

Vital Records: Clarifying the Confusion

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Vital records, the government registration of births, marriages and deaths are the core documents most family historians seek. It seems simple, just go get a copy of Grandma Barkley's birth certificate, but it's not as easy as that. Every state began keeping such records at different times, and has different access rules. However, there are some key concepts that will make you search both easier, and more successful.

DISCUSSION OUTLINE

What are Vital Records?

In North America: Government created records of birth, marriage, death

Evolution of Vital Records

Marriages first: A social contract

Usually recorded in counties, from beginning (exceptions: NY, PA, SC)

Regulation of births and deaths

Often began with city health departments (social planning: future schools, etc.)

Means to enforce (doctors'/midwives' licenses, burial permits, etc.)

Towns in New England and related places

Inconsistent recording

Staggered and slow starts

Local first, then state laws: Mass 1841, NJ 1848, . . . WV 1917, GA 1919

90% compliance: Births, 1915* -1933 Deaths, 1880 -1933

Start & stop: *KY* (1852-62, 1874-79, 1892-1910, 1911+), *MO* (1883-93, 1909+),

IL (1877-95, 1916+), *NY* (1847-50, 1880+), *PA* (1852-54, 1906+)

Northern states generally sooner than South

By 1900: CT (1897), DE (1881), FL (1899), IA (1880), ME (1892), MD (1898),

MA (1841), MI (1867), NH (1866), NJ (1848), NY (1880), RI (1853), VT (1857),

WA (1891)

Content and Format

Early: minimal information on a ledger style books

Later: more data, on certificates

Delayed birth records (1940s)

Access

Where recorded: local, later state

Indexes

Published

Internet

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IGI Inclusion of Vital Records (selected)

Alabama	Many county marriages to 1891/95
Arkansas	Many county marriages to 1895
Connecticut	Most early town births and marriages to 1850s
Florida	Many county marriages to 1885
Georgia	Many county marriages to 1895+
Illinois	Many town births, 1878-1885, some county marriages to 1885+
Kentucky	Most county marriages to 1878
Maine	Many town births to 1875, marriages to 1885
Massachusetts	Most town births and marriages to 1850
Michigan	Most town and county births and marriages, 1867-abt. 1885
Minnesota	Many township births, 1863-1892
Mississippi	Most county marriages to abt. 1895
Missouri	Most county marriages to 1885
New Hampshire	Statewide births to 1877, marriages to 1900
New Jersey	Statewide births and most marriages, 1848-1867
North Carolina	County marriages to 1868
Ohio	Most county marriages to about 1885
Rhode Island	Most town births to 1850 and marriages to 1885
Tennessee	Many county marriages to 1885/95
Texas	Some county marriages to 1895
Vermont	Many early town birth records
West Virginia	Many town births, 1853-1872+

Statewide Death Indexes (June 2007)

This table identifies researcher accessible indexes to deaths on a statewide basis. Generally, these are available on the Internet or on microfilm or fiche (usually from the Family History Library). It does not attempt to identify indexes maintained solely at state vital records offices.

State	Records Begin*	Index Years	Index Access (online, FHL, etc.)	Entries (million)
Alabama	1908	1908-1959 1908-1974	\$<ancestry.com> FHL 1909110+	1.4
Arizona	1909	[1870-1949] 1878-1956#	FHL 2114396+ [death cert. Chron. By county] < http://genealogy.az.gov >	0.4
Arkansas	1914	1914-1948 1914-1950	Desmond Walls Allen book, FHL 976.7 V22ad \$<ancestry.com>	0.6
California	1905	1905-1988 1940-1997	FHL 1686044+ and 6334514+ elsewhere < rootsweb.com > or \$<ancestry.com>	8.2
Connecticut	1897	Pre 1870 1949-2001	\$<ancestry.com> \$<ancestry.com>	0.056 1.4
Delaware	1913	[1697-1926] [1680-1925]	FHL 006416+ card index to m, b, d < state.de.us/sos/dpa/collections > probate index	
Dist Col.	1874	1855-1965	FHL 1994618+	
Florida	1899	1877-1998 1877-1969	\$<ancestry.com> FHL 081769+	5.2
Georgia	1919	1919-1998 1919-1993	\$<ancestry.com> FHL 6334629+	3.2
Hawaii	1859	1896-1949	FHL 1026581 and 1832091+	
Idaho	1911	1911-1932 1911-1951	FHL 1543485+ \$<ancestry.com> < rootsweb.com >& CD-ROM	0.18
Illinois	1916	1916-1950 1916-1938	< www.cyberdriveillinois.com/ > FHL 6016862+	
-- Chicago	1871	1871-1916	Chicago, FHL microfiche 6016533	
Indiana	1899	1800-1941 1882-1920	(67 counties) CD-ROM Heritage Quest 62/92 counties at \$<ancestry.com>	0.9 0.8
Kentucky	1911	1852-1914 1911-1992 1911-2000 1911-1995	FHL 1533971 < http://ukcc.uky.edu/~vitalred/ > < rootsweb.com >; \$<ancestry.com> FHL 6118879	3.3
Louisiana	1914	1900-1949	\$<ancestry.com>	0.6
--New Orleans		1804-1949	< rootsweb.com > \$<ancestry.com>	0.7
Maine	1892	Early – 1922 1960-97	FHL 009743, 009884, 010068 < http://thor.dafs.state.me.us/pls/archives > \$<ancestry.com> < rootsweb.com >	0.4
Maryland		1898-1944	< http://mdvitalrec.net > [images of cards]	
Massachusetts	1841	1841-1971 1970-2003 1841-1910	FHL film 961262+ \$<ancestry.com> < http://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/arcidx.htm >	2.4
Michigan	1905	1867-1897 1867-1874 1971-1996	< www.michigan.gov/mdch. > FHL book 974.4 V22d (3 vols.) \$<ancestry.com>	0.2+ 2.1
Minnesota	1908	1904-2001# 1908-2002	< people.mnhs.org > \$<ancestry.com>	c. 2.5 5.9

Mississippi	1912	1912-1943	fiche at Miss. Dept. of Archives & History	
Missouri	1910	Pre 1910 1910-1956#	< www.sos.mo.us/archives/ >	c. 0.2
Montana	1907	1907-2002	\$< ancestry.com >	0.6
New Hampshire	1883	Pre 1901 1901-1937	FHL 1001058 FHL 2070820 (certificates)	
New Jersey	1848	1848-1878 1848-1900 ?? to 1900	FHL 403697+ FHL 493686 FHL 820014	
New Mexico	1920	1889-1940 1898-1949	FHL 1991645-56 New Mexico GenWeb site	
-- New York City	1866	1866-1965 1891-1948 1892-1902	FHL 1324808+ and 1324912+ < italiengen.org/NYCDeathSearch.stm > \$< ancestry.com >	0.5
North Carolina	1913	1904-1967 1968-1994 1908-1996	FHL 190918 FHL 6118477 \$< ancestry.com >	1.39? 3.6
North Dakota	1899	1881-2005	< https://secure.apps.state.nd.us/doh/certificates/deathCertSearch.htm >	
Ohio	1908	1908-1944 1913-1937 1908-2002	FHL 2023798; \$< ancestry.com > < www.ohiohistory.org/dindex > \$< ancestry.com > gaps 1933-37 & 1945-58	3.7 7.1
Oregon	1903	1903-1998 1903-2000	\$< ancestry.com >; < www.vitalsearch-ca.com > FHL 1373869+	2.2
Rhode Island	1853	1630-1930 1853-1920	\$< ancestry.com > (incomplete?) FHL 1822096+ and 1906584+	0.26
South Carolina	1915	1915-1944 1915-1954 1915-1952	FHL 6334926-28 < www.state.sc.us/scdah/vit.htm > \$< ancestry.com > in two parts	0.8
South Dakota	1905	1905-1955	\$< ancestry.com >	0.32
Tennessee	1908	1908-1919 1914-1973	< http://state.tn.us/tsla/history/vital/tndeath.htm > FHL 1299605, 2282061	0.1
Texas	1903	1903-1945 1903-1973 1903-2000	FHL 1380775 Texas State Library & Archives \$< ancestry.com > some at:< rootsweb.com >	7.3
Utah	1905	1898-1905 1905-1951 1904-1954#	2 volumes by Utah Genealogical Association \$< ancestry.com > < http://state.tn.us/tsla/history/vital/tndeath.htm >	0.24
Vermont	1955	1760-1908 1981-2001	FHL 027555+ and 540051+ \$< ancestry.com >	0.1
Virginia	1912	1853-1896	In process at < http://eagle.vsla.edu/drip >	0.05+
Washington	1907	1907-1979 1940-1996	FHL 1308455 \$< ancestry.com >	1.3
West Virginia	1917	1917-1991 1853-1954#	FHL 1984577 < www.wvculture.org/vrr/va_dcsearch.aspx >	
Wisconsin	1907	1820-1907 1959-1984	\$< ancestry.com > also FHL 6331472 FHL 6334350-51	0.4

* Statewide registration of deaths. In many states, some counties or towns kept death records in earlier years.
Death certificates also online.