

When the Record Doesn't Exist: Strategies for Determining Vital Data About Your Ancestors

David Allen Lambert, Chief Genealogist, david.lambert@americanancestors.org

Birth Record Substitutes

Church Records

- Baptism records will on occasion be recorded on or shortly after the birth, offering a birth record substitute.
- Often Church baptism records exist before town records were kept.

Family Registers and Family Bible Records

- Family registers often recorded the birth of a child shortly after it occurred.
- Considered a valid proof of birth for many hereditary societies if it is a period bible record or family register.
- American Ancestors has hundreds of Family Bible and Family Registers on the Digital Library & Archives section at <https://digital.americanancestors.org/digital/collection/p15869coll15>

U.S. and Canadian Census Records

- 1900 U.S. Census reports the month and year of birth of each individual.
- 1901 Canadian Census reports the full birthdate of each individual.
- 1911 Canadian Census reports the month and year of birth of each individual.

Gravestones

- Often by the 19th and 20th century it is not uncommon to see the year of birth or full birthdate carved upon a gravestone.
- Gravestone records online from American Ancestors: <https://www.americanancestors.org/browse-database?databasename=cemetery&size=50&page=1>
- Findagrave: <https://www.Findagrave.com>

- Billiongraves: <https://billiongraves.com>

Newspapers

- Birth announcements were occasionally published in local newspapers starting in the 19th century.
- A birthday anniversary will often list the birthdate of the person celebrating in the newspaper article.

U.S. Naturalization

- U.S. Naturalization records starting in the mid-19th century will often list the birthdate and birthplace of the individual petitioning for citizenship.
- U.S. Naturalization records can be searched on Ancestry.com, Fold3.com and FamilySearch.org for various counties and states.

U.S. Passports

- Passport applications will often include the birthdate and birthplace of the applicant.
- U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925 are available at <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1174/>

U.S. Military Pension Records

- Starting with Revolutionary War pensions you will often find the birthdate and birthplace listed in soldier's affidavit when applying for a pension.
- By the time of the pensions of the Civil War preprinted applications would often request the pensioner to state their birthdate and birthplace.

Other Birth Record Substitutes

- Adoption Records
- School Records
- Employment Records
- Social Security Administration
- Passenger Lists – Births at Sea

Marriage Record Substitutes

Church Records

- Often the bans of marriage were read and recorded in the church records.

Tip: A marriage intention may be filed in the town of either spouse and not where they were ultimately married

Family Registers and Family Bible Records

- Family registers and family bibles will often record the marriage of the owner of the bible and of successive generations.

U.S. Census Records

- 1900 and 1910 U.S. Census reports the number of years married of each individual.
- 1930 U.S. Census reports the exact age of each individual when married.

Newspapers

- Marriages were often published in the city and local newspapers starting in the 18th century. Often a small notice of the couple's names would later expand to full details about the ceremony.
- Wedding anniversaries published in the newspaper will often state the date and place when the couple were married.

U.S. Military Pension Records

- Starting as early as Revolutionary War pensions for widows you will often find the date and place of marriage of a veteran and his spouse recorded.
- In pensions for War of 1812 and Civil War veterans, their widows would often need to supply an affidavit or proof of marriage.

Divorce Records

- Divorce records starting as early as the 18th century will often recount the date and place of the marriage of the couple seeking a divorce.

- Divorce records are in various courthouses and state archives throughout the United States. Some records are digitized on Ancestry.com & FamilySearch.org

Death Record Substitutes

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.
- 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
- 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.
- 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.

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 through 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
- American Ancestors 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
- American Ancestors 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.

- The first city directory in the United States was produced for Boston in 1789: https://archive.org/details/bd-1789_202202
- The replacement of a male taxpayer by his wife may also indicate she is a “Widow” in the records.

Publications

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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).