Guide to Searching for Death Records

Search Tip

When you're doing a "global search" of all the collections on Ancestry.com, think about the details you expect to find in the records you're seeking. Since most of the records your ancestor left were probably created while he or she was living, we recommend leaving off a death date to find census, birth, marriage, etc. But when you're searching for death records, including a death date will help you to zero in on the closest matches in death-related collections (as well as online trees, which also often include a death date). Even if you don't have an exact date, an educated guess can be a huge help. Use the advanced search to specify +/- 1, 2, 5, or 10 years on either side of your estimate.

When and Where Did He Die?

Create a timeline for your ancestor to see if you can narrow down the date and place of death.

- 1898 Norwalk, Connecticut, City Directory
  Rommelmann Christian, cigarmaker, h Bull Run, N

- 1899 Norwalk, Connecticut, City Directory
  Rommelmann, Christian, cigarmaker, h 45 Reynolds, E N

- 1900 Census, Connecticut, Fairfield Co., Norwalk, District 83, sheet 28b [image 56 of 58], lines 89-92. (taken 28 June 1900)
  Street address: 563 Shore Road
  Rammelmanan, Mary, Head, white, female, b. Dec. 1867, age 32, widowed, 4 children/ 3 living, b. Bohemia, father bp. Bohemia, mother bp. Bohemia, immigrated in 1884, occupation cigarmaker, unemployed 3 months census year, reads, writes and speaks English, rents, house.

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- 1901 Norwalk, Connecticut, City Directory
  Rommelmann, Mary, widow Christian, h. 2 First av. E N [East Norwalk]

- 1902 Norwalk, Connecticut, City Directory
  Rommelmann, Mary, widow Christian, rem. to Jersey City, NJ

Where Are They Buried?

Timelines can help pin down where and when your ancestor died, but you'll want to get a bit more specific and determine where he or she was buried to obtain cemetery records. Your ancestor's death record is a good place to start your search. Many death records provide the name of the cemetery in which the deceased was to be buried. Obituaries are another obvious source of burial information.

Find A Grave is an excellent resource for locating the resting place for more than 100 million souls. If you're not finding your ancestor's burial location online, you may need to take your search offline. Start your search close to where your ancestor lived and check the cemeteries nearby. Some religious sects maintain their own burial grounds.

That said, keep in mind that your ancestor might not be buried as near to home as you'd think. As cities grew, sometimes the dead were moved to make more room for the living.

As the cemeteries in larger cities were pushed to the outskirts and beyond city boundaries, there was also an increased need for transportation to the cemeteries. Often spur lines were created off railroads in the city and special funeral cars would transport the deceased and mourners to the cemetery.

In some cases, an ancestor may have been transported to an entirely different city or state for burial, perhaps with other family members. Since the transport of bodies was regulated because of the fear of infectious diseases, you may be able to locate body transit records or burial permits. Sometimes you'll find these records within broader collections of state death records. The collection of South Carolina, Death Records, 1821-1955, on Ancestry.com is a good example of this. Check on the city and county municipalities as well to see what records are available.

Other Resources

If you can get your hands on a good local map for the vicinity in which you are searching, you may find the cemeteries outlined on the map.

The U.S. Geological Survey's Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) is a very useful tool for locating cemeteries and other features near where your ancestor lived. Click on "Search Domestic Names," and by entering the county name and state and selecting "cemetery" from the "Feature Class" drop-down menu, you can see a list of cemeteries for a particular county. From the list of results, you can click on each cemetery name for more information and to map the location using MapQuest or other mapping tools.

You may find your ancestor's cemetery has an online index. Ancestry.com has more than two hundred cemetery databases among its collections, and some cemeteries are even posting their own indexes online. Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, New York, is a good example of this.

Genealogical societies are great when it comes to recording cemetery information. Check with societies in the areas in which your ancestor lived to see what publications and database collections are available beyond Ancestry.com.

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Death Record Alternatives

In many places, civil death registration didn't begin until the twentieth century. So what do you do when there is no death certificate? Here are some alternatives:

1) Mortality Schedules. Between 1850 and 1880, federal censuses recorded names of people who had died during the 12 months prior to the census on separate mortality schedules. Ancestry.com has these valuable records for many states and years.

2) Coroner's Records. Coroner's records can often be found in county or state archives. To locate them type "coroner's records" or "medical examiner's records" + the state and county of interest into your favorite search engine. Examples of some Salt Lake County coroner's inquest files can be found on Ancestry.com.

3) City Directories. If your ancestor lived in a city, directories can sometimes help you determine a year of death. When a name that has been listed for several consecutive years suddenly disappears, that person may have passed away. When a man died, his wife might be listed in subsequent years as "widow" or "widow of…" Ancestry.com has city directories for hundreds of cities and years.

4) Heirlooms. You can often find death dates in or on items found at home. Look for diaries, journals, letters, photographs, jewelry, embroidered items, etc. Many of the millions of family trees at Ancestry.com include photographs of heirlooms like these.

5) Court Records. In the United States, court records began very early, and in other countries, earlier still. Court records can include probate documents that name the decedent, date of death, and heirs. When a child's parent(s) dies, chances are good that guardianship records at the county court will provide death information. Check *Red Book: American State, County & Town Sources* on the Ancestry.com wiki for information on court records.

6) Cemetery Records. Don't overlook details that can be found on a tombstone or in the records of a cemetery sexton. Millions of cemetery records have been transcribed and indexed by genealogical societies. As mentioned above, Find A Grave is a great source for finding cemeteries as well as photographs of millions of graves.

7) Body Transit Records. Health concerns led many cities to mandate record keeping for bodies transported through or into the city for burial. These records can sometimes be found at the local, county, or state level.

8) Passenger Lists. Particularly in the age of sail and before there were means to preserve a body, passengers (and crew) who died on board ships were usually buried at sea. Look for notations next to names on the manifest. Also check the end of the manifest, where the captain sometimes noted births and deaths on board.

9) Apprenticeship and Indentured Servant Papers. In the early years of the U.S. and in many European countries, children were often indentured or became apprentices. Ancestry.com has a sampling of these records for London, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Virginia. In some cases, children were apprenticed or indentured because they had lost one or both parents, a fact the records may mention.

10) Almshouse Records. Many counties required institutions that looked after the poor to keep records, and many of those records include death information for residents who passed away at the institution.

11) Hospital Records. Admittedly, most contemporary hospital records are closed to the public. Still, some collections have ended up in archives and other repositories that you might be able to find by typing the place where your ancestor lived and the phrase "hospital records" into a search engine. You may turn up something like the Kansas State Historical Society's database of burials in the cemetery on the grounds of the Topeka State Hospital.

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12) Insurance Records. Insurance records are typically found only at home, so ask around to see if a relative has kept them for members of your family.

13) Military Records. Military records, including many found at Ancestry.com, can contain death information. These include casualty lists and prisoner of war records, among others.

14) Genealogical and Historical Society Records. St. Louis City Death Records, 1850-1902, is an example of an extraordinary database at Ancestry.com that was compiled by the St. Louis Genealogical Society. They're one of hundreds of genealogical organizations whose members spend untold hours preserving their city or county's history. Genealogical and historical organizations are good sources for learning about cemeteries in an area and may even have created indexes listing the people buried in them.

15) Funeral Home Records. Funeral home records vary in format and content, but they can all be valuable for determining someone's death date. Some of these records are making their way online. Ancestry.com is home to the Pennsylvania, Oliver H. Bair Funeral Records Indexes, 1920-1980, and the California, San Francisco Area Funeral Home Records, 1895-1985. Check genealogical and historical societies; state, county, and local libraries; and municipal archives for possible holdings.

16) Necrologies. Many ethnic, fraternal, and religious organizations annually printed names and death dates and sometimes full-length obituaries for their members.

17) Newspapers and Obituary Collections. The New York, Death Newspaper Extracts, 1801-1890 (Barber Collection), can be invaluable for finding information about New Yorkers and people who died there. There are plenty of similar obituary and newspaper collections, including Historical Newspapers, Birth, Marriage, & Death Announcements, 1851-2003.

18) Pension Records. Pension records often include death dates, particularly when a widow is applying for the pension. Ancestry.com has military pension records from the American Revolutionary War and an index to Civil War pensions among its collections. The Federation of Genealogical Societies is heading up a project to digitize and make millions of pensions from the War of 1812 available online. In addition, the National Archives and Records Administration holds millions of pension records that have not yet been digitized.

19) Periodical Source Index (PERSI). PERSI is the largest and most widely used subject index covering genealogy and local history periodicals written in English and French (Canada). The collection dates from approximately 1800. Staff at the Allen County Public Library have been compiling PERSI for more than a decade, and it currently includes over 1.7 million searchable records and nearly 6,000 different periodicals. You can find PERSI at Ancestry.com.

20) Bible Records. Traditionally, pages in family Bibles include spaces for recording death dates and other landmark events. Check with family members to learn whether a family Bible has passed down any of the family lines.

21) Religious Records. Religious records often predate civil registration and often document deaths and burials.

22) Funeral or Memorial Cards. Funeral and memorial cards have been printed since the 1800s and were often distributed to family and friends. Check with relatives to see if any have been passed down in scrapbooks or among family heirlooms.

23) U.S. Homes for National Veterans. Following the Civil War, a network of homes was set up for disabled veterans. If the veteran died in the home, records noted death and burial information and sometimes included an accounting of personal effects and to whom money was disbursed. Records from these homes from 1866 through 1938 are available online at Ancestry.com.

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24) 1890 Veterans Schedule. Though the 1890 Census perished in a fire in January 1921 in the basement of the Commerce Building in Washington, D.C., fortunately nearly 75,000 special schedules with the names of Union veterans and widows survived. In cases where the widow is listed, you may find the place and date of death for the soldier. You can search these records here on Ancestry.com.

25) Adoption Records. While most adoption records are closed by law, you can sometimes find information from adoption records by coupling the word "adoption" with the name of the place where your ancestor lived. Some genealogical societies indexed old adoption records before they were sealed from public access.