Beyond the Grave: Uncovering Life Stories from Death Records

Class 2: Reporting Death: Civil Death Record Substitutes

David Allen Lambert, Chief Genealogist, David.Lambert@AmericanAncestors.org

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

    o Original handwritten records

    o Copy books

    o Manuscripts (unpublished)

    o Published (church histories and journal articles)

- Last Rites

    o In Catholicism, the last prayers and ministrations given to a dying person of the faith shortly before death.

    o Can be given to anyone awaiting execution, mortally injured, or terminally ill.

    o Cannot be given to someone that has already died.

    o Recorded in the sick call registers as "last rites" or "Viat" (abbreviation for Viaticum).

- Register of Communicants

    o Active log on members of the church

    o Vital records are noted (baptism, death), disciplinary measures, and dismissal date/location.

- Published Church Histories and Funeral Sermons

![American Ancestors logo] A NATIONAL CENTER FOR FAMILY HISTORY, HERITAGE & CULTURE

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

American Ancestors.
A National Center for Family History, Heritage & Culture

- 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
  - Body examined; 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 number of decades

- American Ancestors has the Boston City Hospital Admission records 1867-1870 online: https://www.americanancestors.org/search/databasesearch/32/boston-ma-city-hospital-admissions-1867-1870

American Ancestors
A National Center for Family History, Heritage & Culture

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 Newspaper*s (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).