

# 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 as town meeting minutes, earmarks, etc. These records have existed since the town was settled.
- 19th Century – During the mid-1800s, deaths were recorded in larger cities. In Eastern towns and the Midwest, this practice started occurring in the late 1800s. Massachusetts was the first to enact statewide vital record registration in 1841.
- 20th Century – Most states start requiring vital registration in the early 1900s. 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
  - 1970s – 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

- Informant
  - 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
  - Birthplace may give a clue to the migration and immigration pattern of the deceased.
  - Siblings are more reliable informants than children/spouses of the deceased as they are more likely to report correct details about their parents.
- Veteran Status
  - 20th-century death certificates usually ask about veteran status.
  - 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 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 includes contact information for State Health Departments as well as obtaining record instructions, fees, and years available - <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w/index.htm>
- Additional death indexes can be found on [www.deathindexes.com](http://www.deathindexes.com)

## FamilySearch Wiki – Vital Records

- United States Vital Records - [https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/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](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 indexes are not up to date. 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 catalog to see if the 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>

### **Finding Records of American Citizens Abroad**

- Deaths of American Citizens Abroad, 1835-1974 – Ancestry.com - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1616/>
- United States Citizen Abroad Vital Records - [https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United\\_States\\_Citizens\\_Abroad\\_Vital\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Citizens_Abroad_Vital_Records)

### **Publications**

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, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Olive Tree Genealogy, 2017).

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

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/>