



Main Menu – Genealogy A Beginner’s Workshop

Class 3 – Types of Records

1. Genealogical Resources: Sources

definition: **Primary source** - a document or object that was created by an individual or group as part of their daily lives. Primary sources include birth certificates, photographs, diaries, letters, embroidered samplers, clothing, household implements, and newspapers.

Vital records are considered to be **primary** sources and correct. Even though vital records are supposed to be just that – vital – you may find errors. For example, a death record may have incorrect information because the informant did not know the correct information, such as year of birth or parents' names.

Always search for primary records when available. Birth, marriage and death records were not required for many years, depending upon the location. In Iowa, vital records were required beginning in 1880, and were kept at a county level. However, there was poor compliance with this law. In 1921, the state required records to be kept at a state level and compliance was better. Many states or churches kept marriage records because property was involved. Divorce records were required, since property was frequently involved.

definition: **Secondary source** - summaries, second-hand accounts, and analyses of events created by someone who did not witness the event, but may have read or heard about it. Examples may include: books or articles written on a topic, artworks depicting an event, letters or diaries recounting a version of events told to the author by another source.

Secondary resources are basically everything else. Family stories, tombstones, books, family Bibles, etc., are examples of secondary resources. Some may be first-person testimony, second-person or hearsay testimony or mixed sources.

definition: **First person testimony** - the account of a person who actually participated in an event. Examples are oral history interviews, diaries, letters, photographs and drawings of events, and court testimony of an eyewitness.

definition: **Second person or hearsay testimony** - an account repeated by someone who did not actually participate in the event. Examples are newspaper accounts from interviews of observers, letters that repeat a story told to the writer, drawings based on other people's observations, or a book written about a topic.

definition: **Mixed sources** - A document that is a primary source may contain both first person testimony and second hand testimony. An example would be a diary entry that records a person's eyewitness observations of an event (first person testimony) but also contains additional stories told to the writer by a family member (second hand testimony). Newspapers often contain a mixture of first and second hand accounts.

It may depend on the question you are asking to decide the type of source to research. The same document can be a primary and secondary source, depending upon the question you ask. For example, a Baltimore newspaper's account of Lincoln's death that includes unattributed accounts of what happened at Ford's Theater contains second hand testimony, if your question is what exactly happened at Ford's Theater that night. But if your question is how people in Baltimore heard about Lincoln's assassination and what did they hear, then the newspaper is a primary source for answering that question.

2. Vital Records are records kept by the government.

When looking for government records, know the geographical name(s) at the time of the record:

- name of the city (if in a city)
- name of the township. This is not always needed, but it can be helpful.
- name of the county. note: Some cities are not in a county. For example, current St. Louis (the city) is not in a county. There is a St. Louis County in Missouri, but it does not include St. Louis City.
- name of the state or territory.

Generally, the government *now* keeps records of:

- birth
- marriage
- divorce
- death records

These records are usually kept at the county level, although some records may be kept at a state level.

These records have not always been kept. For example, Iowa did not require maintenance of birth, marriage and death until 1880, and even then many areas did not comply until 1921 when the laws were changed. Also, some religions did not share marriage records.

There are other court documents which may or may not give “vital records” information, such as wills, probates, deeds, lawsuits or criminal cases. In class 4 we will discuss more about courthouse records.

Many of the courthouse records for birth, marriage and death are now on-line. If it is not on-line, it does not mean it does not exist. Different on-line sites offer different information. Not all courthouses allow materials to be copied.

Note: Courthouse marriage records may have three different documents.

- (1) Marriage bond.
- (2) A register for the marriage license application.
- (3) A register when the license is signed and returned by the person who performed the marriage.

If you cannot find vital records, there are other sources, some primary and some secondary, to help to find birth, marriage or death records.

Birth Records

Bible Records

Birth Certificate

Birth Register

Baptismal

Census Records – 1850-1940 censuses show age. 1900 census gives month and year of birth.

Church Records

Death Certificate

Delayed Birth Certificate

Funeral, Memorial and Prayer Cards

Marriage Records – this may contain the age of the bride and groom

Military Records

Monument Makers' Records

Necrologies and Other Sources

Obituary and Death Notices (newspaper, church publications)

Passport Records

Pension Records

Social Security Application

2. Vital Records are records kept by the government. (continued)

Marriage Records

Bible Records

Census Reports – 1850-1940 censuses ask marital status. 1900 & 1910 censuses ask how long married

Church Records

Funeral, Memorial and Prayer Cards

Marriage Bond

Marriage Certificate

Marriage Register

Marriage Return

Necrologies and Other Sources

Obituary

Pension Records

Divorce Records

Divorce records are at the courthouse. A copy might be kept at the local library. Some divorces are now showing up on the internet.

Death Records:

Autopsy Records

Bible Records

Bodies in Transit

Burial Permits

Cemetery Record

Census Mortality Schedule

Church Death Record

City Directories

Coroners' Records

Death Certificate

Death Registers

Death at Sea

Funeral, Memorial, and Prayer Cards

Funeral Home Records

Institutional Records (church records, military or pension records)

Monument Makers' Records

Mortuary Schedules

Necrologies and Other Sources

necrology: (1) a list of persons who have died within a certain time period (2) a notice of death;

Obituaries and Death Notices (newspapers, church publications)

Probate Record

Sexton Records

Social Securities Death Indexes

Wills, Administrations, and Probate

For additional information on the above death records, see Chapter 1 – Records of Death in Your Guide to Cemetery Research by Sharon DeBartolo Carmack, Davenport Public Library call no. 929.5. This book is available for circulation.

Notice of any of these events might be in the newspaper

3. Census reports

We discussed Census reports last week.

4. Cemetery Records

Don't believe everything you read on a tombstone, but it can be a good starting place. It might indicate where your family member lived.

reminder: some people did not die in the city/county where they are buried.

5. Church/Synagogue Records

If you find the church where your family member attended, there may be records regarding birth/baptism, marriage, death or burial.

Lutheran and Catholic churches typically kept extensive records and they can be especially helpful as well as Quakers or Friends.