

Death Records: A Check List of Ten Documents Every Genealogist Should Own

by William Dollarhide

Here are ten places to look for a death record. All ten sources should be obtained for every ancestor on your pedigree chart, and every member of a family on your family group sheet.

1. Death Certificate. A rule in genealogy is to treat the brothers and sisters of your ancestors as equals. That means you need to obtain genealogical sources for all of them. For instance, for every ancestor on your pedigree chart, and for every brother or sister of an ancestor, you need to obtain a **death certificate** (assuming they are dead). If there were six siblings in an ancestor's family, a death certificate for each brother and sister will give six different sources about the same parents; places where the family lived; names of spouses; names of cemeteries; names of funeral directors; and other facts about a family. If a death certificate for your ancestor fails to provide the name of the deceased's mother, a sibling's death certificate may give the full maiden name. How do you get a death certificate? Go to the www.vitalrec.com site, where every state and county is listed, and where you can find out where, when, and how much. Start with a death certificate, because the names, dates, and places you will find on a death certificate will always lead you to further records.

2. Funeral record. A death certificate may mention the name and location of a funeral director. Find a current funeral home in North America at www.funeralnet.com. This site has the listings from a directory of funeral homes called *The Yellow Book*. A funeral record may include names of survivors; names of the persons responsible for the funeral expenses; and often, obscure biographical information about the deceased not available anywhere else. Modern funeral records are full of genealogical information about the person who died and may include copies of newspaper obituaries, death certificates, printed eulogies, funeral programs, and other details about the person. A reference to a burial permit, cremation, or cemetery can be found here as well. Generally, funeral directors are very easy to talk to and they are usually cooperative (they want your family's business). Even if the old name of a funeral home is not listed in a current directory, it should be possible to locate the current funeral home holding the records of an earlier one. These businesses rarely go out of business, but are more often taken over by another funeral director. If at one time a town had two or three funeral homes, but only one today, the *Yellow Book* listing is still the source for finding the current funeral home in that town, which can lead you to information about the older funeral home. Funeral directors are also experts on the location of cemeteries in their area.

3. Cemetery Record. If the name of a cemetery is mentioned on the death certificate or funeral record, that cemetery is now a source of information about the person who died. There may be a record in the sexton's office of the cemetery, or off-site at a caretaker's home; and the gravestone inscription may be revealing as well. When you contact a funeral home, ask about the cemetery where the person was buried, and whether they have an address or phone number for the cemetery office, or at least know who might be the keeper of records for the cemetery. At the same time, ask the funeral director for the names of monument sellers/stone masons who cater to cemeteries in the area. As a back-up, a local stone mason may have a record of a monument inscription for the deceased's gravestone. To locate a cemetery anywhere in the United States, a special list can be obtained from the United States Geological Survey (USGS) within their Geographic Names Information System (GNIS). The GNIS contains the names of over two million place-names (map features) in America, of which about 107,000 are cemeteries. The GNIS website is located at <http://geonames.usgs.gov/>. Click on "Domestic Names" to search for any named cemetery.

4. Obituary. A newspaper obituary was probably published soon after the person's death. Old newspapers from the town where the person died are usually available in the local public library. They may be on microfilm. Find the website for any library in the U.S. at the Libweb-Library Servers site at <http://lists.webjunction.org/libweb/>. If the library responds but says it is unable to look for an obituary or make copies for you, then you may need to find a person living in that town to go to the library for you. One way to locate such a person is to write to a local genealogical society and ask if they know someone who can do a bit of research for you. Most genealogical societies have a volunteer who responds to such requests, and there will most likely be a small fee for this service. A good list of American genealogical societies is in Elizabeth Petty Bentley, editor, *The Genealogist's Address Book* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., Inc., 3rd edition, 1998). You may also find your genealogy friend on the Internet. Do a place search for people involved in genealogy in a particular place near where you need help, drop them an E-mail message and promise to do something in exchange for them. A spattering of historic newspaper obituaries are beginning to appear on the Internet. Check www.cyndislist.com under the category

“obituaries” for direct links to web-sites on the Internet specific to actual obituaries transcribed and made available in various sites. Also, use your browser to search for “obituaries” which should provide names of newspapers, dates, etc., and what may be available.

5. Social Security record. If a person died within the last 35 years or so, the death certificate probably includes the deceased’s social security number. With or without a person’s social security number, you can write for a copy of any deceased person’s original application for a social security card, called a form SS-5. Since 1935, virtually every working person in America has applied for a social security account. The Social Security Death Index (SSDI) needs to be consulted to see if the person is listed. Any person who died since 1962 should be listed there. One of the easiest of these look-up services is found <http://ssdi.genealogy.rootsweb.com/> where a search in the SSDI can be made by the surname or optional first name, or defined by a particular place in the U.S. where a person died. With the name and social security number, you can obtain a copy of the deceased’s application for a social security account, which was filled in by the person and gives his/her full name, date and place of birth, place of residence, name of parents, occupation, and name of employer. For deaths before 1962, the RootsWeb SSDI site is still a good place to start, click on any person to get the form letter asking for a SS-5, modify it to fit the the person you want, and add more details.

6. Probate Records. Details pertaining to a deceased person’s estate may be located in a county courthouse. These records may provide important information about the heirs of the deceased. Probate records may include docketed (court calendars), recorded wills, administrator’s records, inventories of estates, sheriff’s sales, and judgments. Microfilmed probate records for nearly every county in the U.S., are located at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. To find them, go to the www.familysearch.org site. Do a “place” search for a state, then click on “Review Related Places” to see a list of the counties for that state. The topics listed include probate records, and a review of what records have been filmed can be located quickly.

7. Private Death Records (Insurance Papers, Medical Records, Doctor’s Office Records). If the deceased had insurance, there is undoubtedly a record of the death within the insurance company’s files. There may be much more information concerning the deceased’s survivors, and the disposition of an estate. Hospital records are almost always closed, but a close family member may be able to get some information; and records at a Doctor’s Office are also usually closed, but again, close family members may be given access.

8. Coroner and Medical Examiner Records exist for any person who died under suspicious conditions, or for whom an autopsy was performed, or in most cases for people who died outside of a hospital. Coroner records are public records kept at the county level in virtually all states. In addition to the circumstances of the death, there may be vital details about the deceased. Locating a Coroner or Medical Examiner for a county is not difficult. Many have their own websites, or are part of a county government website.

9. Military Records for deceased veterans are public records. The National Archives and Records Administration, National Personnel Records Center (Military Records Facility) is located at 9700 Page Ave., St. Louis, MO 63132-5100. Write for a form SF-80 to request copies from any soldier or sailor’s military file. Their online website is at www.archives.gov/st-louis/military-personnel/index.html. Next of kin to a deceased veteran can access data online. Others need to use the for SF-80 to obtain information about the deceased veteran.

10. Church Records. A death record may be recorded within a church’s records, plus information about a burial. Check www.cyndislist.com under the category “Religion and Church” to survey what is available online.

Go get the death records!

A death certificate is not enough, and may not even be correct. If you know a person’s exact date and place of death, there are several more sources relating to a person’s death. If you get these other death records, you will certainly learn more about your ancestors.