

THE ESSEX Reporter

Along for the voyage: Locals trace ancestry to the Mayflower

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Janet Allard, left, of Essex Jct. looks through a book of Mayflower descendants with Lillian

Robinson, right, at the Vermont Genealogy Library in Colchester. (Photo by Michaela Halnon)

McGuire has compiled genealogical records and family tales from six of his eight grandparents, but one in particular was always shrouded in mystery.

At the Vermont Genealogy Library in Colchester's Fort Ethan Allen, he began to uncover details about his mother's paternal line. At a genealogy conference in Boston, he found more than he ever expected.

"I opened the door, and all of a sudden, the sun shined in," McGuire said. "I just went along for the voyage."

At the conference, a professional genealogist worked with McGuire for more than three hours, beckoning more and more books and scrawling handwritten notes on a paper family tree.

When the man told McGuire he was likely related to Mayflower passengers, he was beside himself. Back in the Colchester library, he was immediately eager to learn more.

Of the 540 genealogy society members, only a handful was able to trace their lineage to the Plymouth pilgrims, according to library director Sheila Morris.

She estimates even more members have connections they don't know about.

One Mayflower passenger now has about 1 million ancestors each, Morris said, and the number grows each year. With 102 passengers, the odds of finding a relation are fairly good.

Among the success stories is Janet Allard of Essex Jct. She has worked as a librarian at the genealogy society for more than 20 years. Her path back to the Mayflower moved quicker than most, taking only a couple of weeks, thanks to family tree work completed by her parents.

Allard connects to Mayflower passenger Henry Samson through her maternal line. Samson made the trans-Atlantic voyage with cousins at just 6 years old, and the family likely specialized in cloth making, her research shows.

McGuire said personal details like that make the family tree really come alive. He traveled to England with his wife last summer, and they stopped in Titchfield, a tiny town where McGuire believes his Mayflower-connected ancestors lived.

On the advice of some locals in a coffee shop, he traveled to a street dotted with Tudor-style homes from the 1500s.

"You kind of look around and think, geez, my ancestors were really a part of all this stuff," McGuire said. "That connectedness is something you don't get when you're sitting [in] your first history class."

“That’s what really gets you,” Lillian Robinson, another society member added. “I’ve already been to Plymouth and now I might be related to the pilgrims.”

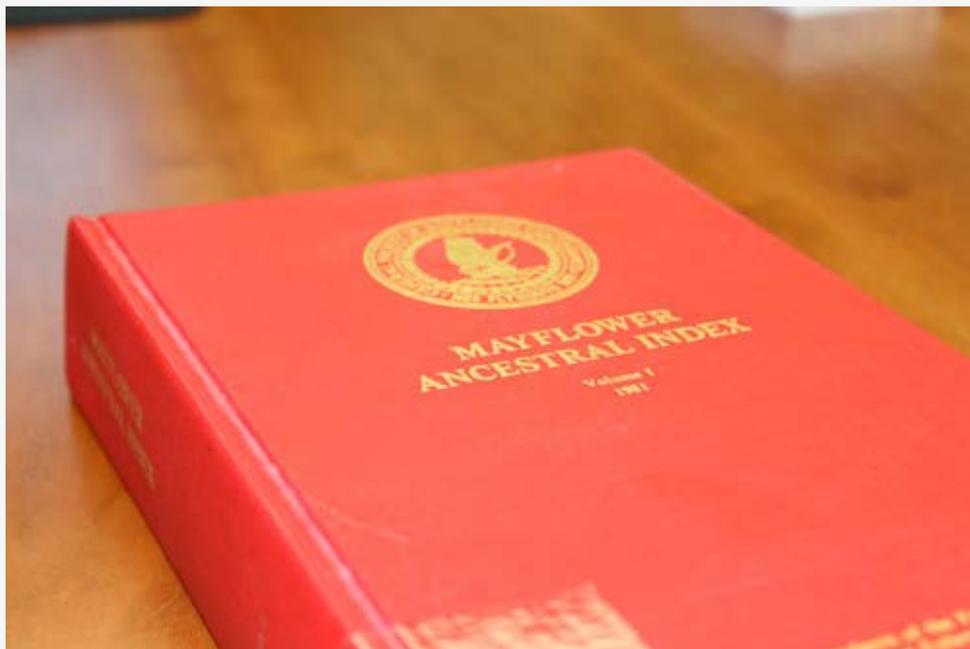
Robinson is still trying to prove both her maternal and paternal lines connect to the Mayflower. She joined the society on a bet with her husband, hoping to prove her family came to America before his.

Though Robinson has strong inklings, she’s waiting to declare success until she obtains the proper documentation. Many people take records or online family trees at face value, she said, not bothering to confirm the sources.

“That’s why in proving my way to the Mayflower, it’s so important that I find the documentation,” Robinson said.

With more than 500 fellow genealogy members, Robinson has many resources at her disposal to help with just that.

Morris said that’s the biggest benefit of a society like theirs: Each member has a different skillset and is always willing to help out fellow genealogy enthusiasts. Some work best with computers and social media, others with books.



At
the

A genealogy textbook helps society members trace their roots to the trans-Atlantic Mayflower voyage. (Photo by Michaela Halnon)

library, members can earn various “pins” for proving their ancestry connected to various historical events. Accolades are awarded for folks who had a family member in the Civil War, or ancestors that “walked with Samuel De Champlain.”

But McGuire said proving a pilgrim connection is not an easy feat.

“We know who was on the Mayflower, but getting from here to there is not as straightforward as getting to people who walked with Champlain,” he said.

French-Canadian records were impeccably kept, McGuire explained, but you might have to traverse New England to find often-unreliable Mayflower records.

Forging a connection to the Mayflower voyage is challenging but worthwhile, McGuire said. It makes Thanksgiving an extra special time for these society members, who can now boast a personal connection to one of the most famous events in American history.

“A lot of people have ancestry that goes back a ways,” he said. “They don’t realize that those ancestors intersected with history in a lot of ways, or were affected by it.”
