

What are vital records?

Vital records document major life events such as birth, marriage, divorce, and death. These records are typically created by local authorities, including government agencies and churches. They can help you place your ancestor in a specific time and location, identify their relatives, and uncover clues that may lead to additional records. Also, lineage societies, such as the General Society of Mayflower Descendants, often require these types of records for admittance to their ranks.

How do I find vital records?

Record-keeping laws have varied over time and by location, so there is no single source for searching or requesting records. Most states had laws mandating the keeping of vital records - and general compliance with those laws - by the early 1900s. Some areas, particularly in New England, began keeping records much earlier. Use resources like the FamilySearch Research Wiki to look up a county or state and learn when different records were kept and where to access them today. To get started, visit familysearch.org, then click "Search," and select "Research Wiki."

Types of Vital Records

Death Records

Search for death records before birth or marriage records. They are more recent and often include details about the individual's birth and marriage.

- **Death Certificates** - Include date, time, place, & cause
- **Death Registers** - Record of multiple deaths
- **Cemetery and Church Records** - May be only record for children or women
- **Probate Records** - Relate to estate & dependents
- **Census Mortality Schedule** - Prior 12 months; 1850-1880
- **Newspapers** - Obituaries & death notices
- **Social Security Death Index** - Deaths reported to SSA

Marriage Records

Marriages are the earliest vital events recorded by local authorities. Marriage and divorce are often public matters, so records are easy to access.

- **Banns and Intentions** - Public notices via local church or clerk
- **Bonds** - Payment pledged if marriage proven illegal
- **Applications and Licenses** - Filed by couple at local clerk
- **Certificates** - Given to newlyweds & kept by family
- **Returns and Registers** - Book records of multiple marriages
- **Contracts and Consent Forms** - Prenuptial agreements & parental consent for those underage

Birth Records

Birth records are often the most difficult vital records to locate. Privacy laws may restrict access, or a record might not have been created at all.

- **Birth Certificates** - Created at birth & document a single birth
- **Birth Registers** - Created at birth & document multiple births
- **Delayed Birth Certificates** - created after birth & often required proof of birth date

TOP TIPS

Work backward through your ancestor's lifetime; more recent records can shed light on earlier events.

Note: You are not likely to find each of these records for all your ancestors.

Supplemental Records

Don't despair if you struggle to locate a vital record. Other records can provide details related to an ancestor's major life events. Here are some to look for.

Birth, Marriage, & Death

- Census Records
- Military Records
- Newspapers
- Diaries
- Family Bibles

Additional Birth

- Tax Records
- Naturalization Records
- Baptismal Records
- Yearbooks
- Passports
- Marriage Records
- Divorce Records

Additional Marriage

- Divorce Records
- Death Records

Further Considerations

Keep these tips in mind as you research:

- Do you understand the record-keeping laws for the time and place? Look them up.
- Can you find more than one record? Multiple sources allow you to confirm information.
- Who was the informant? Were they close to your ancestor? Are they in other records for your ancestor?
- What does the handwriting look like? If multiple people should have filled out the record, be suspicious if writing looks the same.
- Was the record created near the time of the event? Be cautious if there was a delay between the event and record creation.
- Is information missing or left blank? Why might that be?
- Who are the witnesses, family members, or other signatures on the document?
- Did you read the whole record? Look at all information available and check for a back page or additional pages.
- Is a date range or year possibly the best you can find - for now?
- Does lack of a record mean your ancestor wasn't there? If no one forced them to make a record, they may have chosen not to.
- Did the borders of towns, counties, states, or countries change?
- Not all records are online. But many are! Check free places before paying fees.



Check online family trees! Someone else may have already found or requested the record you are searching for. As always, verify the information other researchers have provided.

Vital Record Resources

PPLD Regional History & Genealogy | tiny.ppld.org/rhg

Access genealogy databases and reference material.

FamilySearch Wiki | tiny.ppld.org/family-wiki

Research guides for United States vital records

Find A Grave | findagrave.com

BillionGraves | billiongraves.com

Images and indexes of cemetery tombstones.

Online Searchable Death Indexes | deathindexes.com

Find online death record indexes.

Council of State Archivists Member Directory

tiny.ppld.org/us-state-archives

Lists contact information for U.S. state archives.

Where to Write for Vital Records

tiny.ppld.org/where-to-write

Contact info for vital records requests by state.

Chronicling America | tiny.ppld.org/chronicling

Historic American newspapers.

Atlas of Historical County Boundaries | tiny.ppld.org/ahcb

View U.S. county boundary changes over time.

International Classification of Diseases

wolfbane.com/icd/index.html

Look up cause of death code meanings.

Cyndi's List | cyndislist.com/us/vital/

Links to U.S. vital records websites by state.