

Using Vital Records for Genealogy Research

Vital records are official record of life events, such as birth, marriage, divorce and death records. They are typically created by a government agency. For genealogy, these records form the foundation for your research. Vital records can be both a primary and a secondary source. For example, a death record is a primary source for death information as well as a secondary source for birth information. To begin using vital records for genealogy research, you may want to watch our [Using Vital Records](#) class.

When can I find vital records for genealogy?

Some American colonies began keeping records in the early 17th century. By the mid-1800s, birth and death records began to be kept mainly on a local level. Not all of them have survived.

Some states didn't record birth and deaths until the early 1900s. Ohio began recording birth and death records at the state level in 1908. Before then, any records that still exist would be at the county level. Marriage records in Ohio typically began at the formation of the county. (Note that early Ohio counties may have different boundaries than today).

The [FamilySearch Wiki](#) is a great resource for determining what records are available. The beginning dates for major records in a county are listed, including those for [Franklin County](#).

Birth Records

Birth records are the least likely to be recorded online. You may need to search for them on microfilm at the library or at the local courthouse. In Ohio, many counties started keeping records in the late 1860s, but some have records back to the 1840s. Statewide records start in 1908. Information found on birth records may include:

- Place of birth
- Date of birth
- Name
- Name of parents
- Race
- Sex

There are few types of birth records that are common:

- Birth certificate. Today's birth certificates contain detailed information about the child and parents.
- Delayed birth certificate. These were given later in life for people who needed a birth certificate to apply for government benefits or join the military. In Ohio, common for people born before the state started issuing birth certificates in 1908 but who were alive in the twentieth century.
- Birth register. These are the earliest records and tend to have minimal information. Sometimes only the parents' names are recorded.

Marriage Records

Marriage records are some of the oldest records in the United States. Even so, records were not always kept, especially on the frontier and occasionally were destroyed by fire or other natural disasters. Each state or colony enacted laws governing marriage. It is helpful to know the laws of the state in which you are researching, especially since laws change over time to include:

- Who could get married

- How old the couple could be to get married
- How closely the couple was related

There are many variations in how a marriage was recorded. Information on a marriage record generally includes:

- Name of groom
- Name of bride (maiden name)
- Date of marriage
- Place of marriage
- Officiant (who married them)
- Possibly more information such as:
 - Place of birth and where they are living presently
 - Previous marriages (How many and sometimes their previous spouse's name)
 - For marriage bonds, the name of groom and bride and a third person supplying the money
 - Occupation
 - Age
 - Parents

Types of marriage records also vary and include:

- Banns, the public announcement of an impending marriage, usually recorded in church or town council records.
- Bonds, or a guarantee paid by the groom and recorded in the courthouse for an impending marriage.
- Consent affidavits, signed by the parents of an underage bride or groom and giving permission for the marriage.
- Contracts, or agreements made before marriage, often if the woman owned property.
- Declarations of intent
- Marriage licenses, issued by a government entity and declaring that the marriage meets all legal requirements.
- Marriage returns, or minister's returns, were created by the person officiating the marriage in order to turn over the information to the clerk who was issuing the marriage license.
- Marriage certificates were created to confirm the marriage happened. These are often given to the bride and groom and not part of a government record or archive.
- Marriage registers were often created by local clerks and sometimes include information from the marriage certificate.

Did they elope?

If you can't find a marriage record in the county the couple were living in, check surrounding counties or the counties their relations were living in. Check for "Gretna Greens" or areas where people could show up and get married without a waiting period, in the area around where they lived. Family Search has a [list of popular Gretna Greens](#).

Divorce Records

The first divorce case in the United States was in 1639 in Massachusetts. Earliest divorces may have been granted by the State Legislature and will be recorded in those proceedings. Some states in the 19th and early 20th century were known as divorce mills and couples may have gone to a different state to get divorced. Clues that there may be a divorce include:

- Newspaper notices
- Probate records
- Guardianship records
- Census (May say "D" for divorce)

Death records

In Ohio, some county records date to 1840 but state records start in 1908. Information on a death record typically includes:

- Name
- Place of death
- Place of residence
- Date of death
- Cause of death
- Names of parents
- Occupation
- Age at death
- Race
- Marital status

Record Substitutes

If a record cannot be found or has been destroyed, you may still be able to find death information. Record substitutes include:

- Birth
 - Census records (the 1900 census lists month and year of birth)
 - Military records (Draft records and pension records typically record a birth date)
 - Marriage records
 - Death records
 - Church records
 - Cemetery records
 - Bible records
 - Newspapers
 - Social Security records
- Marriage
 - Newspapers (Wedding and anniversary announcements and obituaries)
 - Census records
 - Birth of first child
 - Pension applications
 - Naturalization records
 - Family documents
- Death
 - Newspapers (Obituaries or estate notices)
 - Social Security applications
 - Cemetery records
 - Probate records
 - City directories
 - Church records
 - Mortality schedules
 - Family Bibles
 - Military records
 - Funeral programs
 - Funeral homes

Where to Find Vital Records

Online databases have revolutionized genealogy research. Many databases of vital records [can be accessed for free](#) with your library card, including Ancestry and Family Search. Other online sources include:

- [Online searchable death indexes](#)
- [Birth records and indexes on the Internet](#)
- [Online birth and marriage record indexes for the USA](#)
- [Reclaim the Records](#)

Only a fraction of vital records have been digitized. Local and state government agencies (including health departments and county court), archives, libraries, health departments and historical/genealogical societies are all sources for finding vital records.

Questions? Contact us at history@columbuslibrary.org or book a [Reserve an Expert](#) for a virtual meeting with a librarian.