

Finding Your Ancestors: Beginning Genealogy in Four Parts



Part 2: Vital Records

Vital Records help establish the “framework” for your ancestor’s life. Once you have set up this framework you will go back and fill in information you find about the person from family stories, newspaper articles, and other sources.

In this part, you will learn:

- What vital records are, and why they are so important to your research.
- How to find the dates for these events.
- How to order copies of the certificates that recorded these events.
- How online access is changing the way we research vital records.

First, a review of some important research principles:

Start with what you know.

Start with yourself, and work backwards to the unknown. Interview family members, especially those who are older. Oral history is very important. Look for documents, photos, etc. still being kept by family members. Ask to make copies.

Always cite the sources of your information.

If you skip this step, you will be unable to defend your research. You should record all sources you’ve checked, and whether they held – or didn’t hold – the information you sought.

What are Vital Records?

Vital records are records kept by a governmental authority that document the life events of **birth, death, marriage and divorce**. Vital records provide the dates of events (such as birth and death) that you will enter on an ancestor’s pedigree chart (also known as an ancestral chart). Vital records may also give you other important information. For instance, a death certificate might give names of parents and/or spouse, occupation, address, place of birth, cause of death,

death location, name of mortuary, place of burial and more. It should also give the name of the informant and their relationship to the deceased.

You must keep in mind, however, the source of the information on the certificate – how well did the informant know the person? Misinformation can be found even on such important documents as death certificates.

In the United States, vital records are created by local authorities, such as county government, and were often recorded at the county courthouse. Different states started recording vital statistics in different years. A chart listing the years each state started recording births, marriages, and deaths can be found by clicking on this link to the FamilyTree Magazine website: <https://familytreemagazine.com/vital-records/>

However, some counties recorded births, deaths, etc., before it was required by the state. Check with the county registrar if you are looking for an event that happened before the state started collecting records.

Finding the Dates

If you don't know the dates for these events, look for **indexes** that will give you this information. Look for a state's birth, death and other indexes. Once you have the date of birth, death, etc., you can order a copy of the certificate, and look for newspaper articles, including obituaries. (Learn more about included dates and finding married women on the [FamilySearch Wiki](#).) Indexes of births, deaths, marriage and divorce can be found in databases and websites such as:

- **FamilySearch.org** - <http://www.familysearch.org>. Use free of charge online.
- The **Sacramento FamilySearch Center** subscribes to many databases, which you can use for free. You can also subscribe to many of these databases at home, for a fee.
- **Ancestry.com (\$)** - <http://www.ancestry.com>. Subscribe for a fee, or use Ancestry Library Edition at any Sacramento Public Library branch, or at the Sacramento FamilySearch Library.
- **American Ancestors (\$)** – use at Sacramento Central Library, or subscribe at home.
- **Online Searchable Death Indexes & Records**, <http://www.deathindexes.com> by Joe Beine.

- **Social Security Death Index,**
- **Western States Marriage Records Index,**
<http://abish.byui.edu/specialcollections/westernstates/search.cfm>
- **USGenWeb, www.usgenweb.org** is a site run by volunteers, and organized by state and county.

Online Vital Records Databases:

You may be lucky enough to find digitized images or transcriptions of these certificates online for the state you are researching. Records found online cannot be used as certified copies, but still contain the same information. Keep in mind that transcriptions of records sometimes contain mistakes, and it is important to look at the original image. You can search online for “vital records” and the name of the state you need to see a list of potential sites.

Here are some samples of online vital records:

- **Missouri Digital Heritage Birth & Death Records Database,**
Birth and Death Records Pre-1910, and Death Records, 1910-1965
<http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/resources/bdrecords.asp>
- **Washington State Archives – Digital Archives**
<http://www.digitalarchives.wa.gov>
- **Arizona Department of Health Services – Birth and Death Certificates**
<http://genealogy.az.gov>

Ordering Copies of Certificates

Depending upon the state and the type of vital record you are seeking, there are several ways to find the information. There are two types of copies: **certified** (sometimes referred to as an **authorized** copy) and **uncertified** (sometimes referred to as an **informational** copy). Proof of identification is needed to order both certified and uncertified copies of certificates.

- **Certified copies** have a raised seal of authenticity, and can be used for legal purposes, such as getting a passport. Access to the certified copy is limited to the person who is

named on the certificate and certain close family members. The application for the copy will usually have to be notarized.

- **Informational copies** do not have the raised seal, and can be used for informational purposes only.

Before you can order a copy of the certificate, you will need to know the **full name** of your ancestor, the **location** and **date** of the event, and the entity holding the records.

- **County Level:** Often the fastest way to get a copy of a certificate is to begin at the county level, starting with the County Clerk-Recorder or similar agency. To find the appropriate county agency, use a search engine to search for “county name,” “state” and “death (or birth, etc.) certificate” or “vital records.” Check the agency’s website to find out the requirements and the fee charged to order a copy of the certificate.
- **State Level:** For the state you are investigating, start with the Department of Health and Vital Records or a similar agency. As on the county level, there will be a charge for copies of these records. For California, order copies through the California Department of Public Health. Information on how to order copies from each state can be found on the “**Where to Write for Vital Records**” page of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w.htm>

If you can’t find a civil death record for your ancestor, try using these documents and sources to locate information:

- **Family Bible inscriptions** and other family papers.
- **Court records** (wills and administrations).
- **Census records** (federal mortality schedules).
- **Military service** and pension records.
- **Newspapers** (death notices, obituaries, and news articles).
- **Cemetery records** and tombstone inscriptions.
- **Find a Grave** <http://www.findagrave.com> may have burial information submitted by volunteers.

Some things to keep in mind:

- **For each ancestor, look for a death record first**, then a marriage record, and then a birth record. The death record normally contains the most information about the person, followed by the marriage record. Use the information in the death record to outline your ancestor's life.
- In the **New England** states, vital records were kept on the **town level** before the states started keeping records. For information on these states, check the **Ancestry.com Wiki** or the **FamilySearch Wiki** listed below.

Where to Get Help:

Sacramento FamilySearch Center,

2745 Eastern Ave., Sacramento 95662. Phone: 916-487-2090.

[https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Sacramento California FamilySearch Center](https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Sacramento_California_FamilySearch_Center)

Use databases, take classes and get advice from volunteers free of charge.

Book a Genealogist at Orangevale Public Library,

8820 Greenback Lane, Orangevale 95662.

Volunteer genealogists help you individually with your research by appointment. Reserve your session online (saclibrary.org/events) or at any Sacramento public library branch.

Genealogical Association of Sacramento <https://gensac.org/> Monthly meetings and programs with guest speakers. Currently held on the 3rd Wednesday of each month at the Belle Cooledge Library, 5600 South Land Park Drive, Sacramento 95822.

Books and Wikis about Vital Records:

International Vital Records Handbook, by Thomas Jay Kemp.

Ancestry.com Family History Wiki. www.ancestry.com/wiki. Use of Ancestry's Wiki is free. In the upper right corner of the screen, click on the link "**Vital Records.**" The Wiki contains entries for each state, giving information about when records were kept, and how to order copies.

FamilySearch.org Wiki. <https://familysearch.org>. To access, click on "Search" and then on "Wiki." Using the search box, find information in the Wiki about vital records for a certain state. Use of the FamilySearch Wiki is also free.

Part 3: Census Records coming August 21, 2024