

Finding Your Ancestors in Church Records

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Church records can be an excellent source of information. The early records, kept by the clergy, were generally basic - the date of baptism, child's name, father's name, and the names of the sponsors. Some are easy to read, having been written in a legible style, while others appear difficult to read and decipher. Marriages simply listed the names of the couple and the date of marriage. Deaths were simply recorded, usually with the name of the deceased and the date of burial. Later records, in the mid to late 1800's, might offer the cause of death.

Some Church records can also be a rich source of history of local families and social customs. Records might list not only baptisms, marriages, and deaths, but on occasion provide poignant insights about people and happenings. Consider the following, found in the records of the Episcopal Church in Middletown: Imogene daughter of Nathan and Ann Haley, born in Philadelphia August 31st 1838, baptized in Middletown in private on account of extreme illness, June 13th and died June 16th 1840.

They are an excellent source for locating information about your ancestors, but can be difficult to locate. If your ancestors were from a large city, you might need to locate the section of town where they lived to determine the closest church to their home. If you are searching in a small town, there are probably only a few churches to check out. If your ancestors settled in the wilderness, the search is even more difficult, but perhaps not impossible. You will have to determine if there even was a church in the area in which your ancestors settled.

Daniel Henshaw, b. 1762, and his brother Joshua, b. 1765 were at Middlebury Vermont about 1800. The brothers built stores, mills and dwellings; they were also engaged in mercantile business for several years. They were prominent men in the early history of the town. Daniel Henshaw fitted up a room in which Episcopal church services were held from 1817 until the stone church was completed in 1827. Joshua and his family were members of the Congregational Church. The *History of the town of Middlebury* says that the church at Middlebury was dependant upon visiting clergy for their services. The Episcopal Church at Middlebury was formed on St. Stephen's Day, 26 Dec 1811, and the church, consecrated in 1827, is named St. Stephen's on the Green.

The 1790 census shows Daniel Henshaw with one male over 16 and three females living at Middletown CT. In the Episcopal Church records of Christ Church, Middletown, I found an entry for 1802 showing that the Reverend Joseph Warren, whose contract with the parish allowed him to be absent one-fourth of the time "in case his business should require it", was in Vermont on June 23 of that year when he baptized thirteen children at Middlebury CT. These baptisms were recorded in the Christ Church, Middletown Connecticut church records, Volume C, as there was no church in Middlebury before 26 Dec 1811 according to the History of the town of Middlebury. However, *the History of the town of Middlebury* says that the church at Middlebury was dependent upon visiting clergy for their services. (The Episcopal Church at Middlebury was formed on St. Stephen's Day, 26 Dec 1811, and the church, consecrated in 1827, is named St. Stephen's on the Green.) Eight were the children baptized that day were the children of Joshua and Esther (Burnham) Henshaw, formerly of Middletown.

The lesson here is that if there was no church in the area, check the church records of the town from which the family lived previously.

At the library, we are fortunate to have the records of several early churches from the Middletown area. Available to Godfrey Scholars online are the First Congregational Churches of Middletown and Cromwell, the Groton Congregational Church and the Second Church of North Stonington. Not online are the records of Portland Zion Church, the Northford Congregational Church, and some records from Plymouth Connecticut, as well as the Episcopal Church of the Holy Trinity, Middletown, formerly named Christ Church.

If you would like us to search the church records here at the library, simply print out the American Genealogical Biographical Index search request (AGBI), and for \$10 per name (and rough date) we will search the church records for you. Mention that these are the church records you would like us to search.