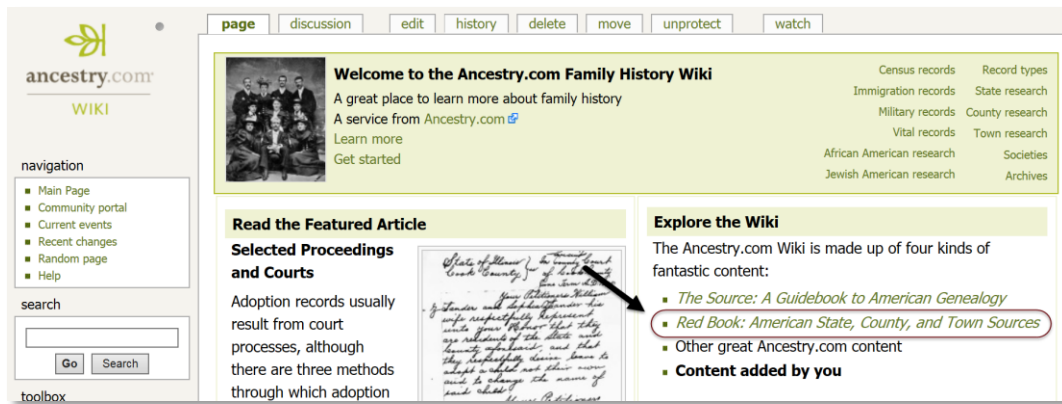


# Finding U.S. Vital Records and Alternative Sources

Vital records – records of births, marriages, divorces, and deaths – are cornerstones of family history research. They provide a framework for our ancestor’s lives, marking the beginning and ending of their lives and family transitions. No doubt about it, they are vital to our research. But civil registrations in the U.S. weren’t kept on a statewide basis for the most part until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So how do you know what’s available for the places where your ancestor lived? What’s available online? And where do you turn for alternative sources if your ancestor’s record doesn’t exist? This guide will give you some ideas for where to look.

## When Did They Start?

Learning when civil registration of vital events began in the state and county where your ancestor lived is an important first step. The [Ancestry Wiki](#) is home to *Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources*, which provides that information for U.S. states and counties.



Once inside *Red Book*, navigate to the state and the county of interest.

Map	County	County Address	Date Formed	Parent County(ies)	Birth	Marriage	Death	Land	Probate	Court
E2	Adams	507 Vermont , Box 1169, Quincy 62306	1825	Pike/unorganized	1877	1825	1877	1817	1826	1825
KS	Alexander	2000 Washington Ave., Cairo 62914	1819	unorganized (Union)	1877	1819	1878	1818	1819	1821
G4	Bond	County Office Bldg., 200 West College, Rm. 203, Greenville 62246	1817	Madison/Crawford/Edwards	1877	1817	1877	1817	1821	1817

Visit the Ancestry.com Learning Center at [www.ancestry.com/learn](http://www.ancestry.com/learn).

For account questions or technical help, call 1-800-262-3787.

# Finding U.S. Vital Records and Alternative Sources

## What's on Ancestry?

Once you've determined that civil registrations of vital records are available for the time and place in question, check the [Card Catalog](#) or explore collections by location by selecting a state on this map in the lower corner of [the Search tab](#) to determine which collections are available on Ancestry.

The screenshot shows the 'Explore by Location' section on Ancestry.com. It features a map of the United States with state abbreviations. A sidebar on the left lists 'Recent additions include:' with items like '1940 United States Federal Census - New' and '1930 United States Federal Census - Updated'. The main content area is titled 'Pennsylvania' and includes a search bar, a 'SEARCH' button, and a list of collections. A red box highlights a portion of the collection list:

Collection Name	Count
Pennsylvania Birth, Marriage & Death	10,934,014
Pennsylvania and New Jersey, Church and Town Records, 1708-1985	7,057,115
Pennsylvania, Death Certificates, 1906-1963 <b>UPDATED</b>	1,160,879
Pennsylvania, Veterans Burial Cards, 1777-2012 <b>UPDATED</b>	637,786
Pennsylvania, Birth Records, 1906-1908	235,771
Pennsylvania, Oliver H. Bair Funeral Records Indexes, 1920-1980	
<a href="#">View all Pennsylvania Birth, Marriage &amp; Death (20)</a>	

Once you identify a collection of interest, be sure to read the description, as coverage may vary by county or be partial. And check back often. Ancestry is constantly adding and updating content.

## Seeking Out Alternative Sources

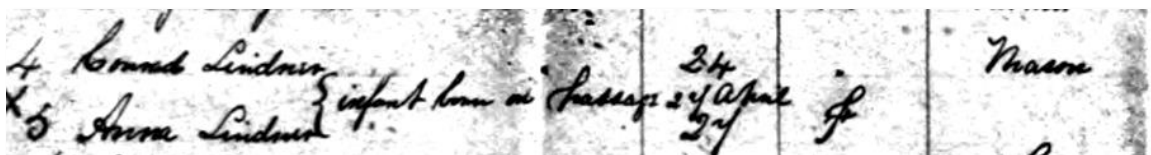
If it turns out your ancestor's civil registration is not available, there are alternatives. Here are some other records that may provide supporting evidence for birth, marriage, and death dates and places.

### Births

- **U.S. Census Records.** [U.S. Federal Censuses](#) for the years 1850-1940 include ages for everyone in the household, which helps you at least close in on a birth year. Additionally, for those years enumerators were instructed to record the age of persons who were born within the census year as fractions (1 month = 1/12, 2 months = 2/12, etc.). The [1900 census](#) asked for the month and year of birth, as well as ages. There are even clues in earlier censuses, 1790-1840. While the age groupings were consistent between 1840 and 1830, the parameters were slightly different in 1820. By comparing which columns an ancestor appears in between 1830 and 1820, you can narrow the time frame to 5 years. In the 1820 census, there are columns for males "between 16 and 18" and again for males "of 16 and under 26." It's important to be aware that he'll be counted twice, once under each category, so be careful not to add an extra teenager. That extra column though allows you to estimate that any males counted in the 16-25 range who are not in the 16-18 field, will have been born roughly between 1795 and 1801 and any in that extra field were born between 1802 and 1804.

# Finding U.S. Vital Records and Alternative Sources

- *Marriage and Death Records.* While it's important to remember that they are not considered primary sources for birth information, marriage and death records often include birth dates and places.
- *Religious records* often pre-date civil registration. Birth registers and baptism or christening records will typically include a birth date. For tips on locating and using religious records, [download our free guide](#).
- *Newspapers.* Granted, birth announcements didn't always make it into the newspapers, but you'll sometimes find mentions in society pages or lists of babies born in a particular hospital.
- *Delayed Birth Registration.* Proof of when and where a person was born was required for Social Security or Railroad Retirement and for those who were born prior to civil registration, this meant filing a delayed birth registration. Proof was required, and although the documents won't be included with the file, details about the proof provided may include clues to their location.
- *Social Security Death Index (SSDI).* That birth information that the Social Security Administration collected makes the Social Security Death Index (SSDI) yet another source for birth dates. While 98 percent of the people listed in the SSDI died after 1962, many of them were born before civil registration began.
- *Passports.* Likewise, people applying for passports were asked about their age and place of birth. If your ancestors applied for a passport to travel abroad to visit family or just on holiday, check the collection of [U.S. Passport Applications, 1795-1925](#).
- *Naturalization Records.* Naturalization records may contain the birth date and places for immigrants. Some naturalization indexes even list birth dates. Ancestry has a growing collection of [naturalization records and indexes](#) that may include your ancestor.
- *Births at Sea.* Births at sea were often noted in [passenger lists](#), often along with deaths at the end of the manifest. Although you might not find a given name, the infant may be listed with the parents and other family members, or at the end of the manifest with a reference to the parents (a good reminder to explore manifests fully). Note that it's typical to see them listed only as "infant" with only the last name.

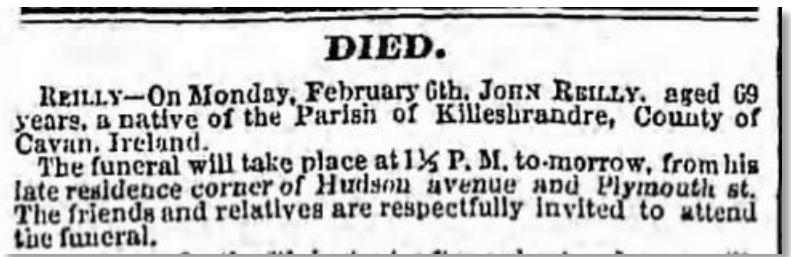


From the *Highland Mary*, arrival at Port of New York, 01 June 1852

- *Bibles.* Traditionally, pages in family Bibles include spaces for the notation of births and other personal landmark events. Check with family members to see if a family Bible was passed down through another line. Go beyond close family and connect with relatives through [online trees](#) or [AncestryDNA](#) and you may find a more distant line that inherited that coveted family Bible.
- *Military.* [Military records](#) will often include birth information for the person who served and occasionally you'll also find birth details on family members. Pension records for veterans with surviving children may include proof of births with dates and places noted. [Revolutionary War pensions](#) are available on Ancestry, and you can find several collections of pensions for the [Civil War on Fold3](#). Fold3 is also home to the [Preserve the Pensions](#) project where you can [search War of 1812 pensions](#) free. Ancestry matches donations to fund this project dollar for dollar. [Draft registrations](#) from World War I and II included birth dates, and the Civil War Draft registers asked for an age.

# Finding U.S. Vital Records and Alternative Sources

- **Obituaries.** Obituaries won't always give a birth date, but you will often find an age, and that can help you to estimate the birth year, and in cases where the birthplace is given, it can lead to other birth-related records, like church records, in that place.
- **Cemeteries.** While we typically associate cemetery records with death information, birth dates and places can sometimes be found on a tombstone, or in the records of the cemetery sexton. Millions of cemetery records have been transcribed and indexed by genealogical societies. [Find-A-Grave](#) also offers significant help in finding cemeteries and includes memorials for 121 million+ graves.



## Find A Grave

### Capt Edwin Brough Dyer

Memorial Photos Flowers Share E

[Learn about removing the ads from this memorial...](#)

Birth: Sep. 19, 1837  
Death: Feb. 27, 1898

he was a member of the Brooklyn Police force.

He arrested [William T Skidmore](#) who had murdered [William Bishop Carr](#).

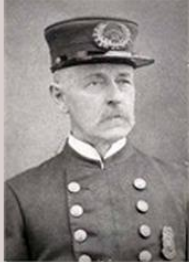
Family links:  
Parents:  
[Eliza Jane Nelson Dyer \(1819 - 1876\)](#)

Spouse:  
[Margaret A Doner Dyer \(1847 - 1911\)](#)


Children:  
[Harry J Dyer \(\\_\\_\\_\\_ - 1903\)\\*](#)  
[John Ferdinand Dyer \(1862 - 1904\)\\*](#)  
[Edwin J Dyer \(1864 - 1934\)\\*](#)  
[Lilly Agnes Dyer \(1867 - 1929\)\\*](#)  
[Raymond Francis Dyer \(1869 - 1952\)\\*](#)  
[Alfred Dyer \(1874 - 1877\)\\*](#)  
[Francis Leo Dyer \(1877 - 1900\)\\*](#)  
[Alfred J Dyer \(1879 - 1879\)\\*](#)  
[Clarence Dyer \(1884 - 1933\)\\*](#)

Siblings:  
[Edwin Brough Dyer \(1837 - 1898\)](#)  
[Emeline Dyer \(1847 - 1927\)\\*](#)  
[Susie F Dyer Sterling \(1855 - 1899\)\\*](#)

\*Calculated relationship



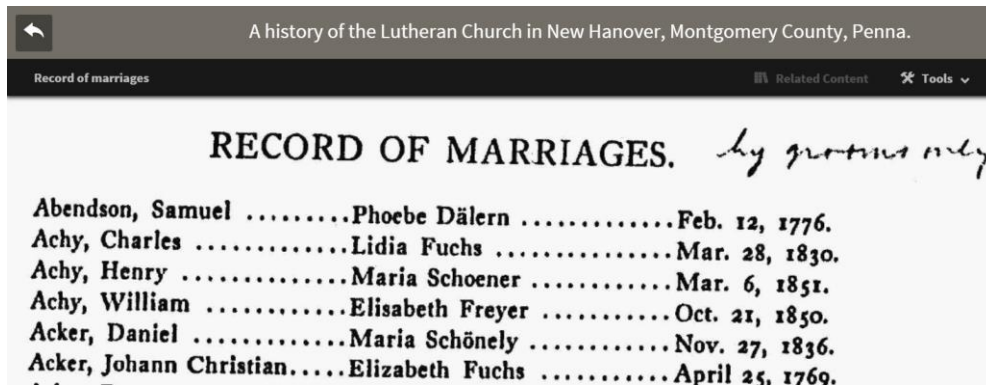
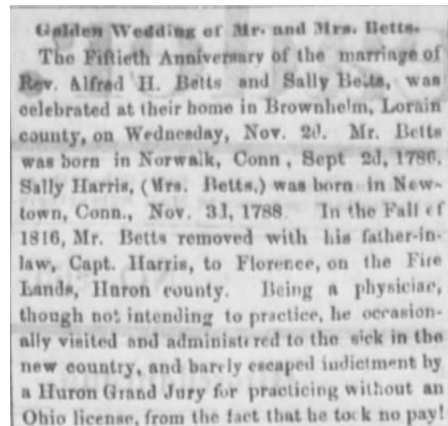
Added by: Anonymous



# Finding U.S. Vital Records and Alternative Sources

## Marriages

- *Church Records.* Since churches were the first to keep records of marriages, this is an obvious choice as an alternative to a civil registration. Determine what churches were in existence around the time you think your ancestors were married and search those closest to where your ancestor lived or those that shared an ethnic affiliation with your ancestor. You may find reference to church affiliations in death and other records as well. For tips on locating and using religious records, [download our free guide](#).
- *Engagement and Marriage Notices in Newspapers.* Local newspapers may have run notices of your ancestor's engagement or marriage. Look for tidbits in social columns, as well as in any sections that regularly listed marriage announcements and engagements.
- *Anniversaries in Newspapers.* Look for notices of anniversaries, particularly memorable ones like 25th and 50th, in local newspapers where they lived in later years. You may find details about the original marriage, including the date and names of witnesses, as well as a guest list of anniversary party attendees that will likely include other family members.
- *Obituaries.* Don't overlook obituaries as a possible source for marriage information, as they sometimes mention how long the deceased was married.
- *Church Histories.* Church histories and centennial publications can include wonderful details about the congregation, and a surprising amount of genealogical information, including lists of marriages. Here's an example from *A History of the Lutheran Church in New Hanover, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania*. (It also includes a list of baptisms, catechumens and adult baptisms, and deaths.)



- *Pensions.* Widows applying for military pensions had to submit proof that they were married. That proof was often in the form of testimonies from someone who had first-hand knowledge of the marriage.
- *Marriage Banns.* Some religions required that marriage intentions be published or announced in public for several weeks before the ceremony, affording those with concerns about the marriage time to step forward and object. Keep in mind, just because the banns were actually published, doesn't necessarily mean that a marriage took place.

# Finding U.S. Vital Records and Alternative Sources

- **Divorce.** While divorces weren't as common in the past as they are today, they did happen and divorce records typically include the marriage date, as well as other details that can flesh out your family history—for better or for worse. The Card Catalog can provide a list of [divorce records on Ancestry](#).
- **Bonds.** Marriage bonds, often found in Southern states, guarantee payment of a particular sum if the marriage is for some reason nullified. While the bond may not include the actual marriage date, knowing when it was filed can help narrow the timeline down a bit.
- **Estimates from Oldest Child.** Where marriage records can't be found, estimate the marriage date based on the age of the first child. Bear in mind that there may have been an unknown pregnancy before the first known child born or a rushed marriage that could throw the estimate off a bit. There's also the possibility that the child came before the marriage, so as with any estimation that you include in your research, be sure to notate it as such.
- **Probate Records.** Since probate records include relationships and often list children, check the probate records of the parents of both the bride and groom to see if spouses are listed among the heirs and whether daughters of the deceased are listed with married names. This can help narrow the time frame.

## Deaths

- **Mortality Schedules.** In some early years, the federal government also kept a record of those who had died during the census year. Ancestry has these valuable records for 27 states. [Check the description](#) for coverage.
- **Coroners' Records.** Many of these can be found in county or state archives. To locate them put the words "coroner's records" or "medical examiner's records" + the state and county of interest into your favorite search engine. Examples of some [Salt Lake City coroner's inquest files](#) can be found on Ancestry.
- **Body Transit Records.** In many cities, health concerns mandated keeping records of deceased individuals whose bodies were transported through or into the city for burial. Again, these records can sometimes be found at the local, county, or state level. Some examples of body transit records can be found among the records in [South Carolina, Death Records, 1821-1960](#), on Ancestry.
- **City Directories.** If your ancestor lived in a city, directories can be especially useful. When an individual who has been listed in a directory for several consecutive years suddenly disappears, it might be that he or she has passed away. When a man died, his wife may be listed in subsequent years as "widow" or "widow of..." Ancestry has [thousands of city directories](#) for many cities and years.

# Finding U.S. Vital Records and Alternative Sources

- *Heirlooms*. In many instances, items found in the home will provide a death date, including diaries, journals, photographs, jewelry, embroidered items, etc. A surprising number of the millions of family trees at Ancestry.com include photographs of such things.
- *Court Records*. In the United States, court records began very early, and in other countries, earlier still. Court records include probates that typically include information like the name of the decedent, date of death, heirs, relationships, etc. When one or both of a child's parents died, chances are great that the guardianship records at the county court will provide death information.
- *Cemetery Records*. While these records may seem to be self-evident for death information, don't overlook the potential of other details that can be found on a tombstone or in the records of the cemetery sexton. Millions of cemetery records have been transcribed and indexed by genealogical societies. [Find-a-Grave](#) also offers significant help in finding cemeteries and includes photographs of several million graves.
- *Passenger Lists*. Particularly in the age of sail and before there was a means to preserve a body, passengers (and crew) who died on board ship were usually buried at sea. After the last entries of passengers in the early passenger lists, the captain often noted the names of those who had perished on board.



On the ship *Liverpool*, 9 March 1849

- *Apprenticeship Papers*. In the early years of this country and in many European countries, young children were often indentured or became apprentices. Ancestry has [Washington, D. C., Indentures of Apprenticeship, 1801-1811](#). In some cases, the indexes will lead to original records that reveal the death dates of the parents of the children.
- *Almshouse Records*. Many counties kept records of the institutions that looked after the poor, and many of those include death information on those who died there. New York took a [Census of Inmates in Almshouses and Poorhouses, 1830-1920](#), that is available on Ancestry.
- *Military Records*. Military records including many of those found at [Ancestry](#) and [Fold3](#) include death information. Casualty lists and prisoner of war records may include death information for those who died in the service. Also check the resources for pension records mentioned in the birth section of this guide as the files often note the deaths of the veteran and spouse.
- *Collections of Genealogical Societies*. [St. Louis City Death Records, 1850-1902](#), is an example of an extraordinary database at Ancestry that was compiled by the St. Louis Genealogical Society – just one of the many genealogical organizations whose dedicated members have spent countless hours preserving their area's history.
- *Funeral Home & Mortuary Records (Undertaker's Records)*. Undertaker's records vary in format and content, but all of them can be valuable in determining the death date of an individual. Check genealogical, historical, state, county, and local library and archives catalogs for possible holdings. Ancestry is home to the [U.S. Cemetery and Funeral Home Collection](#); [California, Mortuary and Cemetery Records, 1801-1932](#); [California, San Francisco Area Funeral Home Records, 1895-1985](#); [San Francisco Area, California, Funeral Home Records, 1850-1931](#); and [Pennsylvania, Oliver H. Bair Funeral Records Indexes, 1920-1980](#).

# Finding U.S. Vital Records and Alternative Sources

- *Fraternal and Other Organizations.* Many ethnic, fraternal, and religious organizations annually printed names and death dates and sometimes full-length obituaries for their members. In addition to published necrologies, you may find collections like [Order of Sons of Italy in America](#) and [Massachusetts, Mason Membership Cards, 1733-1990](#), which include

Name <i>Blockson, Ralph Clements</i>			
Residence <i>Brighton</i>	Occupation <i>Designer</i>	Nativity <i>Fanesville, O. 1875-12-3</i>	
Lodge <i>Columbian</i>	Initiated <i>1905-6-1</i>	Passed <i>1905-7-7</i>	Raised <i>1905-11-2</i>
Membership <i>1905-11-2</i>	Dim. Sus. Dis.	Reinstated	Deceased <i>1950-8-29</i>
Remarks <i>Charter member of Ebenezer Fuller Lodge 1921-6-23 Dismissed from " " " " 1924-9-4 Wor. Master Columbian Lodge 1922-23</i>			

death information.

- *Newspapers and Obituary Collections.* In addition to obituaries found in online newspapers like those on [Newspapers.com](#), check for extracts like [New York, Death Newspaper Extracts, 1801-1890 \(Barber Collection\)](#).
- *Religious Records.* As mentioned earlier, religious records often pre-date civil registration and death and burial details can often be found among them.
- *Funeral or Memorial Cards.* Funeral and memorials cards have been printed since the 1800s and are often distributed to family and friends. Check with relatives to see if they have saved any of these cards. Often they are passed down in scrapbooks and among other heirlooms. The example on the right is in Polish, but online translation tools tell us that the date of death was 3 November 1960.
- *U.S. Homes for National Veterans.* Following the Civil War, a network of homes was set up for disabled veterans. If the veteran died in the home, death and burial information was included, as was sometimes an accounting of personal affects and to whom money was disbursed. Records from these homes for 1866-1938 are available online at Ancestry.

