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

**Birth Records**

**Birth Certificates**
Birth Certificates, while not the only records recording a birth date, are the official proof that a birth occurred. In addition to a date of birth, information listed on a birth certificate may include:

- Time of birth
- Place of birth
- Weight and length of child
- Parents’ name, age, and place of birth
  - If parents were unmarried, father may be listed as “unknown”
  - Potentially including maiden name
- Adoptive parents’ name, replacing birth parents, if the child was adopted

While information on a birth certificate should be correct, keep in mind that parents could have lied about their ages, names, etc.

Census records, Social Security applications, church records, cemetery records, newspaper announcements, bible records, and death records may also contain information about date of birth.

| Known Beginning Dates for Major County Records[^4] |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 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.


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**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

**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)

**Tip:** Use the [FamilySearch Wiki](http://www.familysearch.org) to determine when a county began keeping records.

County records for [Nodaway County, Missouri](http://www.familysearch.org) (from the FamilySearch Wiki)
Death Records

Death records, usually in the form of a certificate, will generally include:
- Name of deceased
- Cause of death
- Date of death
- Age at time of death

A death record may also include:
- Place of birth
- Occupation
- Name of spouse
- Name of parents (including mother’s maiden name) and their places of birth
- Deceased’s occupation
- Place of burial

Obituaries, census mortality schedules, tombstones, pension records, church records, and the Social Security Death Index (dating back to 1962) may also contain information about an ancestor’s death.

**Tip:** Details on a death record are provided by an informant, usually a family member. Information may not always be correct if the informant was unsure of details, lying, or grieving.

Marriage Records

Marriage records serve as proof that a marriage occurred and may include certificates, bonds, applications, and returns.

Details in these records may include:
- Names of the couple
- Ages of the couple
- Occupations
- Name of church and presiding official
- Witnesses (often family members!)
- Parents’ names (if under the age of 21, law may have required a parent’s signature)
- Place of residence
- Place of birth of couple and/or couple’s parents
- Number of times married

**Tip:** Marriage records are one of the best places to find a female ancestor’s maiden name.

Divorce Records

Divorce occurred in almost all families and are 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 stories and information that may have otherwise remained a mystery.

Details in these records may include:
- Names of the divorcing couple
- Ages of the divorcing couple
- Names of underage children
- Cause for divorce
- Marriage date

**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 marriage records?
- Usually held by the county or town where the couple lived, unless they eloped
- Rarely held by the state
- May be found in online databases, but otherwise contact the county courthouse

Where can I find divorce records?
- Usually held in county courthouses
- Few are available in online databases
- Pre-twentieth century divorces may be recorded as private acts of state legislature, held with state-level legislative documents

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 guide](#))

**Pre-twentieth century:**
- Held at the county level
- 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 – law did not require reporting a death