

Beyond the Grave: Uncovering Life Stories from Death Records

Class 5: Final Resting Place

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When we find a death certificate for our ancestor, we should continue to look for other records surrounding their death. For example, if we are seeking children or the married names of daughters, we look for a will or other probate records. But records created by the mortuary or the cemetery can also hold valuable information.

Beyond the Death Certificate

Civil death records are often more concerned with the act of dying; they provide information for public health, attrition of population, and in some situations an indication that an autopsy was necessary.

However, other records produced by cemeteries and mortuaries look at the death in a different way:

- Funerals – allow the living to say goodbye
- Funeral Home records – document the business of preparing the deceased for burial
- Burial records may hold information about:
 - Religion
 - Family members
 - Final wishes of the deceased

There are several published resources in the Bibliography below that look at the history of burial, both in the United States and around the world.

Funeral Homes and Funeral Records

Several records are generated by the mortuary or funeral home while taking care of the body of your deceased ancestor.

Funeral Homes

Many of the records created by the funeral home will include the business side of the burial of your ancestor. However, the funeral home also kept information about what was needed for the funeral itself and for the burial in the cemetery. Among the records, you may find:

- Business registers that detail the costs involved in the burying of the deceased
- Receipts from the funeral home among personal papers

- Records or registers that also include personal information about the deceased
- Records or registers that may contain information about those involved with the funeral, such as pall bearers

Tip: Funeral home records are considered private records.

Funerals

Depending on the type of service held to honor your deceased ancestor, there may be items that were presented to those who attended the event. The funeral is a way for the living who knew the deceased to say goodbye. Ephemera saved from funerals will likely be found in family papers, and how it is presented is often influenced by the religious denomination of the family. Two of the more often seen records are:

- Funeral programs – usually include information on the deceased with more emphasis on the service itself
- Funeral cards – often include a photo on the front of Jesus Christ, a particular holy saint, or the deceased, plus a prayer or information about the service and basic information about the deceased

Burials and Burial Records

While not true of every religious denomination, there are some burial traditions that you may discover in the cemeteries where you find your ancestors:

- The body is positioned with the head to the west, hands resting on thighs, and feet to the east
 - If west-east position is not possible, north-south is used instead
 - Allows the dead to rise at dawn on Judgment Day, see the sunrise, and ascend into heaven
 - Clergy are buried in the opposite orientation
- Headstone inscriptions on the side facing west
- Quakers used plain coffins, sometimes stacking them on top of each other
 - Nondescript headstones are used
 - Meeting members may have removed any gravestones used (not done by the Hicksite and Guernseyite sects)
- Jewish burials are based on the Torah, which requires:
 - The deceased to be buried, not cremated
 - To be buried in a Jewish cemetery, or a section of a cemetery that is only for Jewish burials
 - That burial rights must be permanent (in other words, the plot cannot be dug up and reused)
 - Burial in a wooden box
- Muslims are buried with their face turned toward Mecca

Burial Registers

Burial registers are connected to the churches and usually offer the following information:

- Name of deceased
- Date of death
- Date of burial
- Burial plot details
- Age
- Cause of death

The further you go back in time, the less information you may discover. Many burial registers have been abstracted to preserve the information.

Tip: Always read the introductory section of any volume of abstracts.

Burial registers may also be located at the cemetery office, especially if that cemetery is not attached to a specific church, synagogue, or mosque.

Burial Permits

Burial permits emerged at approximately the same time that counties and states standardized the collection of vital statistics. This practice was born out of the interest of public health and protecting the remaining inhabitants from potential disease. One way to learn what permitting requirements existed for the town, county, or state in which your ancestor was buried, is to search for the statutes of that area, usually found in published volumes.

In addition to the “burial permit” you may also find that certain places required a “body in transit” permit if the deceased was traveling through the area. One major collection of registers of Bodies in Transit can be found through the New York City Municipal Archives (<https://nycrecords.access.preservica.com/>).

Cemeteries and Cemetery Records

When it comes to the cemetery itself, it is important to learn if the cemetery is attached to a church or if it was created by the city. Churches often oversee their own private graveyards and cemeteries, with the records found at the church or their archives. They also may reserve their plots for their parishioners or those of their religious denomination. City cemeteries are created by the town or city for the burial of those who simply purchase a plot. They were founded to accommodate citizens, especially those who were not affiliated with a specific church or religious denomination, as well as to answer the need for additional burial space as church and other private cemeteries became overfilled.

Among the records you may discover:

- Interment records
- Lot sales/transfers
- Maps of the cemetery

Lot Sale/Transfers

As the name implies, the burial plots are sold. You may find a register showing the sales or you may find the original plot deed among your family papers. Usually, the purchasing of a plot is based on need, purchased as a family member is extremely sick or has just died, Though the plots are within the cemetery, you may find that these deeds are recorded either in registers held by the cemetery or the local courthouse may be in charge.

Like a traditional land deed, the focus is on certain items. In addition to the costs, you are likely to find:

- Size of total plot
- Plot number
- Cemetery section

Tip: Seek out information about the church and/or cemetery.

Finding the Records

When it comes to where to look for the various records and documents generated by burial of an ancestor, there are a variety of places you may want to look.

Type of Record	Possible location
Funeral programs	Family papers
Funeral/Prayer cards	Family papers
Funeral home records	Could be: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Abstracted and published• Deposited in an archive (funeral home out of business)• Still with the funeral home (funeral home still in business)• Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org
Burial registers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Churches• Cemeteries• Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org
Cemetery records	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cemeteries• Ancestry.com, FamilySearch.org
Cemetery tombstones	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In the cemetery• Digitized online

Suggested Bibliography

Books

- Colman, Penny, *Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts: A History of Burials* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997)
- Lamm, Maurice, *The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning*, rev. ed. (Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 2000)
- Szucs, Loretto Dennis and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, *The Source: A Guidebook to American Genealogy* (Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2006)
- Yalom, Marilyn, *The American Resting Place, Four Hundred Years of History Through Our Cemeteries and Burial Grounds* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008).

Web Resources

- Goles, Kelly, "Evolution of American Funerary Customs and Laws," *Library of Congress Blogs*
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