

What's New at AmericanAncestors.org?

By Dave Horton - January 2021

The New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS) offers a quarterly webinar to present new material available to search from its website, AmericanAncestors.org. All of these programs are recorded and are available for viewing from the home page by selecting "Events" followed by "Online Events" then clicking on "View Archived Webinars." The latest presentation was on January 14, 2021. If you have family roots in New England, then AmericanAncestors.org is probably the best place to explore them, particularly during the three centuries from 1620 to 1920. New information in a searchable database could enhance the family genealogy data that we have and might even break down one of those pesky brick walls.

NEHGS tries to provide databases for global interest, but its real strength lies in the data available for New England. There are 475 searchable databases containing 1.4 billion names, and 220 of these databases are unique to AmericanAncestors.org. The databases that are accessed from the "Search" option on the menu are event based, generally relating an individual with an event on a particular date or in a particular year. The website's use of years for searches differs from one database to another, so if your search is not for vital records, it may be best to use the "A-Z" option to find a particular database, which will then have search criteria clearly labelled.

In the last three months of 2020, NEHGS enhanced the two databases on the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston (1780-1920), one of which is image-only and the other of which can be searched by name. Both databases are ongoing projects, with new images and parishes being added regularly. One of the interesting features of the searchable database is that it can be searched by the first and last name of an individual, usually a child, by parents' names, and by the names of baptismal witnesses. The text that can be seen on the attached images of pages from the diocesan records is often in Latin, or in a priest's attempt at Latin. Obviously, good intentions did not always produce good spelling or correct Latin grammar. The Latin names have been Anglicized for the search and so may be inconsistent. If searching in this database, try using the last name and the first name with a wildcard, e.g., to find Jane Smith use "Smith" as the last name and "J*" as the first name.

One of the most popular of the AmericanAncestors.org databases is "General Society of Mayflower Descendants Membership Applications, 1620-1920," which has been updated with new records. Each record gives a member's descent from one of the original Mayflower passengers, where the member's birth date is 1920 or earlier. This particular database has an interesting feature that is rarely available elsewhere. After searching for an individual member and selecting that person's record, scroll down to see a list of Mayflower ancestors. Next to each of these names is a link labelled "Tree." By clicking this link, a family tree is displayed using "AnceTrees," the tree application provided for NEHGS members. Any tree displayed here would be confirmed by the Society of Mayflower Descendants.

A new database is "The LeRoy Family in America, 1753-2003," which contains records for the genealogy of the Le Roy family in New York, descendants of Jacob Le Roy. He was a merchant with French and Dutch ancestry, who arrived in New York City in 1753. The database records have been transcribed from a 19-volume book. While this database could be useful for those searching for family in New York, which can be challenging, unfortunately, the search is by name, volume, and generation. The name search is useful, but volume and generation do not help unless revisiting the data after an initial search.

Another fascinating new database is “Boston, MA: Provident Institution for Savings, 1817-1882.” The Provident Institution for Savings was founded in 1817 in Boston and was the first savings bank incorporated in the United States. About 80% of the records are for Boston immigrants, many of whom were Irish immigrants. The records could provide critical information for additional research in Ireland, but they also provide an insight into early immigrants that is not found in the vital, census, and court records that we so commonly use in genealogical research.

The last quarter of 2020 also saw updates to some of the journal databases, particularly *The Maine Genealogist* and *The Mayflower Descendant*. Searchable access to journals may be one of the most compelling reasons to use AmericanAncestors.org for information on ancestors in early New England. Journals are the first places that will see new research.

In the last several years, NEHGS has created databases containing sketches of settlers, including two that have recently been updated, “Early Vermont Settlers, 1700-1784” and “Western Massachusetts Families in 1790.” The sketches are written by NEHGS members and staff and then edited.

Separate from the searchable databases is the Digital Library and Archive, which contains manuscripts, genealogies, histories, and other digital images collected by NEHGS. There is a “how to” webinar on the best ways to use the collection. It is accessed from the AmericanAncestors.org home page by selecting “Library” and then “Digital Book and Manuscript Collections.” Each collection can be browsed but there are no search options. One recent addition is the “Riobard O’Dwyer Papers” with information on Irish immigrants from the Beara Peninsula of southwestern Ireland, including genealogies by town. More towns will be added in months ahead.

If your research includes Connecticut, then of interest in the “Local History Books” section could be “Manual of the First Church of Christ in Hartford, Connecticut” or “Schools and schoolmasters in Farmington in the olden time.” Another new digitized book there is “’61 to ’65: recollections of the Civil War.”

AmericanAncestors.org also has several searchable databases for researching Jewish ancestry. The Digital Library and Archive has a collection titled “Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society Boston Port Digital Archives,” which contains images of forms and index cards the society used to help immigrants and their families settle in the Boston area. There are a variety of document images such as naturalization forms.

Soon there will be a searchable database for Catholic cemetery records in Massachusetts. Initially it will include 7 cemeteries and will expand to about 20 cemeteries.

Until the end of January, because of the pandemic, AmericanAncestors.org provides a link to Newspapers.com World Collection. This means that RVGS members can for a short time access Newspapers.com free of charge. First, of course, connect to AmericanAncestors.org using the instructions on the RVGS website. To reach the Newspapers.com option, select the “External Databases” option from the “Search” menu of the home page. Then scroll down and click on “Proquest Databases.”

Another feature of AmericanAncestors.org is the ability to “chat” with a genealogist. From the home page, scroll down and click on “Chat Online.” This feature is for questions with straightforward answers and is available Monday to Friday from 9 to 5 Eastern time. An explanation is provided on the website.