

# *Vital Records and Their Substitutes*

By Carolyn H. Brown

## **WHAT ARE VITAL RECORDS?**

Vital records are created and held by the government. They may be held at the city, county or state level. Vital records may provide: the full name of the individual; their date and place of birth; their date and place of marriage and the name of the person they married; and the date and place of death; the name and birth place of their parents.

They include:

- Birth certificate
- Marriage license and certificate
- Death certificate

## **WHEN TO LOOK FOR VITAL RECORDS.**

If the person was born, married or died after 1900, look for vital records. Since many states didn't start to keep vital records until after 1900, they may not be available in your state and time frame of interest. Often finding one record leads to find other records.

If the person died before 1900, start with the federal census. If the person was in the United States before 1900, they may appear in census records. Though there are often errors in census records they may lead you to other places to search. If you are not sure exactly where someone lived, you may need to search the censuses to find the place an event may have occurred.

## **ERRORS IN VITAL RECORDS.**

All forms of vital records may contain errors. Some vital records are much more reliable than others. Birth records have less errors than either marriage licenses, marriage certificates, or death certificates.

## **WHO CREATED THE ERRORS?**

Some errors were made by the court recorder who may have transcribed the information from another form incorrectly. If the name of the person was not written for the recorder to read, the court recorder may have spelled the name differently than the individual did.

Some errors occurred because the person giving the information gave the wrong answer or lied for a personal reason.

## **BIRTH CERTIFICATES**

Birth records were not required by the US federal government until 1912. However, many states or counties kept birth records as far back as the 1850s or earlier. The mother may have given the name of the father as someone other than the biological father.

The original birth certificates for adopted children may be sealed. It may take a court order to gain access to those records. The adopted parents may have had a second birth certificate created for the child showing them as the parents. Family records may provide information to the child's birth name and place.

## **BIRTH INFORMATION FROM COURT RECORDS.**

Children were often listed in a will by the order of birth, however the oldest male may be listed first, even if he was not the oldest child. A list of children by name may be found in a probate record, deed or other court records. These records will not generally give the date of birth. They may list children not found in other records.

### **OTHER SOURCES FOR BIRTH INFORMATION.**

There are other documents which may provide or suggest birth date information. Many times these source won't provide a date of birth, however some records, i.e. 1790 thru 1840 US population censuses may help you establish a birth date range.

*Books:* county histories and lineage

*Censuses:* population – 1790 thru 1940

*Church:* baptism, christening, bulletins, class attendance records

*Family:* Bibles, letters, diaries, loose papers, photographs

*Genealogy societies:* newsletters, quarterlies, applications

*Newspapers:* birth, marriage, death notices

### **MARRIAGES RECORDS**

Marriages often took place in the hometown of the bride. Banns, a bond, or license was often required before the marriage took place. Marriage banns were required by the church to be posted for three consecutive weeks before the wedding. Marriage bonds were later required by the state. A relative of the woman had to sign for her if she was under the age of 18 or 21 depending on the state.

Marriage licenses were issued by the state and given to the couple to be given to the minister or Justice of the Peace. The minister or justice then completed the information the day of the marriage and filed it with the state.

In some states, marriage certificates were sent to the couple after the wedding. Sometimes the minister or justice created a marriage certificate for the couple after the wedding and filed the completed license with the state. There are cases where the minister performed the marriage and failed to record it with the county.

### **MARRIAGE INFORMATION IN COURT RECORDS**

Evidence of a marriage may be found in various court records.

Court orders and civil cases

Deeds

Guardianships

Probates

If the term "my now wife" appears in a document, the man may or may not have had a previous wife. If his wives had the same last name, the man may have married the widow of his brother or cousin.

### **MARRIAGE INFORMATION ONLINE**

Extracted data is often found on the Internet. It may only be a line item in a list. A copy of the original is needed to get all of the information. Look for multiple marriages. Be aware of a man marrying two women with the same first name. In early time the man may have married the sister of his dead wife or the woman may have married the brother of her dead husband.

### **OTHER SOURCES FOR MARRIAGES**

Other documents which may provide, or suggest, a marriage and the possible date of the event.

*Books:* county histories, lineage

*Cemeteries & funeral homes:* records and tombstone inscriptions. Some cemeteries have a copy of the obituary of everyone buried there.

*Censuses:* population – 1850 thru 1940

*Church:* baptism, christening, bulletins, year books

*Court records:* probate, guardianships, court orders, justice court records, deeds

*Family*: Bibles, diaries, letters, loose papers, photographs  
*Genealogy societies*: newsletters, quarterlies, applications  
*Newspapers*: marriage notice or obituary

#### **DEATH CERTIFICATES**

In most states death certificates were not issued until after 1900. Vermont didn't require death certificates until 1955. Death certificates are noted for containing false information. Death records were created when the family was grieving. The information may be wrong because the person providing the information didn't know, didn't remember, or confused the parents of the person who died with the parents of that persons spouse. Information about parents may be an adopted or foster parent. Names of the people may be spelled wrong, and in some cases the woman may be found by her husbands name. In a case I worked on when searching for her death records, Georgia Ann (Hampton) Winn was listed as Mrs. James Winn. Her given name doesn't appear on her death certificate or in the obituary.

#### **OTHER SOURCES FOR DEATH INFORMATION**

There are many other documents which may provide or suggest death date information:

*Books*: county histories, lineages

*Cemeteries & funeral homes*: records and tombstone inscriptions. Some cemeteries have a copy of the obituary of everyone buried there.

*Censuses*: mortality schedules - 1850 thru 1880

*Church*: records, bulletins, year books

*Court records*: probate, guardianships, court orders, justice records, deeds, civil cases

*Family*: Bibles, letters, diaries, loose papers, photographs

*Genealogy societies*: newsletters, quarterlies, applications

*Newspapers*: obituaries

*Tax records*: show when land changed hands

Build a time line for the person you are researching. Note every event you have found with the date and place. Look for information about the people around them.

#### **CONCLUSION**

To prove a date and place for each vital event, you should look for three unique sources for confirmation. Errors were made and people lied. Some of the published information is extracted from one source, when several original sources are need to confirm the information.

Happy hunting,

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Take note of the years statewide vital-record-keeping officially began in each US state—that’s when counties started to collect birth, marriage and death information and report it to state offices. Some counties or towns kept stats earlier, and some were slow to comply with state laws, so check with your ancestors’ local government for record availability.

	BIRTH RECORDS	MARRIAGE RECORDS	DEATH RECORDS		BIRTH RECORDS	MARRIAGE RECORDS	DEATH RECORDS
Alabama	1908	1936	1908	Montana	1907	1943	1907
Alaska	1913	1913	1913	Nebraska	1905	1909	1905
Arizona	1909	1909	1909	Nevada	1911	1968	1911
Arkansas	1914	1917	1914	New Hampshire	1901	1901	1901
California	1905	1905	1905	New Jersey	1848	1848	1848
Colorado	1907	1907	1907	New Mexico	1920	1920	1920
Connecticut	1897	1897	1897	New York	1880	1880	1880
Delaware*	1861	1847	1881	North Carolina	1913	1962	1913
District of Columbia	1874	1811	1874	North Dakota	1907	1925	1907
Florida	1899	1927	1899	Ohio	1908	1949	1908
Georgia	1919	1952	1919	Oklahoma	1908	1908	1908
Hawaii	1842	1842	1859	Oregon	1903	1906	1903
Idaho	1911	1947	1911	Pennsylvania	1906	1885	1906
Illinois	1916	1962	1916	Rhode Island	1853	1853	1853
Indiana	1907	1958	1899	South Carolina	1915	1950	1915
Iowa	1880	1880	1880	South Dakota	1905	1905	1905
Kansas	1911	1913	1911	Tennessee*	1908	1945	1908
Kentucky	1911	1958	1911	Texas	1903	1966	1903
Louisiana*	1914	none	1914	Utah	1905	1887	1905
Maine	1892	1892	1892	Vermont	1955	1955	1955
Maryland	1898	1950	1898	Virginia	1912	1912	1912
Massachusetts	1841	1841	1841	Washington	1907	1968	1907
Michigan	1867	1867	1867	West Virginia	1917	1964	1917
Minnesota	1900	1958	1908	Wisconsin	1907	1907	1907
Mississippi	1912	1926	1912	Wyoming	1909	1941	1909
Missouri	1910	1881	1910				

\*Delaware’s statewide birth and death records stop in 1863 and resume in 1881. All Louisiana birth records are kept in parish clerk offices. Tennessee has no statewide birth or death records for 1913.

Washington, DC’s birth records go back to 1874, death records to 1855 (but none were filed during the Civil War) and marriage records to 1811.