

Beyond the Grave: Uncovering Life Stories from Death Records

Class 1: Using and Understanding Civil Death Records

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Brief History of Vital Records

- Colonial Vital Records - recorded by the town clerk and sometimes intermixed in the same books with the town meeting minutes, earmarks, etc. These records have existed since the town was settled.
- 19th Century – During the mid 1800's, deaths were recorded in larger cities. In Eastern towns and the Midwest, this practice started occurring in the late 1800's. Massachusetts was the first to enact statewide vital record registration in 1841.
- 20th Century – Most states start requiring vital registration in the early 1900's. Please note that compliance didn't occur for as long as twenty years after the law was passed. Expect gaps prior to compliance with state laws.

Death Record Formats

- Family Group Records
 - Colonial record keeping that originated from New England. Deaths were appended to the lists of births in a family registered in that town.
- Published Vital Records
 - "Tan Book" series (Massachusetts) - up to 1850
 - Barbour Collection (Connecticut)
 - Arnold's Vital Records (Rhode Island)
- State Index Records
 - Clerks created abstracts of vital records and sent them back to the state on standardized forms.
 - Ex. New Hampshire
- Death Registers
 - List of deaths within a town or city for that year.
- Death Certificates
 - Created during 20th Century
 - Can be filed in the place where the person died and where the person buried.



- Changes made to death certificate forms:
 - 1950 – Social Security Number Added
 - 1970's – Autopsy Performed? Question added
 - 1983 – New Hampshire and Oklahoma added ethnicity
 - 1987 – HIV/AIDS added as a new disease classification

Interpreting the Death Record Details

- The Informant
 - The person who gave information about the deceased, including their age, residence, parents' names, birthplace, etc.
 - Sometimes the informant is the deceased if they entered a hospital or other institution.
 - **TIP: The informant is often a close relative or friend of the deceased**
- Parents' Names/Birthplaces
 - The birthplace may give you a clue for the migration and immigration pattern of the deceased.
 - Siblings are more reliant informants than children/spouses of the deceased on reporting the correct details about their parents.
- Veteran Status
 - 20th Century death certificates usually have this question.
 - Examine the date of birth of the deceased to identify potential military conflicts they participated in.
 - Seek out military records on sites like Fold3.com
- Cause of Death
 - Seek out medical glossaries to help you interpret outdated terms
 - Ex. Glossary of Medical Terms United in the 18th and 19th Centuries - <https://www.thornber.net/medicine/html/medgloss.html>
 - **TIP: The date of and cause of death are great clues to identify a death that may be reported in a newspaper or coroner's report**
 - International Classification of Diseases (ICD)
 - Codes assigned to different causes of death
 - Published since 1893
 - Access past revisions at <http://www.wolfbane.com/icd/index.html>



Finding the Records

- Privacy Restrictions vary from state to state.
- Generally, death records over 50 years old are accessible to the public.
- Death records are held in many repositories including:
 - State vital statistics office
 - County/town clerk's office
 - State archives
 - National Archives and State Department (U.S. citizens who died overseas)
- Consult the state death indexes to find the record for the deceased. These can be found in several locations including:
 - AmericanAncestors.org
 - FamilySearch Wiki
 - FamilySearch Catalogue
 - Ancestry.com
 - State Archive Websites
 - State/County Genealogical Society Websites
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a Vital Records page that provides contact information for State Health Departments that provides instructions, fees, and years available - <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w/index.htm>
- Additional death indexes can be found on www.deathindexes.com

FamilySearch Wiki – Vital Records

- United States Vital Records - https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Vital_Records
 - Under Vital Records of Each State, select the state you're searching for:
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Vital_Records#Vital_Records_of_Each_State



Locating the Death Record Indexes on FamilySearch Using the Catalog

- In the catalog, search by Place for the Town, County, or State
- Review the records under the Vital Records category
 - Don't rely on the Vital Records – Indexes category as many of these indexes are not up to date with the latest indexes. The vital records category may have their own general indexes or indexes within individual volumes.
- If the camera icon appears, you can browse the records. Use the death indexes to identify the volume and page where the death record appears.
- Check the catalogue to see if that year range is available and browse the records, using the volume and page # you found to locate the death record.
- **TIP: Before you stop your search and order a copy of the record, check the FamilySearch Wiki for digitized vital record databases.**

Finding Death Records on AmericanAncestors.org

- A full list of vital record databases on AmericanAncestors.org can be found on our website at <https://www.americanancestors.org/browse-database?databasename=vital&size=50&page=1>

Publications

Helen V. Smith, *Death Certificates and Archaic Medical Terms* (St. Agnes, SA: Unlock the Past, 2015).

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

Lorine McGinnis Schulze, *Ancestor Death Record Finder: Finding a Death Record When You've Hit a Brick Wall, 2nd Edition* (Olive Tree Genealogy, 2017).

PBS, "Documenting Death – The Certificate" - <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/post-mortem/things-to-know/death-certificates.html>

Websites

- American Ancestors – <https://www.americanancestors.org>
- Ancestry – <https://www.ancestry.com>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – <https://www.cdc.gov>
- FamilySearch – <https://www.familysearch.org>
 - Catalog - <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>
 - Wiki - <https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/>



- Online Death Indexes, Records and Obituaries - <https://www.deathindexes.com/>