

VITAL INFORMATION WITHOUT VITAL REGISTRATION—BIRTH RECORDS

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A birth certificate is the result of modern legislated vital registration. It provides us with the key elements we want for a birth record: full names of child, father, and mother (maybe with maiden name); exact place and date of birth. As our research pushes backwards in time, we learn that such records were never created. What do we do then?

CHANGING MIND SET

To be realistic, we must restate our goals. We want to find as much “birth information” as possible, citing the best documents (plural, not singular) available. We need to be prepared to qualify what we find with weasel words (probably, possibly, perhaps) and date brackets (before, between, after).

We need to recognize that the most exact source may not be the most accurate, that we may find conflicting sources, and that we must be prepared to enter our information in a way that accommodates those realities.

Consider names, dates, and places as discrete information elements related to the birth. In a modern birth certificate one or more of those elements could be inaccurate. In 1820 Ohio it is not likely that we will find any document with all that information. We must seek them separately.

Not only do we need to look for a record substitute for a birth certificate, we may need seek for a substitute for the birth event. Substitute birth events include pregnancy and baptism.

Now that we’ve restructured our thinking, let’s consider the three groups most likely to have an interest in noting a vital event: family, church, and state. Their interest in the vital event—and the records created—varies considerably based on time, place, and circumstance.

FAMILY

The first family record that comes to mind is a Bible record. Bible records are not created equal. If the entry is made contemporaneous to the birth, it is much more likely to be accurate than a compiled record written generations later. In other words, your documentation of a Bible record should include your analysis of the handwriting (if you have a photocopy of the original), stating if the entries were made at different times or at the same time, and identifying the writer if possible.

Compiled records written by an immediate member of the family group are usually accurate. Think of where you might find such records. The desk drawer or cardboard box where important papers or personal memorabilia were saved are good places to check. Don’t assume it will be in a special book or on a pretty form. My grandparents’ family record—giving birth dates for their parents, siblings, children, and grandchildren—is on three sheets from a freebie notepad given out by the Holdrege [Nebraska] Seed & Farm Supply Co., headed (ironically) “SuperGene Quality Seeds.” It spans over a century of births.

The family might have mailed birth announcements to family members, but you may not find a surviving announcement in the immediate family—ask cousins to check their memorabilia boxes. Baby books became popular in the early twentieth century.

In modern times, the family may have sent birth announcements to the local paper. However, in the past, the birth of a five-legged calf might have rated newspaper ink, but not the birth of a healthy baby.

Family and friends were often informed of a birth in letters. Again, the letters usually survive with the recipient, not the sender. A sister may have noted in her diary that she received a letter mentioning the birth of her nephew. Don’t limit your search to after the birth. The evidence may be in a letter from the expectant mother months before the arrival, lamenting the fact that the baby is expected to arrive at the sultry end of August.

Look for small clues in later records. Be creative. Perhaps you have a black and white photograph of gawky teenagers with a penciled “Mary age 13 and Mark age 14 at Lovely Lake” and a photo-developing date printed in the margin. A photo of grandmother holding a baby on her knee tells you that the baby was born before the grandmother’s death.

CHURCH

Birth is not a religious event; baptism or christening is. You need to know about the beliefs of the church to which the family belonged to understand if they believed in infant baptism, and how long after the birth it normally took place. In some denominations, because of the high infant mortality rate, the baptism would be performed as soon as possible. Other denominations do not believe that whether or not a person has been baptized determines the state of his or her soul at death, hence baptisms of older infants and children were typical.

Study the baptismal records in context. Some clearly seem to be recording the date of birth; others to be recording the date of baptism (only when you are lucky do they give both). Copy the wording of the entry and any column or section headings exactly. Analyze several pages of entries. If the dates are in strict chronological order, have a pattern of dates seven days apart, or if multiple children are named on the same date, this suggests the dates are baptismal.

Not all church records reside with a church. In some cases, the minister may have carried his own volume in which he recorded baptisms. This was a personal, not an official, record. It may have ended up with the minister’s family, or it may reside with a church in which he later preached.

There may have been a record made of the mother’s “churching,” although these records are rare. This service of readmitting the mother to church after a birth existed in many denominations.

In many denominations, children were confirmed and took first communion at about age 13 or 14. For someone who died before the 1850 census, a confirmation record may be the best record for approximating birth year.

STATE

Except for New England, governments haven't expressed much interest in recording births until about the second decade of the twentieth century. There was, however, a flurry of interest in collecting vital statistics in the 1860s in some states. Almost all of the legislated efforts to require registration of birth and death were discontinued (in part because of opposition from the populace), with some revivals of interest occurring in the 1890s.

Although the state might not have taken much interest in a birth, later in an individual's life they often had an intense interest in the result—a person's age. As we move further back in time, genealogists find ourselves relying more and more on statements of age to estimate birth year.

Military pensions seem most likely to provide exact dates and places of birth for early ancestors, but the information wasn't required. Muster rolls or mustering-in records sometimes list age.

As we research, our technique should be first to ask "when would this person's age have mattered or been recorded?" and then look for those records.

We might classify "age" records as:

- those on which age was recorded, but not restrictive (i.e., census)
- those on which age was recorded and restrictive (i.e., draft)
- those on which age was not recorded, but restrictive (i.e., land sale)

Another example in the first category is depositions made in court. This often is the only age we can find in early New England and early Virginia. Be aware that these ages may be off by more than one year, perhaps rounded to the nearest five, but should be in the general time frame.

Not all age restrictions are recorded in government statutes. Many of them derive from English common law, which is the basis of much of the early legal system of both the colonial and federal periods. Unless legislation dictated otherwise, men had full rights at 21, but other actions, such as witnessing documents, were accepted at earlier ages. For other actions and ages, see the table on pages 209 and 210 of Arlene H. Eakle's "Court Records" in the Revised Edition of Ancestry's *The Source*.

CAVEATS

Consider and evaluate all sources. Records closer to the event may be more accurate, although less precise. For example, an exact birth date on a tombstone may be rendered unlikely by a contemporary census entry, requiring us to say, "said to be born 13 November 1838 (tombstone), but no male under 5 on 1840 census, possibly born 13 November 1840."

Although the census in 1850 and 1860 named all of the individuals in a household and their ages, you cannot assume that the man and woman were married and the parents of the children. Unless you have other evidence, you'd better use a weasel word. "Probably" is getting pretty overworked (everything in genealogy seems to be "probably"), so for the census I often use "apparently." This saves face when you find that Susan was John's spinster sister, who had graciously moved in to take care of his motherless children.

Calculating birth year from a stated age in a census or a deposition gets riskier the further away you get from the event. I knew my age without a doubt when I was 17, but as the decades roll by, I seem to have to do the math in my head more and more when someone asks my age. I can do math in my head; I suspect most of my ancestors couldn't.

Parentage and specific place of birth are the elements we may have most difficulty establishing. This first is usually the primary—and often the most elusive—goal of genealogical research.

Other than a state given in a census or a locality from a county history (both of which have high rates of inaccuracy), we may never find a document stating the place of an individual's birth. We may need to solve the parentage in order to say "probably" for a locality, citing the place where the parents resided in the time period. Thus, we may say "born probably in Louisa County, where his father was paying taxes at the time."

SUMMARY

For any time and place, we must stop and consider what types of records would reasonably have been created by family, church, and state. Beyond that, we must consider where that same information might have been mentioned, even if it was not the primary focus of the document.