

Beyond the Grave: Uncovering Life Stories from Death Records

Class 2: Reporting Death: Civil Death Record Substitutes

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Church Records

- Some denominations will include death, funeral, and burial records in the volumes of church records recorded. This may include details to the cause of the parishioner's death.
- Often a diary of a clergyman may record more details about the death of a parishioner.
- Church membership lists indicating former members now deceased. These can date back until the 17th century for some parishes.
- Format types of Church Records
 - Original handwritten records
 - Copy books
 - Manuscripts (unpublished)
 - Published (church histories and journal articles)
- Last Rites
 - In Catholicism, the last prayers and ministrations given to a dying person of the faith shortly before death.
 - Can be given to anyone awaiting execution, mortally injured, or terminally ill.
 - Cannot be given to someone that has already died.
 - Recorded in the sick call registers as “last rites” or “Viat” (abbreviation for Viaticum).
- Burial Traditions
 - Body is positioned head to west, hands resting on thighs, and feet to the east.
 - Clergy are buried in opposite orientation.
 - Headstone inscriptions are on the side facing west.
 - Nondescript gravestones used by Quakers.



- Burial Registers
 - May include the following details regarding the deceased:
 - Name of deceased
 - Date died
 - Date buried
 - Burial plot details
 - Age
 - Cause of death
- Church Cemeteries and Graveyards
 - The church may oversee their own private graveyard or church cemetery.
 - Burial records may include:
 - Internment records
 - Lot sales/transfers
 - Maps of the burying ground
- Cremation
 - First cremation chamber in North America built in Washington, Penn. in 1876
 - Many doctors promoted cremation as a health precaution
 - From 1888 to 1963 the practice of cremation was forbidden for Roman Catholics.
 - Many Quakers choose cremation for simplicity.
- Register of Communicants
 - Active log on members of the church
 - Vital records are noted (baptism, death), disciplinary measures, and dismissal date/location.
- Published Church Histories and Funeral Sermons

Family Registers and Family Bible Records

- Family registers were kept for recording vital records of a family.
- Originally designed simply or elaborately by hand.
- By the 19th century companies such as Currier and Ives were preparing preprinted family registers.
- Often these registers record multiple generations of a family or families.



- Often recorded on a blank page or preprinted page of the Holy Bible between the Old and New Testaments.
- Occasionally family vital records are recorded on the covers, or on papers inserted into the bible.
- American Ancestors has hundreds of Family Bible and Family Registers on the Digital Library & Archives section at <https://digital.americanancestors.org/digital/collection/p15869coll15>

Death Notices and Obituaries

- A death notice is often a preliminary notice to a longer more detailed obituary to be published in the newspaper the same day or the next issue.
- 18th thru 20th century obituary notices were often very limited if published in a larger urban American newspaper.
- Smaller town newspapers will often publish an obituary with details regarding the life, death, and funeral of the resident.
- To locate a death notice or an obituary, often the exact date of death and knowledge of the last residence is required.
- Many online databases now exist to search American Newspapers since 1704.
- Where to find newspapers:
 - Libraries: public and academic
 - State Archives or Libraries
 - State or local historical societies
 - Newspaper Morgues
 - Many online databases now exist to search American Newspapers since 1704.
 - Printed Sources
- NEHGS Resources:
 - AmericanAncestors.org
 - Early American Newspapers, Series 1, 1690-1876 (remote access) over 1 million pages



- 19th Century U.S. Newspapers (remote access) 1.7 million pages
- *Boston Globe* since 1980 (remote access)
- *The New York Times* since 1985 (remote access)
- American Indian Newspapers (remote access)
- Missing Friends (database)
- Microfilm:
 - *Boston Pilot*
 - *Boston Evening Transcript*
 - *Columbian Centinel*
- Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center has digitized the *Jewish Times*
- Digitized Newspapers
 - Ancestry.com
 - Cyndi's List www.cyndislist.com/newspapers
 - GenealogyBank.com
 - Google News news.google.com/newspapers
 - Newspapers.com

U.S. Census Mortality Schedules

- Mortality schedules record the name of the decedent, including age, race, marital status, and cause of death.
- Federal Mortality schedules were taken by census enumerators for the 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880 Censuses.
- The deaths recorded on the schedules occurred a calendar year previous to the date of the census enumeration. Example: The 1850 U.S. Census mortality schedule recorded deaths which occurred from May 31, 1849, until to June 1, 1850.
- All mortality schedules 1850-1885 have been indexed and are viewable online at <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/8756/>
- 1850 and 1860 U.S. Census Mortality Schedule
 - Name
 - Sex, Color
 - Place of Birth
 - Free or Slave
 - Married or Widowed
 - Place of Birth
 - Month when the person died



- Occupation
- Disease or cause of death, and number of days ill
- 1870 U.S. Census Mortality Schedule
 - Name
 - Sex, Color
 - Place of Birth
 - Father or Mother of Foreign birth
 - Month when the person died
 - Occupation
 - Disease or cause of death
- 1880 U.S. Census Mortality Schedule
 - Name
 - Sex, Color
 - Place of Birth
 - Marital Status
 - Place of Birth
 - Place of birth of each parent
 - Father or Mother of Foreign birth
 - Name
 - Sex, Color
 - Place of Birth
 - Marital Status
 - Place of Birth
 - Place of birth of each parent
 - Father or Mother of Foreign birth
- State Census Mortality for 1885 exists for Colorado, Florida, and Nebraska.

Coroner Reports

- A coroner may be called to complete an autopsy or physical examination on the body and confirm cause of death in the following cases:
 - Death caused by criminal violence
 - Unexpected death of an infant or child
 - Workplace injury
 - Unidentified body
 - Suspected drowning
 - Death by intoxication (drugs, alcohol)
 - Death while imprisoned
 - Motor vehicle accident
 - Suicide
- Coroner Inquest
 - The body is examined, and witnesses may be interviewed to help determine cause of death
 - The coroner inquest results are often printed in the local newspaper where the person died.



- Access to coroner reports is based on state laws where the person died
 - In some states the report may only be available to next of kin

Hospital Records

- If hospital records exist, they can provide the date and cause of death of a patient
- Most hospital records are discarded after a set amount of decades
- NEHGS has the Boston City Hospital Admission records 1867-1870 online:
<https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databasearch/32/boston-ma-city-hospital-admissions-1867-1870>

Final Pension Payments

- **Revolutionary War** pensions – completely scanned and indexed:
<https://www.fold3.com/publication/467/us-revolutionary-war-pensions-1800-1900>
- **War of 1812** pensions starting in 1871 – 85% (as of 2023):
<https://www.fold3.com/publication/761/us-war-of-1812-pension-files-1812-1815>
- Union “Widows” **Civil War** pensions starting in 1861 – 22% (as of 2023):
<https://www.fold3.com/publication/24/us-civil-war-widows-pensions-1861-1910>
 - **T288 Index** (Alphabetical)
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/4654/>
 - **T289 Index** (Organizational with occasional entries with date and place of death) <https://www.fold3.com/publication/57/us-civil-war-pensions-index-1861-1900>

Funeral Home / Undertaker Records

- The oldest funeral home in the United States is in Bucktrout, Virginia. It was founded in 1759.
- Before the mid-1800's the bodies of loved ones were displayed in the family's front room or parlor.
- Embalming became more popular following President Lincoln's assassination. His body was preserved for his nationwide funeral train.



- Families started seeking out funeral homes outside of their local area and transported bodies home for burial (particularly during the Civil War).
- Various memorial cards have been produced by funeral homes since the 19th century. Many memorials are simply virtual memorials in the 21st century.

City and Town Directories

- The date of death of an individual is listed in town and city directories the year following their death.
- An entry with “Widow” is an indication that her spouse has died at least by the previous year or before.
- Many U.S. City directories, 1822-1995 can be found online at:
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2469/>
- The first city directory in the United States was produced for Boston in 1789:
https://archive.org/details/bd-1789_202202

Tax Records

- During the 17th to 20th century, a tax record may indicate that the taxpayer had recently died. This will be indicated typically by the word deceased next to their name.
- The disappearance of a name from a tax list can also refer to the death of an individual. It also can indicate the person has moved from that community.
- The replacement of a male taxpayer by his wife may also indicate she is a “Widow” in the records.

Publications

Breland, Claudia C., *Searching for Your Ancestors in Historic Newspapers* (Gig Harbor, WA: the author, 2014).



Coffin, Margaret M., *Death in Early America: The History and Folklore of Customs and Superstitions of Early Medicine, Funerals, Burials and Mourning* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1976).

Dickerson, Robert B., Jr., *Final Placement: A Guide to Death, Funerals, and Burials of Notable Americans* (Algonac, MI: Reference Publications, 1982).

Farrell, James J., *Inventing the American Way of Death, 1830-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

Hefner, Loretta L., *The WPA Historical Records Survey: A Guide to the Unpublished Inventories, Indexes, and Transcripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1980).

MacLachlan, Linda, *Finding Early Connecticut Vital Records: The Barbour Index and Beyond* (Baltimore, MD: Clearfield, 2019).

Morton, Sunny and Harold A. Henderson, *How to Find Your Family History in U.S. Church Records: A Genealogist's Guide with Specific Resources for Major Christian Denominations before 1900* (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, 2019).