

Colonial American Migration Routes and Modes of Travel

Annette Burke Lyttle, CG®
annette@heritagedetective.com

Why migration routes matter

Colonial migration was rarely random. People moved along routes made possible by geography, trade, military needs, religion, kinship, labor, land availability, and transportation systems. For genealogists, a migration route is not merely a line between two places. It is a research tool.

Routes help us ask better questions about our ancestors' migrations:

- Was the move physically plausible at that date?
- What rivers, roads, ferries, or trails connected the old home and the new one?
- Did neighbors, kin, church members, or military comrades move along the same path?
- What jurisdictions did the family pass through or temporarily occupy?
- What records might have been created along the way?

A family's route may explain why records appear in unexpected places. A court record, tax list, church register, ferry license, tavern account, land warrant, militia roll, or probate file may mark a stopping point, a temporary residence, or a community connection rather than a permanent settlement.

Water came first

Early European settlements in North America clustered along the Atlantic coast and beside navigable rivers. Waterways offered easier travel than forested land, and they connected settlements to trade, communication, and export markets. Dense forests, swamps, mountains, and unbridged rivers made overland movement difficult. Even when roads existed, they could be narrow, muddy, rutted, and seasonal.

Rivers were highways. Coastal waters, bays, and river systems carried people, goods, letters, news, and legal authority. Families might travel by small boat, ferry, sloop, shallop, or coastal vessel as well as by foot, horse, cart, or wagon. In tidewater regions, waterways shaped settlement patterns, county formation, church organization, and access to markets.

For genealogists, waterways can be as important as roads. When tracing a colonial family, identify nearby rivers, creeks, landings, ferry crossings, ports, and navigable connections. A move that looks unlikely on a modern highway map may make sense when viewed from the water.

Dutch settlement and the Hudson corridor

The Dutch presence in North America illustrates the importance of waterways. Fort Nassau, built by Dutch traders in 1614 on Castle Island near present-day Albany, stood near the Hudson River and Native trade routes. It was later replaced by Fort Orange, and Dutch settlement developed along the Hudson as part of New Netherland.

By the mid-seventeenth century, New Netherland included settlements and claims in parts of present-day New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. These settlements were tied to trade, river access, and Atlantic commerce. The Dutch surrendered New Netherland to an English naval expedition in 1664; New Amsterdam became New York, and New Jersey was granted to English proprietors.

The research lesson is larger than the political transfer. Control of a place could change while families, property, trade relationships, and local records continued. A colonial ancestor in the Hudson Valley may appear in Dutch, English, manorial, church, notarial, land, or court records depending on date, location, religion, and legal context.

From Native paths to colonial roads

Many colonial roads developed from older Native paths, trading routes, portage paths, and trails connecting villages, hunting grounds, waterways, and interior regions.

Europeans widened, renamed, regulated, and extended some of these paths for postal service, military movement, trade, county administration, and settlement. The Boston Post Road, for example, developed from Native paths and became part of the postal connection between Boston and New York; by the colonial period it included Upper, Lower, and Middle Post Road alignments.

Roads were not simply transportation conveniences. They were public concerns. Counties and colonial governments ordered roads laid out, appointed road overseers, required labor for road maintenance, licensed ferries, and dealt with bridges, taverns, and river crossings. In Virginia, road development was shaped by settlement, county administration, water crossings, labor requirements, and the need to connect plantations, courthouses, churches, ferries, and markets.

A road named in a local record may be a clue to a family's neighborhood. Road orders, petitions, ferry records, and tavern licenses can place people in relation to one another and to the physical landscape.

Early roads and migration corridors

The following examples are not the only colonial routes, but they show how transportation corridors developed from coast, river, trail, military, and trade systems.

Coastal and post roads

The King's Highway developed as a coastal road network connecting settlements along the Atlantic seaboard. Rather than thinking of it as one finished modern highway, it is

safer to understand it as a developing corridor of roads, ferries, and local segments connecting major coastal towns.

The Boston Post Road was a system of routes connecting Boston and New York. Its three principal alignments—Upper, Lower, and Middle—reflected different geography and travel needs. Parts of the route later became incorporated into more formal roads and, eventually, modern highways.

The Albany Post Road connected New York City with Albany along the Hudson River corridor. For researchers, this route matters because it linked the port city, Hudson River communities, manorial estates, military movement, trade, and later inland migration.

New England and Connecticut routes

The Mohegan Road followed an Indigenous trail from the coast at New London northward toward the Massachusetts border. The Farm Highway connected towns in Connecticut and reflected the local and regional need for roads between settlements, markets, churches, and courts.

New England roads often connected towns, meetinghouses, mills, ports, and county seats. A family's movement within New England may be better understood by mapping town networks, church affiliations, and court jurisdictions than by looking only at modern county boundaries.

Pennsylvania and the backcountry

The road from Philadelphia through Lancaster became one of the most important routes into the interior. The Great Wagon Road enabled eighteenth-century movement from Philadelphia and its hinterlands westward to Lancaster and then south into the backcountry of Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. It followed routes established by Native Americans and became a major path for Scots Irish, German, and other migrants seeking land and opportunity.

For genealogists, the Great Wagon Road is especially important because it carried communities, not just individuals. Families often moved with kin, neighbors, religious associates, and people from the same ethnic or regional background. Research should therefore follow clusters, not just surnames.

Military roads

Military roads could become migration routes. Braddock's Road, built in 1755 during the French and Indian War, ran from Fort Cumberland toward Fort Duquesne. Forbes Road, opened in 1758, ran from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, toward Fort Duquesne by a different route. Roads created for military campaigns later supported settlement, trade, and communication.

Military routes can generate records beyond military service files. Look for militia lists, fort records, supply accounts, road-building records, maps, petitions, land grants,

pension files, and later settlement records in the regions opened or connected by the road.

How people traveled

Most colonial travelers moved in ways that were practical rather than comfortable. Many walked. Walking cost little and required no animal, vehicle, or fare. It also allowed travelers to use narrow paths and rough roads unsuitable for wagons.

Those who could afford horses used them for faster travel, carrying messages, visiting courts, attending church, reaching markets, or moving between settlements. Horses required feed, care, and equipment, so ownership itself may signal economic status.

Carts and wagons were useful for farm work, market trips, and household moves, but they required passable roads. Heavy freight wagons should not be confused with later romantic images of western migration. Conestoga wagons, first made by Pennsylvania Germans near the Conestoga River around 1750, were freight-hauling vehicles used to carry goods westward and return with agricultural products; Smithsonian notes their role in trade between Philadelphia, Baltimore, and settlers near the Ohio River.

Ferries were essential where rivers interrupted roads. Colonial Williamsburg describes ferry crossings in eastern Virginia as necessary but sometimes dangerous, with ice, wind, floods, and weather causing delays. Ferry licenses, rates, locations, and operators may appear in court, legislative, or county records.

Stage wagons and coaches existed but were uncomfortable and limited by road quality. Colonial Williamsburg describes early stage wagons as primitive public carriages with benches and little comfort. For many colonial people, ordinary travel remained slow, difficult, expensive, and weather-dependent.

Records created by movement

Migration can create records before, during, and after the move. When a family disappears from one locality and appears in another, search the route between them.

Possible records include:

- land grants, warrants, surveys, deeds, leases, and mortgages
- tax lists and tithables
- county court minutes and order books
- road orders, bridge orders, and petitions for new roads
- ferry licenses, tavern licenses, and ordinary licenses
- church minutes, membership transfers, baptismal records, and Quaker certificates
- militia rolls, muster lists, pay records, and pension applications
- probate files naming heirs in multiple locations
- guardianship, apprenticeship, and poor-relief records
- account books, store ledgers, and merchant records
- maps, gazetteers, travel accounts, and travelers' journals

- newspaper notices, runaway advertisements, estate notices, and land-sale advertisements

A migration route may also point to records in counties where the family never settled permanently. Temporary residence, employment, military service, kinship, or travel disruption could leave a trace.

A route-testing workflow

When researching a possible colonial migration, begin with evidence.

1. Identify the earliest known place and the next proven place.
2. Narrow the date of movement as closely as possible.
3. Map the known residences using period-appropriate boundaries.
4. Identify waterways, roads, ferries, mountain gaps, ports, and trading centers available at that date.
5. Look for kin, neighbors, witnesses, church members, military associates, and people with the same place of origin.
6. Study land policy, settlement promotion, religious migration, war, taxation, inheritance, and economic opportunity.
7. Search records in possible stopping places and along the route.
8. Treat the route as a hypothesis unless direct evidence proves the path.

The goal is not to force an ancestor onto a famous road. The goal is to identify the most plausible route and use that route to find additional evidence.

Using maps carefully

Historical maps are evidence, but they must be interpreted in context. A map may show political claims, trade knowledge, military intelligence, roads, settlements, distances, or geographic assumptions. It may also omit places that existed or show places inaccurately.

John Mitchell's 1755 map of North America, one of the most significant eighteenth-century maps, compiled information supplied by colonial governors and showed roads, distances, settlements, and imperial claims at the outset of the French and Indian War. The Library of Congress emphasizes both its importance and its British imperial perspective.

When using maps:

- Use maps close to the date of the event.
- Compare several maps when possible.
- Watch for changing county and colony boundaries.
- Remember that a road shown on a map may not have been passable year-round.
- Distinguish a documented route from a plausible route.
- Combine maps with tax, land, church, court, and probate records.

Research takeaway

Colonial migration research is strongest when geography, chronology, and records work together. Roads, rivers, ferries, ports, and trails help explain where people went, how they traveled, who moved with them, and where they may have left records. A route is not proof by itself, but it can guide the search for proof.

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