



Beyond the Grave: Uncovering Life Stories from Death Records

Class 1: Using and Understanding Civil Death Records

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THE BRUE FAMILY LEARNING CENTER



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Meet today's presenter



Melanie McComb
Senior Genealogist

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OVERVIEW

- **Presentation (60 mins.)**
 - Brief History of Vital Records
 - Death Record Formats
 - Interpreting the Death Record Details
 - Finding the Records
- **Q&A (30 mins.)**

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Brief History of Vital Records

Voice of
Melanie McComb
Senior Genealogist

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Colonial Vital Records

- Recorded at the town level since settlement (ex. New England)
- Town or city clerk recorded the vital records reported to them
- Original records held by town clerk

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Vital Records (19th Century)

- In larger cities, deaths were recorded starting in the mid-1800's
- Many counties in the East and Midwest were recording deaths in the late 1800s
- 1841 - Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed first statewide legislation

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Vital Records (20th Century)

- Most states start requiring vital records to be recorded in the early 1900's
- Compliance may occur as long as 20 years after the law was passed in the state
 - Expect to find gaps

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Death Record Formats

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Family Group Records

- Originated in New England
- Deaths were appended to the list of births in town vital records
- When families were moving from one town to another, these records often came from Bible records.
- These records are very helpful in understanding the entire family unit (parents and siblings)

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Death Registers

- Recorded deaths within a city or town over the year
- Contain the following:
 - Name of deceased
 - Date of death
 - Age
 - Place of death
 - Cause of death
 - Sex
 - Place of birth
 - Parents' names

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AmericanAncestors.org

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Massachusetts Vital Records, 1841-1910, Vol. 113 (Amended), AmericanAncestors.org

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Death Certificates

- A legal document that confirms someone has died
- Created during 20th century
- Can be filed in two places:
 - Place where person died
 - State where person is buried

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What's on a Death Certificate?

Name of deceased person	Sex	Race	Age
Date of death	Place of death	Date of birth (sometimes estimated)	Place of birth
Residence of deceased	Occupation	Parents' names and birthplace	Cause of death
Informant	Funeral home/undertaker	Place of interment	Veteran Status

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Standardized Forms

- Prior to 1989, each state had their own version of a death certificate
- The Center for Disease Control (CDC) issued a standard death certificate form in 1989
- It was revised again in 2003

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The Informant

- The person who gives information about the person that died
- This person may or may not be present at their death
- Supplied answers about the deceased (ex. age, residence, birthplace, parents' names, etc.)
- The informant's street address or city may be noted

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Hospitals/Institutions

- When someone is admitted to a hospital or other institution, information is often collected upfront
- The informant may be a staff member at one of these facilities
- The information on the death record may be self-reported by the deceased before they passed

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Parents' Names/Birthplaces

- Not always reported by informant
- Birthplace may give a big clue for immigrant origins/migration path
- Consider if the informant knew the deceased long enough to know their parents
 - Siblings are more reliable informants than children and spouses

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Veteran Status

- 20th-century certificates may note if the deceased was a military veteran.
- If so, consider the date of birth of the deceased and what possible military conflicts they may have participated in.
- Seek out military records on sites like Fold3.com.

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The informant is often a close relative or friend of the deceased

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Cause Of Death

- Important for public health statistics and reporting
- Determined by the attending physician and sometimes a coroner (if applicable)
- May include outdated terminology
 - Medical glossaries can be helpful resources

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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.

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REGISTRY DEPARTMENT OF THE CITY OF BOSTON. FEB 4-1919

DEATHS. Boston, February 4, 1919

I, the undersigned, hereby certify that I hold the office of _____ City Registrar of the City of Boston, as created by Chapter 212 of Acts of 1892, and have the custody of the Records relating to Births, Marriages and Deaths, in said City; and I further certify that the following facts appear on the said Records.

Recorded February 25, 1919 No. 165

DATE OF DEATH January 8, 1919	NAME AND ADDRESS OF THE DECEASED John Callahan 125 North Street Boston	AGE AT DEATH 65	SUPPOSED AGE 65	PLACE OF BIRTH AND RESIDENCE Ireland
CAUSE OF DEATH Pneumonia	SEX AND OCCUPATION OF DECEASED Male Carpenter	AGE AT DEATH 65	PLACE OF BIRTH AND RESIDENCE Ireland	PLACE OF DEATH AND RESIDENCE Boston, Massachusetts

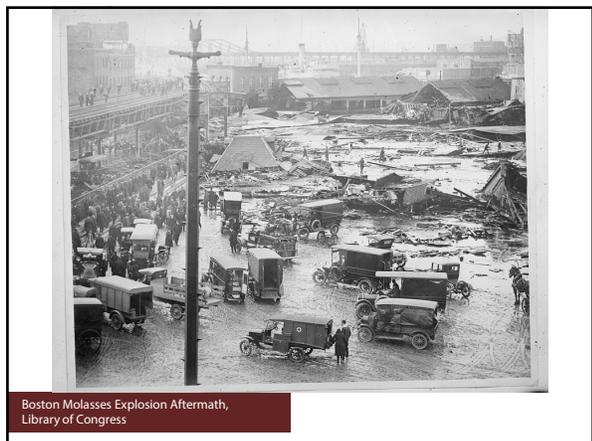
By me, E. W. McElroy, City Registrar.

Then personally appeared the above-named E. W. McElroy and made oath in the truth of the statements in the above certificate to him subscribed.

John H. L. Joyce, Justice of the Peace.

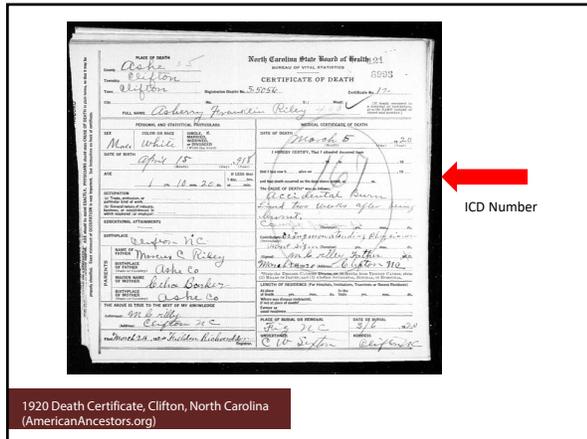
Death Record of John Callahan, 1919, Boston, Massachusetts, UMass Boston

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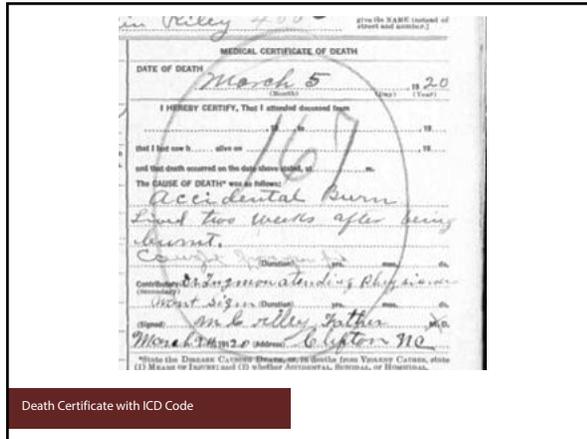
Boston Molasses Explosion Aftermath, Library of Congress

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1920 Death Certificate, Clifton, North Carolina (AmericanAncestors.org)

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Death Certificate with ICD Code

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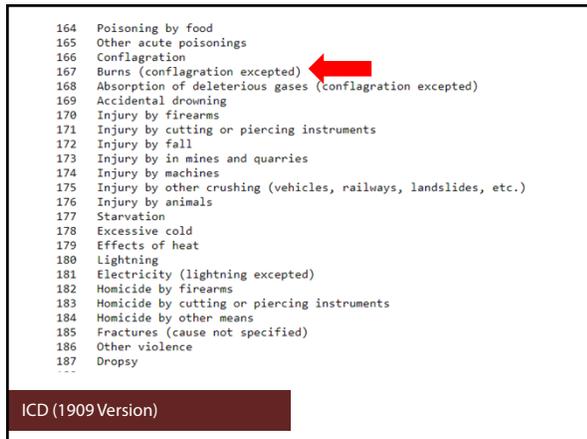
ICD

- ICD = International Classification of Diseases
- First published in 1893
- Codes can help you determine cause of death when it's illegible
- Multiple versions have been produced. Refer to the one that was in place at the time of death.

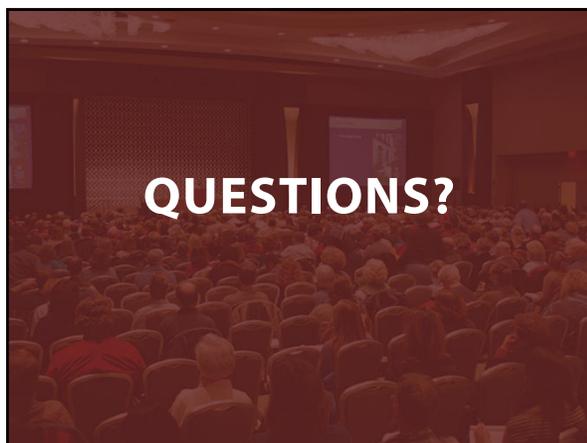
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Privacy Restrictions

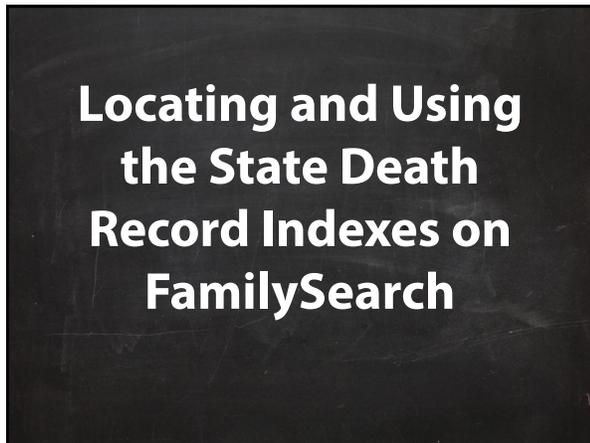
- Vary from state to state
- Generally, death records over 50 years old are usually available to the public and may be digitized.
- Different repositories:
 - State vital statistics office
 - County/town clerk's office
 - State Archives
 - National Archives and State Department
 - U.S. citizens who died overseas

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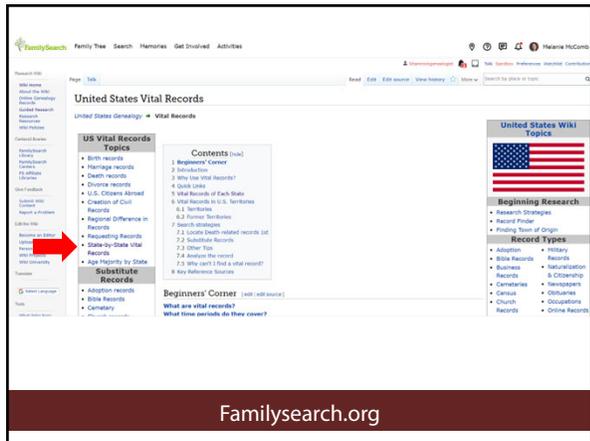
State Indexes

- Each state has a vital record index for births, deaths, and marriages.
- Many indexes available online:
 - American Ancestors
 - FamilySearch Wiki
 - FamilySearch Catalogue
 - Ancestry.com
 - State Archive Web Sites
 - State/County Genealogical Society Web Sites
- Information on index:
 - Name of deceased
 - Year of death (sometimes date)
 - County/town of death

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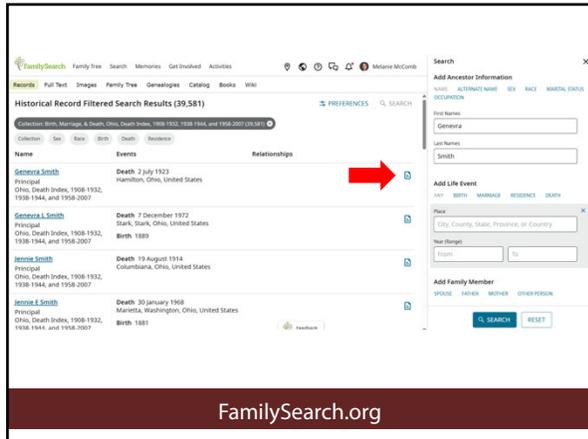
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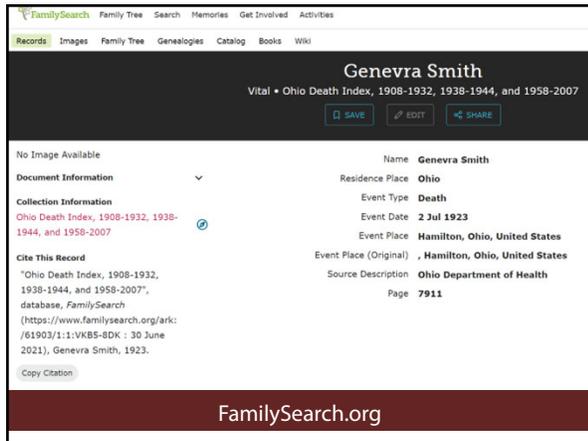
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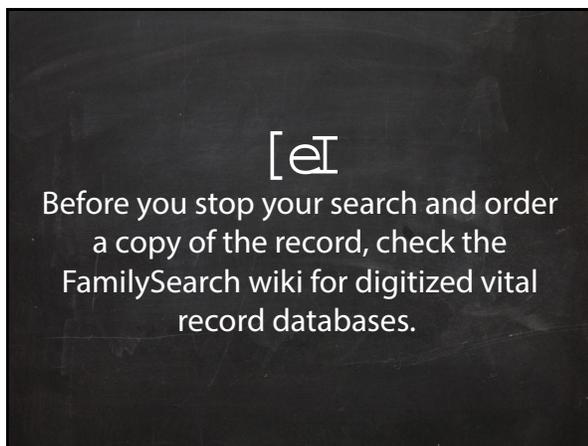
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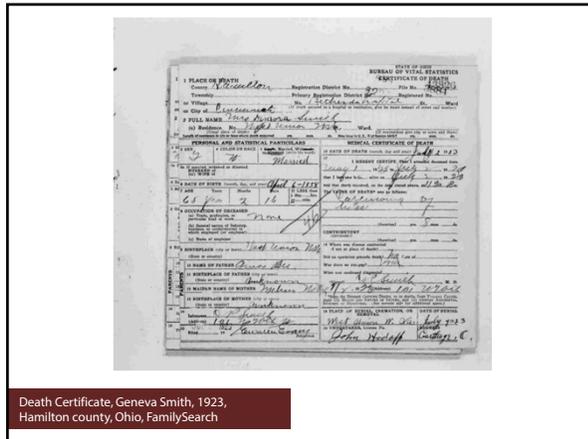
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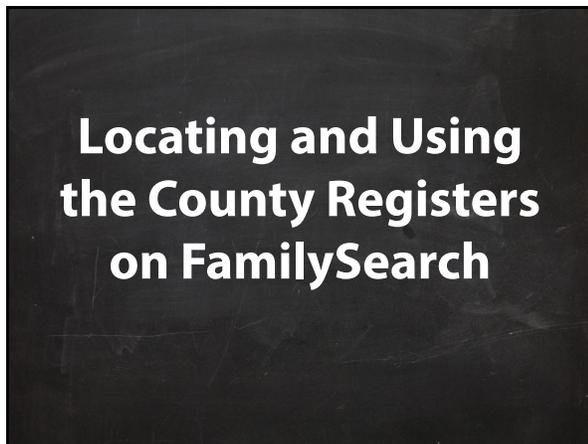


Death Certificate, Geneva Smith, 1923, Hamilton county, Ohio, FamilySearch

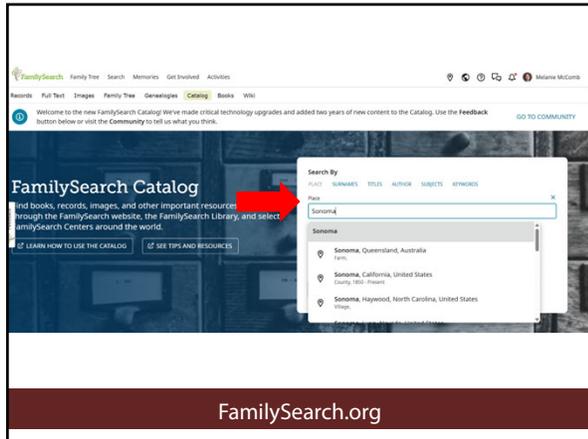
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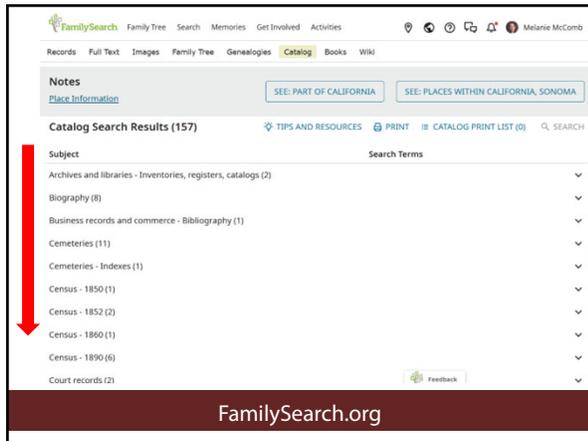
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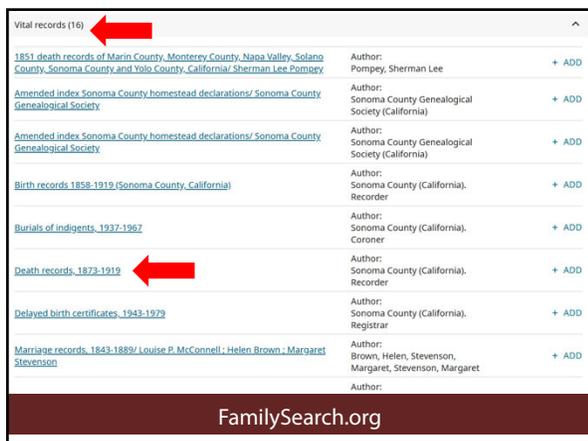
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Records Full Text Images Family Tree Genealogies **Catalog** Books Wiki

Death records, 1873-1919

Authors [Sonoma County \(California\), Recorder](#) (Author)

Format Microfilm 35mm

Language English

Publication Date 1979

Publisher Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah

Place of Publication Salt Lake City, Utah

Physical on 9 microfilm reels ; 35 mm.

Notes
Microfilm of original records filmed in the county courthouse.
[View this catalog record in WorldCat for other possible copy locations.](#)

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Note	Location	Collection/Shelf	Film	Image Group Number (DIG)	Format
Register of deaths, v. 1-4 1873-1905	Granite Mountain Record Vault	United States & Canada Film	1031235	4666596 Items 4-7	
Deaths, 1905-1907	Granite Mountain Record Vault	United States & Canada Film	1031236	7622187 Items 4-5	
Register of deaths, v. 5-7 1915-1919	Granite Mountain Record Vault	United States & Canada Film	1031236	7622187 Items 1-3	
Deaths, 1906-1908	Granite Mountain Record Vault	United States & Canada Film	1031237	7622186	
Deaths, 1908-1911	Granite Mountain Record Vault	United States & Canada Film	1031238	7622185	
Deaths, 1911-1912	Granite Mountain Record Vault	United States & Canada Film	1031239	7622362	
Deaths, 1913-1914	Granite Mountain Record Vault	United States & Canada Film	1031240	7622363	
Deaths, 1915-1917	Granite Mountain Record Vault	United States & Canada Film	1031241	7622364	
Deaths, 1918-1919	Granite Mountain Record Vault	United States & Canada Film	1029934	7622208	

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File # 0066596

Dark Mode SOURCE BOX ACTION TO HELP

Image 1 of 549

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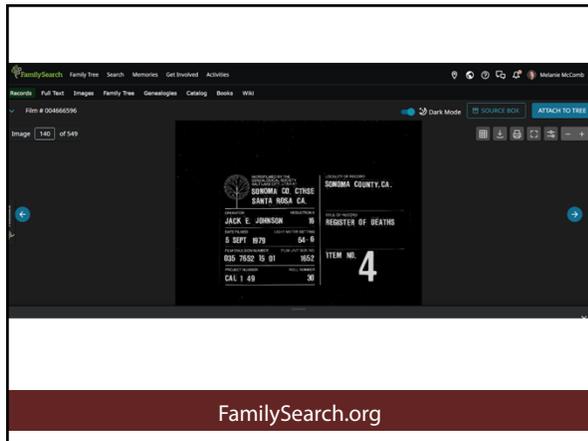
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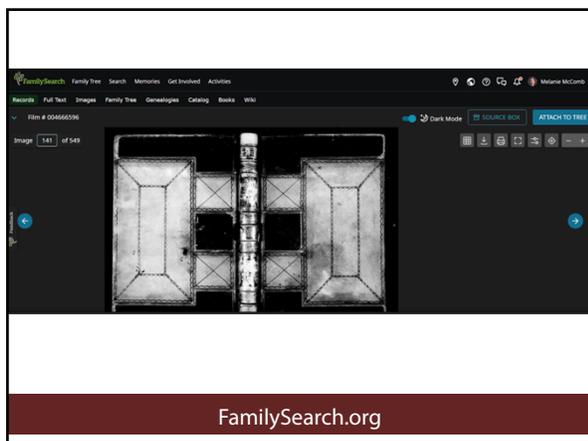
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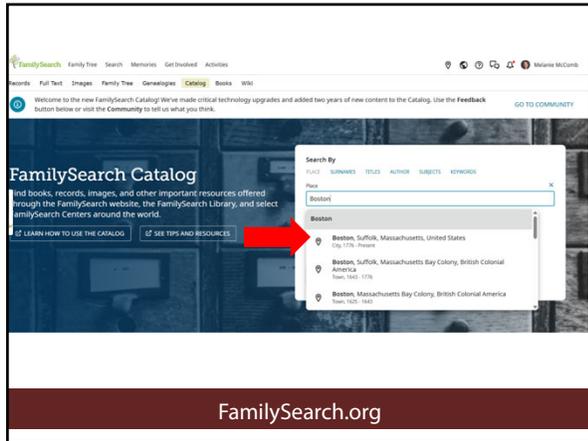
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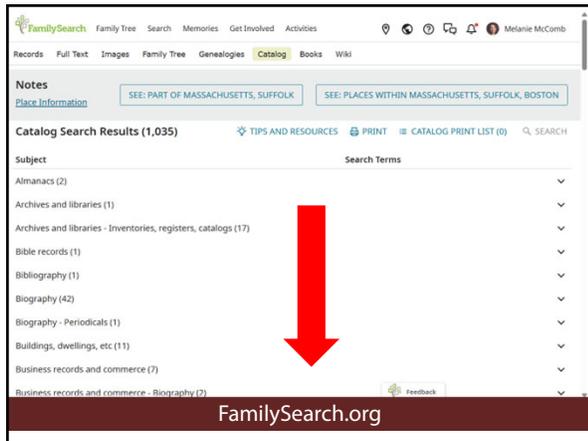
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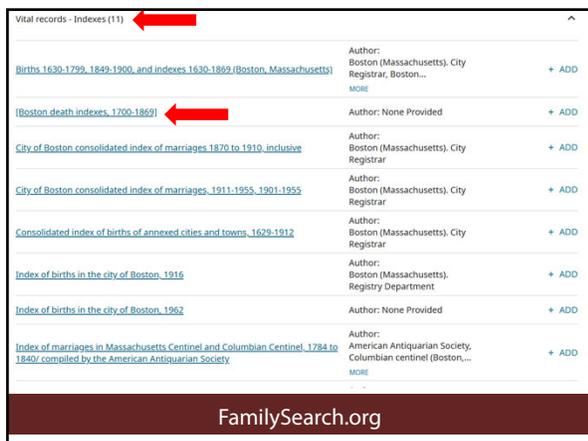
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Records of Duxbury, 1642-1826 ADD TO PRINT LIST

Authors [Duxbury \(Massachusetts\), Town Clerk](#) (Author)
[Duxbury \(Massachusetts\), Town Clerk](#) (Added Author)

Format Microfilm 35mm

Language English

Publication Date 1965

Publisher Filmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah

Place of Publication Salt Lake City, Utah

Physical 2 microfilm reels ; 35 mm.

References (Digital Collection) [Massachusetts, Town Clerk, vital and town records, 1626-2001](#)

Notes
 Microfilm of manuscripts filmed at Duxbury, Plymouth County, Massachusetts.
[Massachusetts, Town Clerk, Vital and Town Records](#) are available online, [click here](#).
[View this category record in WorldCat](#) for other possible copy locations.

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Film/Digital Notes
 Film Number or Image Group Number (IGN)

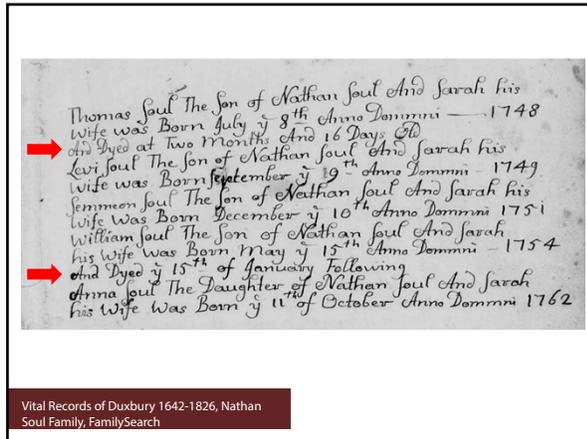
Note	Location	Collection/Shelf	Film	Image Group Number (IGN)	Format
General records: Metes and bounds, debts, minutes of meetings, agreements, warrants, some births, and marriages, ex-marriages, etc., 1645-1826.	Granite Mountain Record View	United States & Canada Film	417933	7009262	 
Miscellaneous and fragmentary records 1642-1787, 1686-1771.	Granite Mountain Record View	United States & Canada Film	417934	7009263	 

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 Don't ignore vital records
 that don't include deaths
 in the description

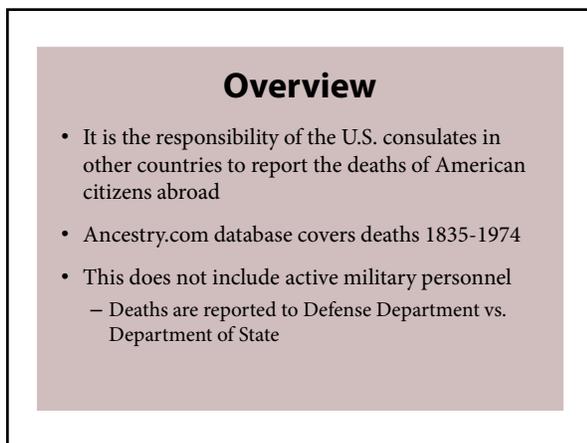
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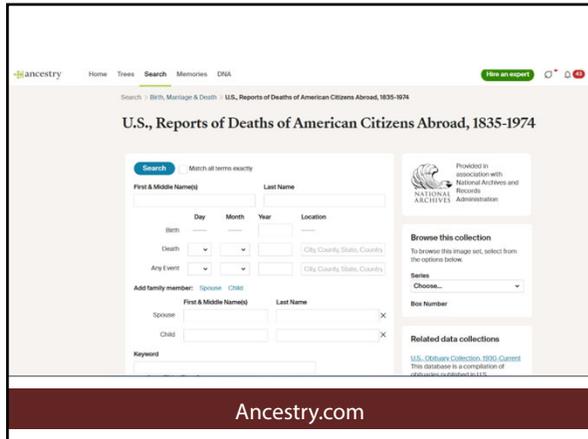
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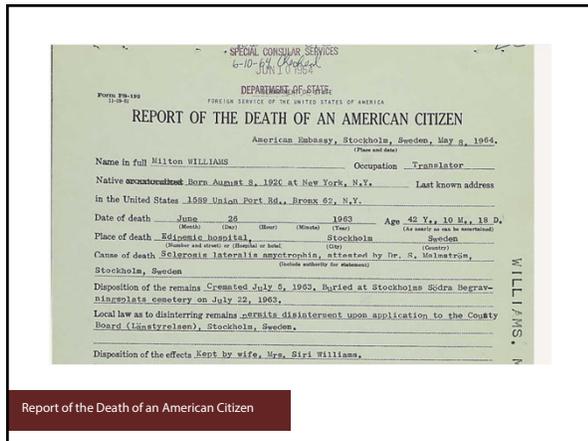
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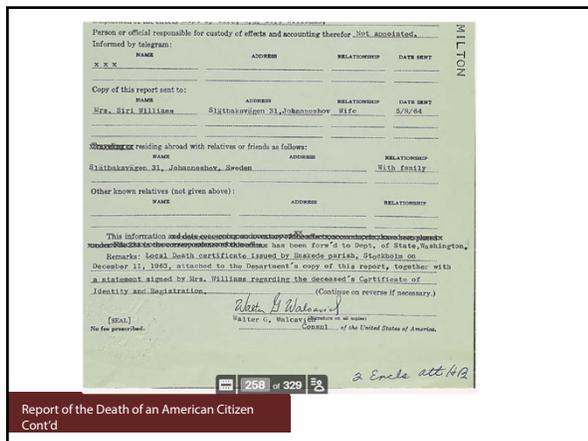


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Report of the Death of an American Citizen

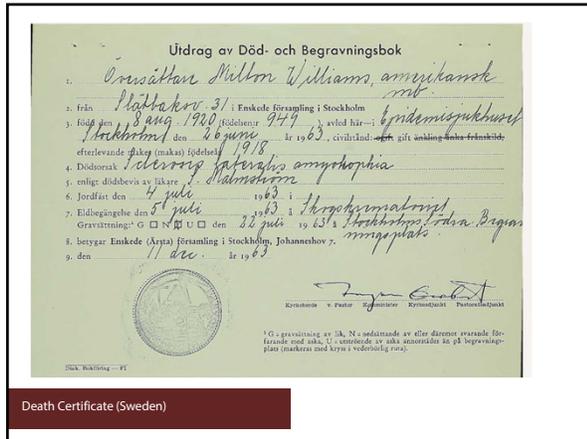
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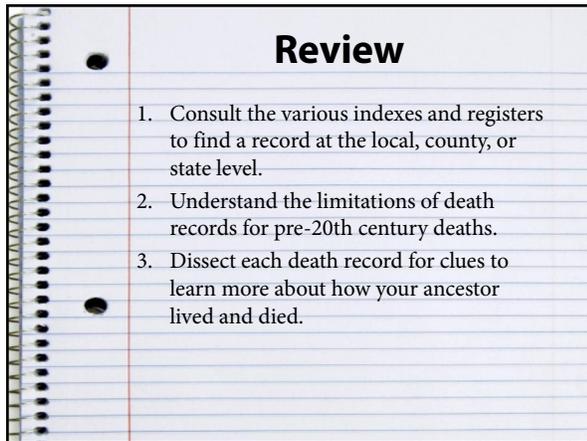
Report of the Death of an American Citizen Cont'd

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