

21 Ways to Find Ancestors Death Information

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When researching our ancestors, one of the most important events is their death. Determining dates and location of death is important as we document the major events in their lives. Most folks limit their search to the obvious repositories, whether online or not.

That would include online or offline death indexes (such as the SSDI and State Death Indexes), death certificates, obituaries, and burial/cemetery records.

But there are many more ways to determine specifics about someone's death, as well as finding clues that help you narrow their death date to a decade, a year, or even less.

Most of these cannot stand alone as evidence of the actual date and location of an ancestor's death - so you might want to check many of these sources to provide corroborating evidence.

1. SSDI - the Social Security Death Index (SSDI) is probably the most frequently researched collection of death information. Unfortunately there are many instances of errors and omissions evident in this collection. Often only the month of last benefit is entered rather than the death date. And the location is the location where benefits were received - not always the actual death location. The Social Security NUMIDENT Files from the U.S. National Archive are also quite useful.
2. State Death Indexes - whether online or in a book at a library - these provide dates and sometimes locations of death. But since they are indexes that are most likely entered from death certificates, you always have to keep in mind that transcription and typing errors can occur.
3. Death Records and Certificates - this is the best document for establishing date and location of death. Usually they are signed by an attending physician (at least in the last 100 years or so) who was there when the ancestor patient died. But other information on the certificate is only as good as the information known and memory of the informant, usually a family member.
4. Cemetery Records - there are lots of ways to find this information. There are several online sites that have information and photos of gravestones, where the date (or at least year) of death is inscribed. And you can visit individual cemeteries where records sometimes are made available. But again these are only as good as the information that the purchaser of the gravestone has provided. Mistakes can be made.
5. Mortuary Records - this is a resource that I have personally used. Often they are hard to get to, but they often provide a great deal of information regarding the decedent and his or her burial and funeral, including date of death. And some of the mortuary records have the obituary attached.

6. Coroner's Reports - although a coroner's report often states the date the deceased person was found, which may have been different than when he or she died - the reports are quite detailed and can provide quite useful information.
7. Probate, Wills and Estates - these legal documents will likely have the death information for your ancestor who has passed, as well as the legal proceedings and will information.
8. Military Records - the military is quite good in keeping lots of information regarding service members - so you should have lots of places where the death information is recorded, in the case of an ancestor who died while on active duty.
9. Pension Records - whether military or civilian, birth date and location may be included.
10. Immigration Records - in the oft chance where an ancestor died while immigrating, make sure that you check all the pages of a recorded voyage. Many times there are notes, should the immigrant have passed while in transit.
11. Obituaries, Obituary Indexes and Newspaper Death Notices - another very frequently used piece of information. But these are only as good as the memory of the person providing the information - as well as the person working at the newspaper and their skill and attention to detail. Many mistakes are made in obituaries.
12. Census Records - you won't find anyone's death dates in a census record. But you might find some clues. Say Mr. Smith and his family showed up in the 1930 census. But in the 1940 census, the same family is there but he isn't. If he had died, likely Mrs. Smith would be denoted with a "W" or Wd" in the Marital Status column indicating that she was a widow. This would most likely mean that Mr. Smith had died sometime between 1930 and the next census. So you could then perform further research centering on his demise for the decade between 1930 and 1940. Now if Mrs. Smith and Mr. Smith had divorced in that same decade and then she married a NEW Mr. Smith who then died, then the original Mr. Smith might still be around. One could come up with all kinds of interesting scenarios - but generally the first case that I mentioned would hold true. Remember to search the Census Mortality schedules if available.
13. City Directories - you won't find death dates in City Directories either, but if Mr. Smith showed up in a 1922 City Directory with his wife's name in parentheses, e.g. "(Polly)" and then the 1923 City Directory has no Mr. Smith and a Polly Smith (widow) at the same address, then you might conclude that Mr. Smith died in 1922 or 1923 - again providing a narrower next area of research for you to perform.
14. Church Newsletters - I have found ancestor death dates in newsletters for the Church that they attended. So for more recent deaths for churches that write and distribute newsletters - this is a source of death date clues. You might want to keep track of what churches, synagogues, etc. that your ancestors worshipped.
15. Personal Bibles - many families recorded birth and death date information in the family Bible.
16. Land Records - sales of land or transfers of ownership from the deceased to the living spouse can sometimes give you an estimated death date, from which you might be able to ascertain exact information from other records.

17. Family Histories and Biographies - many times the deceased and/or family may donate family records and possibly biographies to the local library. Finding these can be a gold mine.
18. Newspaper Legal Notices - about the estate, disposition of the estate, etc.
19. Alumni Directories and Newsletters - for both high school and college graduates may contain a notice about the death of a former student.
20. Private Death Records - includes insurance papers, medical records, etc.
21. Newspaper Local Interest Articles - in smaller, local newspapers, often the goings on from residents and guests were recorded. If someone traveled to or from the town to attend a funeral, often the deceased's name was mentioned. From the date of the article, one might have a clue as to the death date and location of the deceased.