

# Birth, Marriage, and Death Records

## Overview

Birth, marriage and death records, also known as vital records, are an important part of your genealogical journey.

While birth and death records did not start in the United States until the early 1900's, often we can find marriage records back to the early 1800's and sometimes even farther back.

Also keep in mind there are many types of vital records that go beyond just your typical birth, marriage, or death certificates. We are looking for evidence of these events.



## Working Backwards

As always, we want to work backwards in our ancestors lifetime so that we can get the most out of our research.

## Death Records

We are starting with death records because you should be as well when you are working on your ancestors research. There are many reasons why we start with death and work towards birth, but one of the reasons why is because you will find more information in a death record about a person's life than you will in any other of the vital records.

## Death Certificates

Names: In a death certificate it often names the parents, and sometimes you will be lucky enough to find the maiden surname of the mother. If the person was married at the time of death, you will often see the spouse listed as well.

## Addresses

Typically, you will see an address on the death certificate. Keep in mind it is not always the address of the last residence of the person when they died. It might be the address of the surviving family. It might also be a nursing home or a hospital address. Either way, you should



take the time to investigate the address and figure out where that was at the time the person died.

## Informants

One of the most important pieces of information you can find in a death certificate is the informant. The reason for this is because if the informant was the spouse, then that person likely gave accurate information about their marriage (because the spouse was there).

However, if the Informant was a child of the deceased, then the information they report might be inaccurate about anything (except day the person died) because the child did not witness the deceased birth or (likely) the marriage.

If the informant did not witness the event they are reporting about (i.e., birth or marriage on a death certificate) then that information is secondary and may have accuracy issues.

Remember the person giving the information, (the informant) is a person who just lost a loved one and may be distraught and not thinking clearly at the time they are giving this information to the funeral home or whoever it is filling out the death certificate.

## Cause of death

You always want to look at the cause of death, just in case. There is another part of the family history story to tell here. If, for example, they died in an accident, there may be newspaper records to look for or other types of information that you can find.

## Vital Data

The data contained, usually at the top of a death certificate, contains the **date of death**, the **place of death**, and the spelling of the **person's name**. Again, the informant may be misinformed about some of this information, so keep that in mind. In my experience, you will often see misspelled names in a death certificate.

## Obituaries

Other great places for evidence of death and probably one of the best in this category, are obituaries. A well-written obituary will include family members, spouses, children grandchildren and so on. This would be considered derivative information since there is a reporter involved. The reporter did not witness the event about the facts in an obituary, thus making it secondary information. However, obituaries can be fabulous place to find information about family relationships, birth order of children, and so on. We just need to keep in mind that the information might not be perfectly accurate.

## Social Security Records

One of the first death records you may find in your ancestry search is the Social Security Death Index. However, there are multiple social security records you can find once you have a social security number for your ancestor, they come in three different forms, the **Social Security Death Index**, the **Social Security Applications and Claims Index, SS-5**, and the **Numident index**.

## Background

In the United States, the **Social Security Administration was formed in 1935**, with records **beginning in 1936**, depending on the location. The beginning of the Social Security records specifically for your ancestor would also be dependent on when they applied for the Social Security Card.

## The Social Security Death Index

The **Social Security Death Index** can be found on Ancestry.com and on FamilySearch.org.

## The Social Security Applications and Claims Index

The **Social Security Applications and Claims Index** can be found on Ancestry.com. You would be wise to find both sets of records if they exist as the data is just a little bit different in each of the indexes.

## Social Security Numerical ID Files (Numident)

Family Search has more information in this index that may provide additional information when requesting the SS-5. Go to FamilySearch.org, click Search>Records> Collection Type “Social Security” and drill into the Social Security (Numident) file. Then search for your ancestor.

## SS-5

You can also write to the Social Security Administration for a deceased ancestors **SS-5 record**, which is a record in more detail about your ancestors Social Security Records. Each one is different and so some will have more information than others you may find. income information. Residence, benefits applications, and more.

To write for an SS-5 record, you do so by making a [Freedom of Information Act Request here](#).

## Clues in Social Security Numbers

If you have a social security number, you may be able to discover where your ancestor acquired their social security card.

The **first three numbers** in a social security number are called the area number. “The Area Number is assigned by the geographical region. Prior to 1972, cards were issued in local Social Security offices around the country and the Area Number represented the State in which the card was issued,” according to the [Social Security Administration website](#).

The [Steve Mores website](#) has a terrific way to learn more about where social security numbers were created by state.

### Three-Digit Decoder

SSN starting with  - XX - XXXX  
was issued in

*Where card was issued, not where person was born*

## Tombstone Websites

Sometimes the only time you will find a death record is on websites like FindAGrave.com BillionGraves.com or CemeteryCensus.com.

## Church Death Records and Graveyards

Often, we can find records in the churches our ancestors attended. If you know the religious affiliation of your ancestor, look for churches within a few miles of where your ancestor lived.

[Example shown is here.](#)

## Wills & Probate



Do not forget that if there was land, there was likely a will or probate package to find.

Ancestry and FamilySearch have Wills and Probate packages to search for. Check to see if they are available for the area you are researching. Also, check the state archives for the actual record.

Church of England Burial Record, After 1812  
(Family History Library film 994,229 Item 1, page 80)

BURIALS in the Parish of <i>Wingland</i> in the County of <i>Hampshire</i>						Parish of burial
Name of deceased	Sex	Residence	Abode	When buried	Age	By whom the Ceremony was performed
<i>William Baker</i>			<i>Colmole</i>	<i>Aug 25</i>	<i>74</i>	<i>H. Brown</i>
No. 611			Month, day	Age when buried		<i>Widdow</i>
<i>Thomas Hughes</i>			<i>Wingland</i>	<i>Nov 29</i>	<i>76</i>	<i>H. Brown</i>
No. 612						<i>Widdow</i>

Church of England Burial Record, Before 1812  
(Family History Library film 994,229 Item 6)

Month, day	Persons buried in the year of our Lord	Year	Name	Spouse
<i>Apr 15</i>	<i>Anne the wife of Edward Barton</i>		<i>Edward</i>	
<i>June 3</i>	<i>Thomas Preman</i>			

## Marriage Records

Marriage records and evidence of marriage can come in many forms. You can have a marriage license, marriage certificate, divorce record, marriage registry, marriage announcement, and so on. It is important to understand the type of record that you have.

Marriage records in the United States go back as far as the early 1600's and vary based on the location. To find when marriage certificates and records began in the area your ancestors married, go to the [FamilySearch Wiki](#) and drill into your location.

## Marriage Certificates & Licenses

**Marriage Certificates** or **Marriage Licenses** are great documents to find because the information provided on them often is provided by the marital couple themselves. Therefore, it is firsthand information, a primary source.



A **Marriage License** is a document that is created when a couple applies for a marriage license so they can legally marry and often has a **Marriage Return** on the bottom.

Application No. 56178		Filed and Marriage License Issued FEB 10 1908	
Name Francis M. Orane	Age 30	Residence Pittsburgh, Pa.	Place of Birth Blackburn, Mo.
Occupation Bridge Erector	Father's Name E. H.	Mother's Maiden Name Mary F. Smith	Number of times previously married None
Applicant Francis M. Orane	Marriage to be solemnized by Rev. J. B. McClay	Consent of Filed	190...
Name Mary G. Humphrey	Age 25	Residence 3302 Denison Ave.	Place of Birth Columbus, O.
Occupation None	Father's Name Jno.	Mother's Maiden Name Catherine Cowdell	Number of times previously married None
Married Name	License issued by Frank J. Zelman Dep'y Clk.	Consent of Filed	190...
...RETURN...			
The State of Ohio, } ss.		I Certify, That on the 10 <sup>th</sup> day of February 1908	
CUYAHOGA COUNTY, }		Mr. Francis M. Orane and Miss Mary G. Humphrey were by me legally	
		joined in marriage. Rev. J. B. McClay	

A **Marriage Certificate** often is a decorative certificate that is provided to the couple after they married and proves they were legally married.

## Marriage Registries

Marriage registries can come in two forms. They can come as a Civil Marriage Registry (usually at the county level) or a Church Registry (held by the church or parish). This depends on the time, location, and laws of the land in which you are researching.

For example, in England, civil birth, marriage, death, and divorce registrations began in 1837. However, there are parish registries that date back to the mid-1500's during Henry VIII's era.

## Marriage Banns

A Marriage Bann was an announcement of a couples intent to marry. This typically happened a few weeks prior to the marriage. This announcement usually was made at their church service in front of the congregation.

If the couple, was from two different congregations. Some churches required the bride and groom to announce at her church service while others required both.

## Marriage Bonds

"Marriage bonds are written guarantees or promises of payment made by the groom or another person (often a relative of the bride) to ensure that a forthcoming marriage would be legal. The person who posted the bond was known as the surety or bondsman. The bond was presented to the minister or official who would perform the ceremony. The bond was then

returned to the town or county clerk. These documents were frequently used in the southern and middle-Atlantic states up to the mid-1800's." – [FamilySearch Wiki](#)

## Marriage Announcements

Newspapers! You can find both Engagement announcements and marriage announcements in the newspapers. This is a popular tradition that continues today but became popular in the early 1900's. You may find engagement and marriage announcements in the social columns of the hometown papers back to the first newspaper in the area.

## Wedding Anniversaries

Milestone anniversaries, newspaper announcements, anniversary parties, and guest registries, all can be more evidence of a marriage.



**50TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY OF HERMAN & FRANCES MADSEN, LONG BEACH, CA, 1955.**

## Birth Records

Lastly, birth records. Again, we are working backwards.

Birth records vary from state to state. For example, in the New England area, you may find some form of birth records back to the mid-1600's while out west, you may not find birth records until the late 1800's or even as late as 1905 (California specifically).

## Birth Certificates

As with death and marriage records, the beginning of civil birth certificates and or mandatory birth record keeping varied depending on the state. Most states started keeping records of births around 1905-1920.

Also keep in mind that while state legislators may have mandated that the record keeping started in a specific year, sometimes it took years for the counties to come into compliance with the new laws.

Certificate of Birth		No. 698	
STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA			
OFFICE OF REGISTER OF DEEDS			
Edgecombe County		Tarboro, N. C.	
Name <u>George Allen Anderson</u>		Sex <u>Male</u>	
Date of Birth <u>January 31, 1928</u>		County of Birth <u>Edgecombe</u>	
PARENTAGE			
Father		Mother	
Name <u>Ray Anderson</u>		Maiden name <u>Gerrie Sweeney</u>	
Age at time of this birth <u>32</u> Race <u>White</u>		Age at time of this birth <u>32</u> Race <u>White</u>	
Place of Birth <u>Edgecombe Co., N. C.</u>		Place of Birth <u>Edgecombe Co., N. C.</u>	
Date Filed <u>Feb. 5, 1928</u> Reg. Dist. <u>33-5414</u> Cert. <u>4</u>		Volume <u>15</u> Page <u>517</u>	
I do hereby certify that this above is a true copy of the essential facts recorded on the birth record on file in this office for the individual named herein.			
Witness my hand and official seal this the <u>16</u> day of <u>October</u> 19 <u>52</u>		Gladys Shelton Pitt, Register of Deeds Edgecombe County, N.C.	
SEAL		By <u>[Signature]</u> Deputy	

## Birth Announcements

Just like marriage announcements and obituaries, look to newspapers, and family memorabilia for birth announcements. You may find birth announcements in the social columns of the newspapers a few days after the baby was born.

## Church Records

There are a variety of birth record churches including **Birth Registries, Baptisms, and Christenings** to name a few.

## Bastardy Bonds

Bastardy Bonds originated and are found in **England** and **Wales**. These bonds were a promise to pay for the care of illegitimate children. These are court records.

Many U.S. states and counties had laws against illegitimate pregnancies, thus the Bastardy Bonds were created so that the care and expense of the child did not fall on the county.

While children often are not named in Bastardy Bonds, knowing when a child was born and finding a Bastardy Bond that fits the timeline may provide a clue to the father of the child.

Bastardy Bonds are found in some eastern **U.S. states** like:

Alabama

Tennessee

Georgia

West Virginia

North Carolina

Maybe More

They originated and are found in England and Wales. These bonds were a promise to pay for the care of an illegitimate child.

Pregnant women who were in their final term of pregnancy would be brought to court to name who the father was of the child. If she refused, she needed one or two people to stand up as the bondsperson to place a bond and agree to care for the soon-to-be-born child.

## Delayed Birth Certificates

Delayed birth certificates can provide an additional amount of information that you would not normally find in a birth certificate.

Delayed birth certificates were popular during the time when the Social Security Administration was formed. People needed evidence of their birth date. If they were born before the birth certificates were created, they needed to obtain a birth certificate to get a Social Security card. Doing so required that they find several people to give testimony that they knew when the person was born.

## Other Resources

### FamilySearch Wiki

Go to the FamilySearch Wiki and drill in by location to see what records may be available in your ancestors region.

## Bible Records

Of course, we cannot overlook family Bibles. Of these are not vital records. They certainly are evidence of birth, marriage, and death.

## Guardianship & Apprenticeship Records

**Guardianship Records** were court records. You will often find these in the county or state archives. These were created to give legal guardianship to a person, typically, to an orphaned child.

### Apprenticeship Records

An apprenticeship involves a contract between a “master” and a minor. The apprentice serves the master for a set period. The master teaches the apprentice a skill and provides maintenance, which may include money, clothing, or property upon completion. These records can offer insights into ancestors, potentially listing parental names or guardians.

If the mother is named, it suggests the child may be born out of wedlock. The guardian could be a relative, and the record may indicate the apprentice's living situation.

Look to the [FamilySearch Wiki](#) for either Guardianship or Apprenticeship records. Keyword search Guardianship or Apprentice and narrow by location.

## Even the Back of Paintings!

I must share this story. While watching the news one evening, I saw a report about a marriage certificate that had been found hidden in the back of a painting, at a thrift store in my area.

They were trying to find anything they could about the people in the old 1870's certificate. I had to jump in.

I got a hold of the thrift store to get a copy of the certificate and I did the research over a weekend.

I found a descendant of this family who was absolutely thrilled to receive this incredibly old marriage certificate that had been preserved in the back of the painting.

All the local news organizations wanted the story including Inside Edition, Fox News, and many more. I did the research and found a descendant from this family, and we are still friends today. If you would like to see the story and how I did the research, [go here](#).





## Finding the Records

The fastest way to find the records is to go to [FamilySearch.org/wiki](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki) and drill down by location. There you can find hyperlinks to where most of the records are located.

### Albany County, Wyoming Record Dates [ [edit](#) | [edit source](#) ]

Information for this chart was taken from various sources, often containing conflicts. It should be verified by contacting the county and/or the state government agency.

Known Beginning Dates for Government County Records <sup>[5]</sup>						
Birth*	Marriage	Death*	Court	Land	Probate	Census
1909	1869	1899	1869	1868	1869	1850
*State birth and death records began in 1909. Limited compliance until 1922. <sup>[6]</sup>						

## Wrapping It Up

When looking for vital records think beyond birth, marriage, and death certificates. There are so many other records that can give you the evidence of the event and possibly much more of the story in your family history.

While this is not a complete list of where to find all evidence of those events, birth dates can often be found on most records in a persons profile.

The easiest way to find any vital record and where to find them is on the FamilySearch Wiki at [FamilySearch.org/wiki](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki).