)

by Lynn Betlock

. . . the Society has already been enabled to begin a work, the publication of the vital records of Massachusetts towns, which will prove a lasting monument to its usefulness, and which must, with the course of time, excite the gratitude of the historian and genealogist in ever increasing ratio, and which . . . will rescue from rapidly approaching decay and oblivion the early records of our forefathers.

— Report of the Council of the  
New England Historic Genealogical Society,  
January 1902

IN NOVEMBER 1901 THE NEW ENGLAND HISTORIC Genealogical Society voted to undertake an endeavor of lasting significance — the Massachusetts Town Vital Records Project. Now, after a century of usefulness in printed form, the records extracted for that project are being made available on *NewEnglandAncestors.org*.

For researchers in 2002, it is hard to imagine doing Massachusetts genealogy without consulting the familiar tan vital records volumes. Before 1902, though, few vital records had yet been published. Vital records created prior to 1841 did not exist in a centralized location; instead each town held its own, which existed in varying states of condition and accessibility. If you were searching for your Massachusetts ancestors but did not know the town of origin, you faced a very daunting task. Other than checking past issues of the *Register* for vital record transcriptions, you had few resources available to aid you in your search.

The impetus for the town records project came from a bequest by Robert Henry Eddy and his wife, Annie Goddard Eddy. Mr. Eddy, a civil engineer, a solicitor of patents, and a life member of the New England Historic Genealogical Society, died in 1887. Upon Mrs. Eddy's death in 1900, the couple's estate was settled. Gifts were made to Harvard University, Massachusetts General Hospital, the city of Portsmouth, New Hampshire (which received \$30,000 for a statue of the Civil War-era Major General Fitz John Porter), as well as to NEHGS. The

gift to NEHGS totaled \$56,500; of this amount \$20,000 was to "be set aside as a special fund to be called the Eddy Town-Record Fund, for the sole purpose of publishing the Vital Records of the towns of Massachusetts . . ."

NEHGS wasted no time in launching this important project. The Society hired "competent persons" to transcribe the vital records of various towns. After the transcriptions were completed, the work was carefully verified. The transcriptions often proved challenging. The original records had, in many cases, suffered from neglect and a lack of preservation, so the transcriber was often faced with pages that were undecipherable, missing, or damaged. No doubt the state of the original records provided further validation of the worthiness of the project.

By the January 1903 annual meeting, the Committee on Publications reported progress on two fronts. First, due to the initiative of NEHGS members, the Massachusetts Legislature passed a law in 1902 agreeing to purchase five hundred copies of each vital records volume published. The Commonwealth of

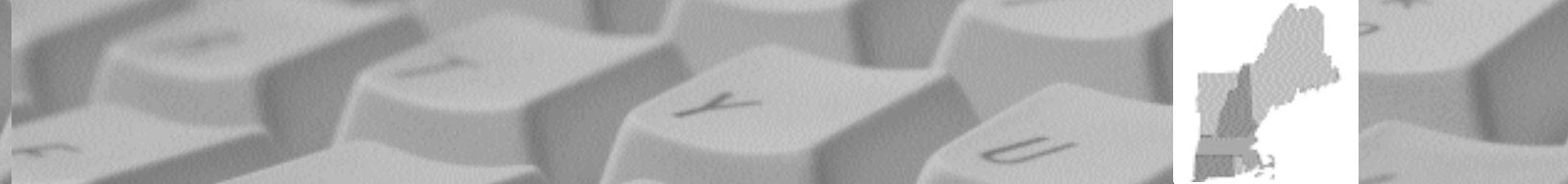
Massachusetts would distribute these volumes, free of charge, to public libraries and historical societies in the state. (This action accounts for the widespread presence of these volumes in Massachusetts repositories today.) Second, publication of the volumes was already proceeding at a remarkable rate, with the towns of Montgomery, Pelham, Walpole, Peru, Alford, and Hinsdale already in print and Medfield, Lee, Becket, Sudbury, and Bedford soon to follow. Just one year later, at the Annual Meeting of 1904, the Council reported that twenty-two other cities and towns were in preparation.

An ad in a 1903 *Register* acquainted Society members with the project's intent and scope: "There are about 180 such Towns, estimated to require an average of 150 printed pages for each Town, and it is intended to issue, in books of 8vo size, in clear type, on good paper, and with suitable binding, the Records of as many Towns as practicable during each year, until the work is completed." The ad went on to announce that

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those interested could subscribe to the town records series “at the uniform rate of one cent per page, which will be about the actual cost.” Experience proved that the sales of records of larger towns and cities subsidized the records of smaller towns that attracted fewer purchases.

The Committee on Publications reported in 1904 that it had taken steps to encourage the states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Connecticut to publish their own vital records series to 1850. It also proposed that a committee of NEHGS members in each state be appointed to persuade their respective legislatures to undertake this project. Today’s genealogists can only lament that this suggestion was never acted on by those states!

Meanwhile, the Massachusetts project continued to gain momentum. Other organizations, such as the Essex Institute and the Topsfield Historical Society, joined the project and produced a number of the volumes. By the time of the NEHGS centennial in 1945, vital records volumes had been compiled and published for 206 Massachusetts cities and towns. Although the Eddy Town Record Fund was folded into the general fund in 1939, volumes of town vital records continued to be published. The New England Historic Genealogical Society’s ongoing commitment to Massachusetts vital records can be seen in the publication, in the 1980s and 90s, of volumes for Pepperell, Charlestown, Townsend, Swansea, and Sandwich, plus the just published *Vital Records of Springfield*.

By 1945, when the vast majority of the vital records had been published, William Carroll Hill, author of *A Century of Genealogical Progress*, a centennial history of the Society, could reflect on the importance of the project to NEHGS and genealogical scholarship generally. “If the New England Historic Genealogical Society had done nothing else in its long life, it would probably have justified its existence by its inauguration of the state-aided program of transcribing and publishing the vital records of the cities and towns of the state.”

Like the print version, the online database of *Early Vital Records of Massachusetts to 1850* presents birth, marriage, and death information as well as marriage intentions and baptismal and burial data. Originally taken from town, church, cemetery, and Bible records, plus other sources, these volumes, and the database, are essential tools for early Massachusetts research. The



data is presented in the format used in the printed volumes, and includes source citations. These citations direct the researcher to the source of the original record. If no source citation is provided, the data came from the town’s vital records. But if a citation is given,

the item came from a different source. The Worthington vital records, for example, cites thirty-two different sources in addition to the town vital data. These thirty-two include records from the Church of Christ, six cemeteries, and twenty-five privately-owned family Bibles. The inclusion of the source record citations makes the *Massachusetts Vital Records* online database particularly valuable.

*NewEnglandAncestors.org* users can choose to search the entire database, or individual localities. The query field allows searches by first name and last name, and researchers can also select a record type, specify a “start year” and an “end year,” and perform a soundex search. Clicking on the name of the town on the search results page will provide details about the original publication date and source citations for that particular town.

At the time this article went to press, the following towns were available online:

- Amesbury
- Athol
- Bellingham
- Beverly
- Bradford
- Bridgewater
- Brimfield
- Brookfield
- Cambridge
- Charlemont
- Chelmsford
- Chelsea
- Conway
- Dalton
- Danvers
- Deerfield
- Framingham
- Gill
- Great Barrington
- Greenfield
- Haverhill
- Hinsdale
- Hopkinton
- Hubbardston
- Lee
- Leominster
- Marlboro

*(continued on page 48)*

