

Who Went Fishing? Migration and Labor in Gloucester's Fleet

GRADES 9-12 · HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE, MATHEMATICS, DIGITAL LITERACY AND COMPUTER SCIENCE · GLOUCESTER

What can a list of fishermen lost at sea tell us about where Gloucester's fishing workforce came from, and what can it never tell us?

Two 55-minute class periods

Gloucester has kept a list of people from its fishing fleet who were lost at sea. Many entries give the place where the man was born. In this lesson you will use those birthplaces as evidence. You will write a hypothesis about where Gloucester's fishermen came from, test it with 449 entries from three periods and compare your results with what two government writers said in the 1870s and 1880s. You will also look hard at what this kind of list can never prove. Every row in the data is a person who did not come home, so treat the numbers with care.

Summary by Cape Ann Current

R1. About the register and this data set

The City of Gloucester's Lost at Sea register was compiled by the city's volunteer Archives Committee and is dated July 29, 2010. It builds on research done for the memorial plaques at the Fisherman's Statue. It lists more than 6,600 entries from the early 1700s onward. The city's own page says the list is unavoidably incomplete.

Each entry gives a name, a date, often a vessel, the compilers' sources and short notes such as age, family, birthplace or residence. Each entry is also coded by type of voyage: F for fishing, T for trading and U for unknown.

For this lesson we built our own table from the register's facts. We kept only entries coded F (fishing) from three samples: 1876, 1895 and 1910 to 1912. We pooled three years for the last sample because single years after 1900 have fewer entries. We left out entries coded F? (fishing uncertain), entries about anyone under 18 and anything after 1950. We did not include names. That leaves 449 entries: 206 for 1876, 131 for 1895 and 112 for 1910 to 1912.

Remember: each row is one death. It is not a count of everyone who fished.

Source: Cape Ann Current summary of the City of Gloucester Archives Committee, Lost at Sea register (2010), based on the work of Roberta Sheedy. <https://www.gloucester-ma.gov/74/Lost-at-Sea>. Rights: Our summary; facts from the City of Gloucester register,

Data table

R2. Abbreviation key

As printed	Meaning
b.	born in
b.&res.	born in and living in (resident of)
NS	Nova Scotia, a Canadian province
CB	Cape Breton, an island that is part of Nova Scotia
NFD	Newfoundland, a separate British colony until it joined Canada in 1949
PEI	Prince Edward Island, a Canadian province
NB	New Brunswick, a Canadian province
Western Island or Western Islands	an older name for the Azores, islands governed by Portugal
sch.	schooner, the fishing vessel type used by most of the fleet
Yarm.	Yarmouth (County), Nova Scotia
Shel.Co.	Shelburne County, Nova Scotia
/ (a slash)	the compilers found two spellings or two possibilities, such as GrandManan/Menan
(none printed)	our label: the entry gives no birthplace

Source: Abbreviations as they appear in the City of Gloucester Lost at Sea register (2010); explanations by Cape Ann Current. <https://www.gloucester-ma.gov/74/Lost-at-Sea>. Rights: Facts from the City of Gloucester register; table compiled by Cape Ann Current

Data table

R3. Sixteen sample rows from the data sheet

Year	Vessel as printed	Birthplace as printed
1876	William T. Merchant, sch.	b.NS
1876	James L. Shute, sch.	b.Archat, CB
1876	D. E. Woodbury, sch.	b.Sweden
1876	John S. Tyler, sch.	(none printed)
1876	Polar Wave, sch.	b.Westport, Maine

Year	Vessel as printed	Birthplace as printed
1876	James L. Shute, sch.	b.GrandManan/Menan
1895	Leader	b.WesternIsland
1895	Mildred V. Lee	b.Bay ofBulls,NFD
1895	Concord	b.Iceland
1895	Helen Story	b.Pubnico
1895	Rigel	b.Gottenburg/Gullholmen,Sweden
1910	Arethusa	b.Placentia,NFD
1910	Thalia	b.Lisbon
1911	Alice R. Lawson	b.&res.Rockport
1912	Conqueror	b.Ireland
1876	William T. Merchant, sch.	b.Mt.Desert,Maine

Source: City of Gloucester Archives Committee, Lost at Sea register (2010); selected fishing entries compiled by Cape Ann Current. Spellings as printed in the register, which runs some words together. <https://www.gloucester-ma.gov/74/Lost-at-Sea>. Rights: Facts from the City of Gloucester register; table compiled by Cape Ann Current

Summary by Cape Ann Current

R4. Our normalization rules

The register prints birthplaces in many forms: a country (b.Sweden), a province (b.NS), a village and province (b.Arichat,CB) or a village alone (b.Pubnico). To count them, we put each one into a normalized birthplace and then a region. These are the rules we used. You may disagree with some of them; that is part of the lesson.

Rule 1. Use the birthplace after "b." only. Ignore residence ("res.") unless it is printed together with birth as "b.&res."

Rule 2. If a province, state or country is printed after the place, use it. Arichat,CB becomes Nova Scotia; Westport,Maine becomes Maine.

Rule 3. CB (Cape Breton) is coded as Nova Scotia, because Cape Breton Island is part of Nova Scotia.

Rule 4. If no province, state or country is printed, assign one only when the place name exists in just one province or state (Pubnico, Grand Manan, Provincetown). Write a note saying the region was not printed.

Rule 5. If the place name could belong to more than one state or country (Lisbon, Lowell, Manchester, Rockport), code it Unclear. Do not guess.

Rule 6. Western Island and Western Islands are coded Portugal (Azores).

Rule 7. If the entry gives no birthplace, code it Not given. Not given is counted, never dropped.

Rule 8. Regions: Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland); United States (Maine, Massachusetts, other states); Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway,

Denmark, Finland, Iceland); Portugal and the Azores; Britain and Ireland (England, Scotland, Ireland); Other Europe (France, Russia); Unclear; Not given.

Rule 9. Percentages for a region use the number of entries that give a birthplace (everything except Not given) as the denominator. The share of Not given uses all entries in the sample.

Source: Rules written by Cape Ann Current for this data set. <https://www.gloucester-ma.gov/74/Lost-at-Sea>. Rights: Our rules; free to reuse with credit

Primary source

R5. Two government documents on who fished from Gloucester

About this source: This report was prepared by the U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries with the 1880 census. Its writers gathered estimates from fishing ports. On pages 14 and 15 it quotes a letter written in 1875 by Gloucester's collector of customs, the federal official who registered vessels at the port.

Document A. Letter of Capt. Fitz J. Babson, collector of customs at Gloucester, to the Chief of the Bureau of Statistics, 1875 (p. 14):

"For some years there has been a large immigration of male adults coming from the Provinces to engage in the fisheries of Gloucester. They are mostly young men and unmarried. The superior class of vessels belonging to this port employed in the fisheries, the liberal and excellent quality of provisions furnished by the owners, the prompt settlement and payment in cash for the fares obtained instead of payment in goods, &c., which is the usual manner of payment to fishermen at other places, the rapid promotion to the command of a fine schooner consequent upon skill and success, all conspire to draw the ambitious young seamen from the Provinces.

"These immigrants make up to a large degree the crews of our fishing vessels, and hence the loss of life falls principally upon them."

The same letter continues (p. 15):

"Of the seven thousand men employed in the fisheries at this port three-fourths are not natives of the town"

Document B. The 1887 report's own estimates, describing about 1880 (pp. 6 and 7):

"Most numerous of these are the natives of the British Provinces, of whom there are at least 4,000 employed in the fisheries of New England, Gloucester reporting 1,600"

"There are probably not less than 2,000 Portuguese, chiefly natives of the Azores and the Cape de Verde Islands." Of these, the report counts "in Gloucester 250."

"Gloucester has 140 men of British birth, a large proportion of whom are Irish"

"Gloucester has nearly 400 Scandinavians among its fishermen and about 70 Frenchmen."

Glossary

the Provinces: the British colonies north of New England, chiefly Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland.

fares: a vessel's catch from one trip, and the money it brought.

provisions: food and supplies for the voyage.

&c.: an old way of writing etc.

Source: G. Brown Goode and Joseph W. Collins, The Fisheries and Fishery Industries of the United States, Section IV, The Fishermen of the United States (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), pp. 6, 7, 14 and 15; the Babson letter of 1875 is quoted in this report on pp. 14 and 15. Transcribed from a scan; spelling as printed. <https://archive.org/details/fisheriesfishery04good>. Rights: Public domain (U.S. federal government work, published 1887)

A1. Hypothesis

Before you count anything, write your hypothesis using the frame. A good hypothesis can be proven wrong by the data.

1. I predict that most fishermen in the register who died in 1876 were born in ____.
2. I predict that by 1910 to 1912 the share born in ____ will have (risen / fallen / stayed about the same), because ____.
3. One result that would prove my hypothesis wrong is ____.

A2. Tally table

Use the data sheet. For each sample, count the entries in each region and the entries marked Not given. Then calculate each region's percentage of the entries that give a birthplace. Round to the nearest whole percent. Show one formula or method you used.

1. Fill in this table for each sample (1876; 1895; 1910 to 1912): total entries; entries with Not given; entries that give a birthplace; count and percent for Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland; United States; Nordic countries; Portugal and the Azores; Britain and Ireland; Other Europe; Unclear.
2. What percent of each sample has no birthplace? Which sample is the weakest evidence, and why?
3. Within the Maritime Provinces and Newfoundland region, count Nova Scotia and Newfoundland separately for each sample. What changes?
4. Sort the 1895 sample by vessel. Find one vessel whose crew changes the Nordic count a lot. What does that tell you about using deaths as a sample?
5. Count how many entries in all three samples are coded Massachusetts. What could explain such a small number? List at least two possibilities and say which the data can or cannot test.
6. Make one chart or table that compares the three samples. Describe in words what it shows, so a reader who cannot see it understands it.

A3. Audit the rules

Look up each row in the data sheet. Decide how you would code it, and whether a different choice would change any conclusion.

1. b.Lisbon (1910): We coded Unclear. Would you code it Portugal? What evidence would you need?
2. b.&res.Rockport (1911): We coded Unclear because Rockport could be in Massachusetts or Maine. Since the man fished from Gloucester, is it fair to assume Rockport, Mass.? What is the risk?
3. b.Pubnico (1895): We assigned Nova Scotia even though no province is printed. Is that different from Lisbon? Why or why not?
4. b.Antigonish,CB (1895): Antigonish is on the Nova Scotia mainland, not Cape Breton. The register prints CB. How should we handle a printed detail that may be wrong?
5. Newfoundland did not join Canada until 1949. Should Newfoundland share a region with Nova Scotia? Recount the region both ways and say whether your conclusion changes.
6. Write one new rule you would add or change, and explain how it makes the data more honest.

A4. Numbers and words together

Use Reading R5 and your tally table.

1. List the reasons Babson gives for why young men came from the Provinces to Gloucester. Sort them into reasons about pay, working conditions and chances to advance.
2. Babson says 'the loss of life falls principally upon them.' Does your 1876 count support, challenge or fail to test that claim? Explain, and mention the Not given entries.
3. The 1887 report estimates Gloucester had 1,600 Provincial fishermen, nearly 400 Scandinavians, 250 Portuguese, 140 men of British birth and about 70 Frenchmen around 1880. Compare the order of these groups with the order of regions in your 1876 and 1895 counts. Where do they agree and where do they differ?
4. Why might a count of the living (the 1887 report) and a count of the dead (the register) give different pictures of the same fleet? Give two reasons.
5. The U.S. History I standard names Irish, Italian, German and other immigrant groups. Which of those appear in your data, and how often? What does that tell you about studying immigration through one local industry?

A5. Limits of the evidence

Discuss in your group. For each limit, say how it could push your results in one direction.

1. The city says the register is incomplete. Who might be missing, and why?
2. Birthplace is not residence. A man born in Nova Scotia might have lived in Gloucester for 20 years. How does that change what 'immigrant' means in your findings?
3. One record is one death, not one worker. A sample of deaths can over-count men on the most dangerous voyages or on vessels lost with all hands. Find an example in the data.
4. Our samples cover three moments, not every year. What could happen between 1876 and 1895 that our samples would miss?
5. We made the normalization rules. How could our choices shape the story the numbers tell?

Talk about it

- Babson wrote that the fleet depended on newcomers. Who benefited from that arrangement, and who carried the risk?
- Is it respectful to turn people who died into counts? What can we do to keep them in view as people while still analyzing the data?
- If you could add one column to this data set, what would it be and where would you find it?
- How would you check whether the 1895 Nordic result is a real pattern or the effect of one or two vessels?
- What would you need to make a claim about why the share from Newfoundland changed, rather than only that it changed?

Show what you learned

Write a findings brief of 250 to 350 words for a local history website. State your hypothesis, say whether the data supports it and include one table or chart comparing the three samples, described in words. Use at least one quotation from Babson's 1875 letter or the 1887 report to explain why people came to fish from Gloucester. Name at least three limits of the evidence and say how each could affect your conclusion. Cite the register and the 1887 report.

Points: 25