

Up In Smoke! What to Do When the Courthouse Burns



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Locating vital records in any state prior to state-wide registration laws is usually a difficult task. There were many differences in custom and practice even within the same state. Some places kept records very early; others kept no records at all until required to do so by state statute. Val Greenwood The Researcher's Guide to American Genealogy

Searching for birth, marriage and death records before 1900 will take you beyond official state records and into other kinds of records at the local level. In terms of marriages, local civil governments have been in charge of recording marriage information in marriage registers since the beginnings of the county or town. Some marriage records began in the early 1600's in New England and the early 1700's in the South.

Unfortunately, most state vital records weren't mandated until the early 20th century. So what should you do when a certain official vital record cannot be found? Search for the next best thing, a substitute. Something that while not official perhaps, is likely a trustworthy source of information.

If you learn that a courthouse burned in a certain year, that may be completely accurate. But, you might want to consider the following:

- a. Which records were burned?
- b. Which records were saved, and where are they stored?
- c. When asking about these records, be sure to mention the years you are looking for. They may have been reconstructed.
- d. Courthouse space is usually at a premium. Records may be scattered throughout many offices and locations. Many will be within walking distance.
- e. Visit the section handling the recording and registration of deeds. Many of these have survived, and if not, were among the first to be reconstructed. Land ownership was precious to our ancestors.

This chart represents when statewide registration began, which doesn't always represent the earliest dates of when Vital Records were available. It also doesn't represent when states began compliance with the mandate.

STATE	Birth	Marriage	Death	STATE	Birth	Marriage	Death
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	1868	1913
D.C.	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	Puerto Rico	1885	1885	1885
Indiana	1907	1958	1899	Rhode Island	1853	1853	1853
Iowa	1880	1880	1880	South Carolina	1915	1950	1915
Kansas	1911	1913	1911	South Dakota	1905	1905	1905
Kentucky	1911	1958	1911	Tennessee	1908	1945	1908
Louisiana	1911	None	1911	Texas	1903	1966	1903
Maine	1892	1892	1892	Utah	1905	1887	1905
Maryland	1898	1950	1898	Vermont	1955	1955	1955
Massachusetts	1841	1841	1841	Virginia	1912	1912	1912
Michigan	1867	1867	1867	Washington	1907	1968	1907
Minnesota	1900	1958	1908	West Virginia	1917	1964	1917
Mississippi	1912	1926	1912	Wisconsin	1907	1907	1907
Missouri	1910	1881	1910	Wyoming	1909	1941	1909

[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/United States Vital Records](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Vital_Records)

<p>The US Federal Census</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every one your family appeared in. • Can lead to other records. <p>Mortality Schedules</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The year before 1850-1880 census. <p>Local Church or Religious Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often began before civil registration. <p>Christening and Baptismal Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be the only record of a child's birth. • These events may take place through adulthood. <p>Cemetery Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check local funeral homes to find the owners of local cemeteries. • Towns, cities, churches, and privately owned. <p>Tax Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the most underused records. • Shows location and financial status. • Check every year. • May see when they reached taxable age, moved, or died. <p>Newspapers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many are online, many more are not. • Small-town newspapers are especially "newsy". <p>Town Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Common in New England. <p>Journals, Letters, and Diaries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for entries near monumental events, i.e. birthdays, New Year's Day, beginning of war. • May be housed in manuscript collections or vertical files – Libraries and Archives. 	<p>Obituaries and Funeral Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissect every bit of information found. • Keep a blank family group record nearby. <p>City and Rural Directories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at each one your ancestor may have appeared in. • May help to determine death. • Earliest date to 1700's – Boston. <p>Military Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pension records are rich! • Obtain the entire file. <p>Draft Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Began during the Civil War. <p>Land Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow the money! • Look at all neighbors. • In conjunction with probate packets, look at estate inventory and sale. • May include names of slaves. <p>Maps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin a collection of maps for your research areas. <p>Naturalization Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at 1900-1940 for abbreviations. <p>Probate Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not just wills – the whole packet. <p>County Histories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commonly called "Mug Books". • Don't rely wholly on the information, but use as a springboard to other records. <p>School Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many include birth date of students. • Most include names of parents.
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