

Vital Records A Beginner's Guide

Vital records are government-issued documents that provide proof of life events including birth, death, marriage, and divorce.

Birth Records

Birth Certificates

A birth certificate is an official state record of a birth. States were first required to begin recording births at different times (usually in the late 1800s or early 1900s). Birth certificate information may include:

- Name of child
- Date of birth
- Place of birth
- Gender and race of child
- Parents' names, ages, and places of birth
 - Mother's maiden name
 - If parents were unmarried, father may be listed as "unknown"
 - If the child was adopted, adoptive parents' names may replace birth parents on a re-issued certificate

While information on a birth certificate should be correct, keep in mind they can contain misstated information or recording inaccuracies.

Census records, church records, cemetery and funeral home records, newspaper announcements, bible records, death records, and Social Security applications (beginning in 1936) may also contain birth information.

Where can I find birth certificates?

Twentieth and twenty-first century:

- Held at the state level
- Usually available for a fee from the state's department of health
- Rarely available in online databases; access may be restricted

Pre-twentieth century:

- Held at the county level
- May be available in online databases (as a copy of the certificate, a list of births, a transcription, or an indexed entry)

Known Beginning Dates for Major County Records

Birth*	Marriage	Death*	Court	Land	Probate	Census
1883	1845	1883	1845	1845	1845	1830

Statewide registration started in 1910 for births and deaths. General compliance for births by 1927 and deaths by 1911.

Tip: Use the [FamilySearch Wiki](#)¹ to determine when a county began keeping records.

County records for [Nodaway County, Missouri](#)² (from the FamilySearch Wiki)

Death Records

Death records, usually in the form of a certificate, will generally include:

- Name of deceased
- Date of death
- Cause of death
- Age at time of death
- Place of birth

A death record may also include:

- Deceased's occupation
- Name of spouse and/or widowed
- Names of parents (including mother's maiden name) and their places of birth
- Intended place of burial, funeral home
- Name of informant

Obituaries, cemetery tombstones, pension records, church records, census mortality schedules, and the Social Security Death Index (beginning in 1962) may also contain decedent information.

Tip: Details on a death record are provided by an informant, usually a family member. Information may not always be correct if the informant provided inaccurate details or mistakes occurred during recording.

Marriage Records

Marriage records serve as proof that a marriage occurred and may be in the form of certificates, bonds, applications, and returns.

Details in these records may include:

- Names of the couple
 - A female's surname was usually, but not always, her maiden name
- Date of marriage
- Ages at time of marriage
- Occupations
- Name of church and presiding official
- Witnesses/Bondsmen (often family members!)
- Parents' names (if under the age of 21, law may have required a parent's signature)
- Place of residence
- Couple's (and/or parents') place of birth
- Number of times married

Where can I find marriage records?

- Usually held by the county clerk and recorder or town where the couple lived, unless they eloped
- May also be held by the state (department of health or state archives)
- May be found in online databases, but otherwise contact the county courthouse

Where can I find death records?

Twentieth and twenty-first century:

- Held at the state level
- Electronic record may include fewer details (try to request a copy of the original)
- May be available online or at county health departments ([use this death index guide³](#)); access may be restricted

Pre-twentieth century:

- Held at the county level or in state archives
- County death record books may include less information than a formal certificate
- May be available in online databases (as a copy of the record, a transcription, or an indexed entry)
- There may be no record (recording may not have been required at the individual's time of death)

Divorce Records

Divorce was less rare than you might think. While it may be uncomfortable to uncover these details, divorce records are a real part of our family histories and can provide information that may have otherwise remained a mystery.

Details in these records may include:

- Names of the divorcing couple
- Date of divorce (and marriage)
- Place of divorce (and marriage)
- Ages of the divorcing couple
- Names of underage children
- Reason for divorce

Tip: When no-fault divorces were less common one party had to be "at fault." To ensure the divorce would be granted, the "cause," including personality flaws, behaviors, etc., may have been exaggerated.

Where can I find divorce records?

- County courthouses; older records may be held in state archives
- Occasionally available in online databases
- Pre-twentieth century divorces may be recorded as private acts of state legislature, held with state-level legislative documents