

VITAL INFORMATION WITHOUT VITAL REGISTRATION—MARRIAGE AND DEATH RECORDS

BY PATRICIA LAW HATCHER, CG, FASG

CHANGING MIND SET

Vital registration was largely nonexistent before the twentieth century. In the previous article on this topic, we learned that we may need to look for records of substitute events and to consider each element (names, date, place, etc.) separately, and that we should consider records of family, church, and state.

MARRIAGE

Substitute events for a marriage include the engagement (or the old-fashioned betrothal or “promised”), banns, license, permission, honeymoon, and anniversaries.

FAMILY

Family records for marriage include many of the same records we mentioned for births: family Bibles, letters, diaries, and newspaper clippings (often with the date carefully cut off, alas!). In modern times, the newspaper announcement is often of the engagement, rather than the wedding, so your search needs to predate the event by quite some time.

You may find that the newspaper never mentions the wedding. Instead, there will be a brief item stating that “John and Mary Jones have returned from their wedding trip last week and taken up housekeeping on the old Miller farm.” Also look for postcards sent home by the honeymooners.

A too-often neglected source is anniversary clippings. While many couples got married, fewer survived until their 50th anniversary. Comb newspapers of the appropriate period. The payoff can be substantial. My great-aunt and great-uncle’s anniversary was covered with a detailed description of their elopement half a century earlier and a large photograph of all family members attending the celebration, named in the caption.

CHURCH

Whether marriage was a function of church or state (or a mixture of both) has varied over time and place. If the marriage was performed by a minister, there may be a surviving record in the church or in the minister’s own book. Many churches, unfortunately, didn’t keep formal church books.

To be married, a couple had to be eligible (i.e., single and not committed to a prior engagement). The church may have been a part of this process. Look in the men’s minutes and women’s minutes for Quakers. Banns were read from the pulpit at specified intervals preceding the marriage in the Anglican church. Sometimes this is the event we find recorded; other times we find the entry “married by banns” or “married by license,” or the cryptic “B.” or “lic.”

STATE

Governmental bodies (counties and large cities) were involved in creating several types of marriage-related records. You should never cite simply “county marriage records.” Always indicate which type of record you are citing. I did not do this in the past, and it has caused confusion.

- If a couple was under age, permissions were required. They may be loose papers or recorded in a book.
- Licenses were usually recorded when they were issued. In some towns in the twentieth century, the newspaper routinely listed all marriage licenses issued.
- License returns were recorded when the signed license was returned to the courthouse. Not all licenses were returned. This does not mean the marriage didn’t happen.
- Some counties recorded the minister’s return verbatim, including whose home the marriage was performed in.

Often, only the minister’s return gives the exact date of the marriage. The other entries simply provide date brackets for it.

Unrelated documents such as pension applications or donation land claims may provide specific marriage information.

A marriage may be documented by its ending. Early divorces occurred at the colony or state level and are found in legislative actions; later divorces occurred at the local level, within the court system.

CAVEATS

Remember that just because a wedding was anticipated, doesn’t mean it happened. Occasionally things changed. However, if you find a license and the name matches that of the wife, you can assume the marriage took place.

Indicate carefully the source of any date: “John Jones married Margaret Moore on or after 2 June 1880 (license), but before 1 August when she was named as Margaret Jones in her father’s will.”

Sometimes we can’t find much specific evidence for a marriage. You should state what you know: “married probably about 1834 (three children in 1840).” This will help prevent you from making mistakes later on.

DEATH

Substitutes for death events include the funeral, the burial, probates, and other records resulting from the death.

FAMILY

Once again, we have the usual types of family records. Sympathy cards and letters are often kept together in a bundle. Funeral cards, especially prevalent in the Midwest, provide much information about the deceased (often,

incidentally, including the birth date). Many families save these cards. When I began my research, I wrote family members seeking information. Several sent me copies of their collection of funeral cards.

Think of the many elements involved in the funeral and burial: purchase of a cemetery plot or burial within an existing plot, digging the grave, preaching the service, ordering and installing a tombstone. Consider all possibilities. I documented one child of a London family whose existence is mentioned only in the receipt in the vestry book for the payment by the father for digging her grave.

Needlework samplers may record births, marriages, and deaths. In Victorian times, art centered around death became popular. Grief pictures replete with urns, weeping willows, and mourning survivors might be needlework or preprinted forms. A more gruesome custom (to modern sensibilities) was taking photographs of the corpse. Mourning jewelry may be engraved.

CHURCH

The church or minister may have records of the funeral. Their interest, however, may not have been in the cold genealogical details computer programs request. In 1753 Heinrich Melchior Muhlenberg devoted several lengthy paragraphs in his journal to Phillip Beyer's spiritual life, the community, the funeral service, and a disruption thereto, but said only that Beyer was "the aged father of a large family." Ministers often recorded only the name of the deceased, date of the funeral (not the death), and the Bible verse chosen for the text.

STATE

Probates are a voluminous topic that range far beyond wills and administrations. Guardianships, land divisions, and quitclaims are only a few of the items we commonly

use to document death. Quitclaims are especially interesting in that they may silently signal that the mother has died, thereby releasing her lifetime dower interest in the land.

If the deceased was receiving pension payments, look for information about the cessation of such payments. This information and possibly the death date may be on the jacket of the pension file or in a separate log.

A recent column reprinted from Laura Szucs Pfeiffer's "Hidden Sources: Body Transit Records and Coroner's Inquests" mentions two interesting death-record substitutes: coroner reports (which I might have thought of) and body-shipment reports (which never would have occurred to me). Check out this book if you need more ideas.

CAVEATS

A tombstone is an good example of how elements of information from a record must be considered separately. When discussing birth records, we mentioned that birth years on tombstones are sometimes erroneous because as we age, "how old" we are becomes less and less important. Consider, however, the death date. If the tombstone is of a style to have been erected at about the time of the birth, the death date is likely correct; that part of the information is contemporaneous. And since it was probably ordered by a surviving member of the immediate family, familial information such as "wife of John" or "mother of six" is also reliable.

SUMMARY

Finding a vital record or vital-record substitute may require flexibility and imagination on your part. It always requires thoughtful and specific wording to document the event accurately.