



Finding An Ancestor's Date of Death

Lisa Lisson from Are You My Cousin?

One of the most frequently heard genealogy frustrations I hear is: **“I can't find my ancestor's death date!”** Let's fix this!

The Death Certificate

Death certificates are typically kept by the register of deeds of **the county where a person died**. If you are not sure where your ancestor died, you will need to check surrounding counties. If you only know the state where your ancestor died, go to the state's vital records page for directions on ordering a search for the death certificate. Provide as much information on your ancestor as you know. Include name spelling variations, too.

Each state's process for obtaining a death certificate (or any vital record) varies. You will need to determine the rules for the state you are researching in. For genealogical purposes, an uncertified copy is fine.

An Important Point to Consider

Typically the death date is correct and is provided by a physician who attended the death or had intimate knowledge of the circumstances surrounding an individual's death. So, obviously, this is a great source for an ancestor's death date.

Death certificates are considered secondary sources for the family information. In other words, the information provided on the death certificate about parents and even the date of birth came from someone else who was reporting facts. This person may or may not have had first hand knowledge about the deceased's early life. Keep in mind, errors can (and do) occur.

The Family Bible

Ok, I know....you are thinking "We don't have a family Bible." I said the same thing when I started, only it wasn't true. I discovered a copy of the family Bible in a relative's possession. Where you may not have looked:

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- Close and distant/collateral family
 - Facebook Groups
 - Online digital collections at archives and universities
 - [ArchiveGrid](#) - Don't miss this one!

The Obituary

Obituaries have been around for a long time and were intended to notify a community of a person's death. Early obituaries were short even for prominent citizens.

Obituaries evolved over time becoming longer and inclusive of the more common man. Part of this was due to progressive printing techniques making getting the newspaper out easier. During the Civil War, obituaries became more common and included more details on a soldier's life and death.

Include in your search for obituaries:

- Local and regional newspapers - many small and local newspapers will be offline - See you county librarian.
- The "big" genealogy databases: [Ancestry.com](#), [FindMyPast](#), [MyHeritage](#), [FamilySearch](#)
- [GenealogyBank](#), [Newspapers.com](#)
- Religious periodicals found at [Allen County Public Library \(ACPL\)](#) and in university special collections. [George Batten's Directory of the Religious Press of the United States](#) (Free at Google Books) is an excellent resource!
- Institutions affiliated with a particular religion or denominations. This could be archives, libraries, or historical societies.

Wills & Estate Records

Wills are some of the best records to start your genealogy research. Often you will not find the exact date of your ancestor's death from the will. On the date the will was written, you can assume your ancestor was alive. After all, he/she wrote the will or at least dictated it.

If the will is all you have, you can only say with confidence your ancestor died **after the date the will was written and when the probate began.**



Where Do You Find Your Ancestor's Wills & Estate Records

- **State Archives** - Researching from a distance? Be sure to check the archives digital collection. More and more are coming online!
- **County Courthouses** - Call before making a special trip. Sometimes county courthouses send older records to the state archives, but retain a microfilm copy.
- Check the legal section of the local newspapers if original records did not survive.
- **Online Databases** - [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com), [FindMyPast](https://www.findmypast.com), [MyHeritage](https://www.myheritage.com), and [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) Online databases are frequently being updated so check back often.

Think Outside of the Box!

Now that we have searched the more obvious records for our ancestor's death date, let's look at the "not so obvious" records that could potentially hold your ancestor's death date. Again, you may not find a specific date, but learn clues to infer a death month and/or year.

Mortality Schedules

Are you familiar with the US Census Mortality Schedules? I overlooked these records for a long time! From 1850-1880 these census schedules recorded those individuals who died in the preceding 12 months. Colorado, Florida, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, and South Dakota created mortality schedules for 1885.

Pension Records

Pension records are another place to find your ancestor's death date. In particular a widow's pension application can be a place to find a husband's date of death. A widow applying for a pension typically had to prove her husband had died and that he was indeed a veteran of that particular war.

Obviously a soldier's pension record and/or that of the widow's pension application provides a lot of important genealogical information on your ancestor. For our purposes today, we are just focusing on death dates.

Pension records can be quite lengthy. Set aside time to read the entire record until you mine all the information you need.



Religious Records

Religious records can hold your ancestor's death date.....but not always. Each religious faith and culture has its own unique records and vary by what records they keep.

- **Methodists** - Not great records
- **Baptists** - Varies quite a bit
- **Presbyterians** - Birth, marriage and death records were kept by Presbyterian congregations. [The Presbyterian Historical Society](#) is a good place to start research of your Presbyterian ancestors. The [John Bulow Campbell Library at Columbia Theological Seminary](#) is also a good repository for Presbyterian records. These are mostly not online.
- **Moravians** - Two large archive holdings house Moravian church records. Large groups of Moravians initially settled in Bethlehem, PA and Winston-Salem, NC. Moravians church and community records can contain good genealogical information. Search for Moravian records at the [Moravian Archives in North Carolina](#) and the [Moravian Archives in Bethlehem, PA](#).
- **Catholics** - [FindMyPast](#) has a growing Catholic Heritage Collection that covers the U. S. dioceses. Britain and Ireland.
- **Jewish Records** - You will want to check Jewish Genealogical sites such as [JewishGen](#) and Jewish Historical Societies ([Center of Jewish History](#)).
- **Quakers** - The Society of Friends frequently referred to Quakers were meticulous record keepers. Congregations are referred to as meetings and it is in the monthly meeting minutes that genealogists will find a wealth of information. Examples of what you can find include intention to marry, birth registers, death registers and ex-communication records. For many years men and women met separately and monthly meetings were recorded for each.

Wade Hinshaw's *Encyclopedia of Quaker Genealogy* (sometimes referred to as Hinshaw Records) is an excellent resource when researching your Quaker ancestors. Find this resource at [Ancestry.com](#) or [Hathitrust](#).

City Directories

Use city directories to narrow down a death date range. Be sure and check for a list of deceased citizens! Sources for city directories include:

- **Google books** - [Here is an example of an Ann Arbor, MI directory.](#)
- **The New York Public Library**
- **University Collections**
- **State and local archives**

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- [Ancestry.com](#)
 - [United States Online Historical Directories](#)

Municipal Records & Private Collections

City and towns may have kept death records (and birth records, too) for earlier time periods than the state. If you know the city where your ancestor died, but not the date, check what municipal records may exist. For example, the City of Raleigh kept a death register for Jul 1887 - Dec 1914. (North Carolina began requiring death certificates in 1913.)

Private collections housed at state archives or a university library can provide unique records, too. One example of such records includes funeral home records! The information may vary, but certainly a death date will be recorded.

8 Sources to Look For An Ancestor's Grave Site

1. The Death Certificate
2. Funeral Home Records.
3. Cemetery Offices:
4. Family Members:
5. Church Cemeteries
6. Local Genealogy Societies
7. [FindAGrave](#)
8. [CemeteryCensus](#)

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