

Some Types of Records Available to Researchers

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There are a variety of records that researchers may encounter when researching their family trees. Many of these records are available in local county archives, courthouses or in online databases. Where they are housed vary from county to county.

- **DELAYED BIRTH RECORDS/DELAYED BIRTH INDEXES.** After the Social Security Act was passed in 1936, many people needed to obtain a birth certificate in order to be eligible for benefits. Many of these eligible persons were born before births were recorded at the county level, so they had no birth certificate. In order to obtain a delayed birth certificate, the person had to submit several sources of information to prove the date of their birth. Usually two or three sources were given, possibly including a family Bible entry, a written affidavit from someone who was present at the time of the birth, such as a doctor, midwife or family member. A record of these delayed birth records were often kept at the county level, as well as through the state.

DEATH CERTIFICATES. Obviously, a death certificate was issued after the death of an individual and may contain a great amount of genealogical information, including birth date, nativity, parents names (and nativity), death date, where the person died, cause of death, burial place, spouse name, marital status and an informant's name. Or, it may contain virtually no information. How could this be? An informant on a death certificate is usually a person very close to the decedent, such as a spouse, child or sibling. If the decedent passed away with no close relatives or extensive personal records, much of the information may be unknown. Death certificates commonly have misinformation because the informant may be someone who wasn't sure who the parents of the decedent were, or they were mistaken about the decedent's birth date, place of birth, etc. Death certificates are available through the state and privacy laws vary from state to state. North Carolina's death certificates are available through 1976 and Tennessee's death certificates are available through 1958. Later records can be obtained from the state with proof of close family relationship.

- **BASTARDY BONDS.** These bonds were created to protect the county from the expense of caring for an illegitimate child. If an unmarried woman was found to be pregnant, a warrant was issued and the woman brought before the Court. She was questioned under oath and asked to name the father of the child. If she refused, she could be placed in jail. Usually with the threat of jail, the woman would name the father of the child. This “reputed” father was then served with a warrant and required to post bond. He could come into court and deny the charges. In that case, character witnesses could be brought in and at that point, the judge would decide whether there was enough evidence to believe the man to be the father of the child. Bastardy bonds may contain a good amount of information, but usually only contain the man and woman involved and his securities, which are two or three people who sign as his security to ensure that he will show up in court to answer the charges. The courts usually charged the father to pay for “three years’ support”, payable to the mother which was usually \$90—only \$30 per year. The bonds are rarely found in the courthouse, but they were commonly recorded through the Quarterly Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions. The minute books for this court are found in most every county.
- **MARRIAGE RECORDS.** There are two things that you should be aware of when looking at marriage records. First of all there may be two important dates—the date that the license was ISSUED and the actual date of the marriage. There are images from some Tennessee marriage record books that have been uploaded to Ancestry.com. The books give the date that the license was issued, the name of the bride and groom, the officiant at the ceremony (usually a minister or Justice of the Peace), and the date of the “return.” The “Return” is the confirmation from the minister or J.P. that the marriage actually took place. Sometimes a minister would save up for a few weeks or maybe even months before making a trip to the courthouse and he would enter “returns” on several marriages at once. If a record shows, “no return,” it can mean one of two things—either that a license was issued, but no marriage occurred, OR the minister forgot to get to the courthouse and sign the return.
- **U.S., SOCIAL SECURITY DEATH INDEX.** The SSDI is a master file containing the death information on millions of persons whose deaths were reported to the

Social Security Administration. Information in this record typically contains the name, birth date, death date and last known residence.

- **WILLS.** A will is a legal document that records your wishes regarding the distribution of your property after your death. Usually it names a person to carry out these wishes. This person is called an “executor.” If a person dies without a will, the court will appoint a person to administer the estate of the deceased person. This person is called an “administrator.” Wills can be written on any piece of paper and do not have to be created by a lawyer. In this case, there may be witnesses who sign that they saw the person write the will. If no one is present at the writing of the will, then witnesses may be brought in to swear that they recognize the deceased’s handwriting. Once a person has passed away, the will is processed through a process called “probate.”
- **PASSENGER LISTS.** These records document a person’s immigration by ship. Early passenger lists typically include the name of the ship, the passengers aboard, their ages, the port of arrival, port of departure, date, country of origin and sometimes occupation of each individual. You won’t always find a record of immigration, but occasionally, you get lucky.
- **DEED RECORDS.** Deed records are found in the local county courthouse and can contain invaluable information on your ancestor. They were created when a piece of property was bought or sold to insure a legal public record of the transaction. The records list the location of the transaction (county and state), the names of the purchaser and the seller and where they resided, the date and a physical description of the location of the property. When a person died, the property was sometimes divided up and recorded in the deeds. These “division of property” deeds usually contained the names of a deceased’s children and sometimes even contained the names of grandchildren.