

Finding Vital Records Online Beyond Ancestry & FamilySearch

by Ted Gostin

Most genealogists, when looking for vital records online, conduct their search on *Ancestry.com* and/or *FamilySearch.org*, but go no further than these two websites. There are hundreds of other websites (probably thousands) that contain some information on births, marriages and deaths, however, and these sites often provide information not found on the two major genealogy sites. The different types of websites one might consider when searching for vital records online are reviewed in this lecture, along with the types of vital records information one might find there.

Types of Vital Records Information Online

Online vital records information can come in several formats, from static indexes (simple typed lists) to searchable index databases linked to actual document images. Some of the most common formats one might find are described below.

- Searchable index plus copies of documents. This is the most complete type of vital records database found online. One example is the Ohio deaths collection from 1908 to 1953 on *FamilySearch.org*. This collection has a searchable index prepared by *FamilySearch.org* volunteers, and each index entry includes a clickable link to a digitized copy of the actual death certificate.
- Searchable index plus copies of original static index. In some cases, online vital records indexes have links to images of the original static index, rather than the original documents. Examples are the California divorce indexes on *Ancestry.com*, which link to images of the microfiche divorce index page where the divorce was listed.
- Searchable index only, with no copies of original documents or index. An example would be the searchable databases of California death indexes from 1940 to 1997 on *Ancestry.com*, *RootsWeb*, or *FamilySearch.org*. These were prepared from original static indexes on microfiche, later sold as data files on CD-ROM, so the online indexes generally don't include any images.
- Static index pages only, with no images. On some volunteer websites, you may find indexes that are simply alphabetical lists, or PDFs of book indexes, etc. While you can visually search these online static indexes, there is no database searching available.
- Document images but no indexes. Some websites - particularly *FamilySearch.org* and some archives - put document images online without any indexes, making them searchable in the same way that microfilmed records are searchable. You just have to go through them one page at a time, looking for your records.

Types of Websites with Vital Records

As with the different types of vital records data one might find online, there are several different types of websites on which one might find vital records information. Some of these are described below.

Commercial Genealogy Sites. While the largest and most well-known commercial genealogy site is *Ancestry.com*, there are quite a few other genealogy websites requiring subscriptions that provide some vital records information. Two of them – *WorldVitalRecords* and *MyHeritage.com* – are related, with *WorldVitalRecords* being owned by *MyHeritage.com*. Another option is *VitalSearch.com*, which is now owned by *Ancestry.com*, but which is still operated as a separate subscription service. The strength of *VitalSearch*, which only covers some states, is their collection of county and municipal records. In addition to statewide indexes for the states they cover, they also have many local sources online, either as digitized images, or index images and searchable databases. There are some small, specialized commercial services that contain useful information. *JewishData.com*, for instance, has the largest collection of burials at Chicago's Waldheim Cemeteries found online. Finally, commercial services that cooperate with government archives, such as *FindMyPast.com* for England and Wales, or *Scotland's People*, provide many vital records indexes online. In some cases, such as *Scotland's People*, actual images of the original documents may also be available for a fee.

Free Genealogy Sites. There are also a number of other free genealogy sites other than *FamilySearch.org* that have vital records information online. These include *RootsWeb* (now owned by *Ancestry.com*) and *USGenWeb.org*. Both of these are free volunteer maintained websites, despite *Ancestry.com's* purchase of *RootsWeb* a few years ago. The vital records data that they have online usually consists of static indexes (typed lists, rather than searchable databases) to vital records prepared and posted by volunteers. For Jewish genealogists, *JewishGen* contains many vital records databases from both the U.S. and Europe. In addition to *RootsWeb* and *USGenWeb*, the British site *FreeBMD* contains a searchable database of birth, marriage and death registrations in England and Wales taken from the published civil registration indexes. While some of the *FreeBMD* data is also searchable on *Ancestry.com*, that version of the database is old and does not include the up-to-date entries that can be searched directly from the *FreeBMD* website. For death records, there are also cemetery databases online on such websites as *FindAGrave.com*, *Interment.net*, and *BillionGraves.com*.

State Government Agencies. In the United States, the responsibility is for maintaining birth, marriage and death records is left to the states. Each state has a vital records agency – usually part of the state Department of Health – that is responsible for keeping current vital records. Some of the state vital records agencies have online indexes of vital records to help people locate the records they want to purchase. In many cases, older records have been transferred to the state archives and/or library, and these agencies also sometimes have indexes online, and some even now have digitized images of original records online. So there are usually two levels of state agencies to check for online: the vital records office, holding current and more recent records; and the state archives and/or library, which will usually hold older records. Both may have some vital records indexes online, while usually only the state archives/library will have actual copies of documents available.

County Government Agencies. While the states have the overall responsibility for maintaining vital records, the day-to-day recording of such events usually starts with a county agency. This is usually the County Recorder or County Clerk, although an office with a different name may be responsible in some states. Copies of birth, marriage and death records are usually first recorded with the county agency, and then copies are sent to the state government agency. And just like the state agencies, older county records are often in the possession of a county archive

or library. Many county agencies resist putting information online because they obtain much of their funding by charging for searches and certified copies, but there are some county vital records agencies that have indexes online. There are more county archives or libraries that have both indexes and document images online.

Local Government Agencies. In some parts of the country – notably New England and Atlantic states – the local agency responsible for recording vital records is not the County Clerk, but the municipal Clerk of the city, town or village in which the event occurred. Very few of such agencies have any indexes or documents online, though. But when older records are transferred to an archive, they may be transferred to municipal archive rather than a county archive, so it pays to search for municipal archive websites that might have older vital records.

Genealogical & Historical Societies. Many genealogical and historical societies may have vital records indexes online, at a minimum, prepared by members of the societies. In some cases, such societies also hold copies of the actual vital records, and occasionally, one might be able to access copies of the actual document copies online. So beyond the government agencies that normally create and store vital records, also check the websites of local genealogical and historical societies for the places where your family lived. And remember that there could be genealogical historical societies at the state, county and municipal levels, any of which might have some vital records online on their websites.

Public & University Libraries. Finally, public and university libraries are also often the repositories of public vital records, and sometimes have local vital records online. On occasion, rather than depositing older vital records with a public archive, some localities have deposited such older records with a local public or university library. While this is somewhat rare, it is also somewhat widespread, so that you will find such cases scattered throughout the country. And local public libraries often serve genealogists, and so many have created finding aids to genealogical resources, including vital records. Many such libraries will have indexes to vital records and newspaper announcements to births, marriages and deaths online. The addition of newspaper announcements to vital events online sometimes makes it possible to locate events online even when indexes to public vital records are not available.

So when searching for vital records online, keep in mind the many types of possible websites that might have vital records, combining the local, county and state levels with the different types of agencies: vital records offices and government archives/libraries, public/university libraries, genealogical/historical societies, etc.

A Sampling of Genealogy Sites with Vital Records Online

The following is just a sampling of the many genealogical sites beyond Ancestry.com and FamilySearch.org that have some kind of vital records online. The list is not comprehensive, but includes all of the examples used in the lecture and will give you an idea of what types of sites to look for when searching vital records online.

Commercial Genealogy Sites

www.myheritage.com

www.worldvitalrecords.com

www.vitalsearch-worldwide.com
www.jewishdata.com
www.findmypast.co.uk
www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk

Free Genealogy Sites

www.rootsweb.ancestry.com
www.usgenweb.org
www.jewishgen.org
www.freebmd.org.uk
www.findagrave.com
www.interment.net
billiongraves.com

State Level Agencies

genealogy.az.gov (Arizona)
www.digitalarchives.wa.gov (Washington)
www.sec.state.ma.us/vitalrecordssearch/VitalRecordsSearch.aspx (Massachusetts)
www.californiaancestors.org (California)
specialcollections.du.edu (Colorado)

County Level Agencies

register.shelby.tn.us/ (Shelby Co. TN)
ulstercountyny.gov/archives/database.html (Ulster Co., NY)
digital.denverlibrary.org/cdm/genealogy/#marr (Denver County, CO)

Local Level Agencies

www.cityofrochester.gov/marriagerecords (Rochester, NY)
drc.libraries.uc.edu/handle/2374.UC/2032 (Cincinnati, OH)
newsindex.cpl.org (Cleveland, OH)

Newspapers

www.newspaperarchive.com
www.newspapers.com
www.genealogybank.com
www.chroniclingamerica.org
www.fultonhistory.com/fulton.html (New York newspapers)
cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc (California Digital Newspaper Collection)
web.nli.org.il/sites/JPress/English/Pages/default.aspx (Historical Jewish Press)
sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/cm/nav/index/title (Compact Memory - German)
anno.onb.ac.at (ANNO - Austrian newspapers)

International Vital Records

www.findmypast.com or www.findmypast.co.uk (England & Wales)
www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk (Scotland)
www.lvva-raduraksti.lv/en.html (Latvia)
www.agad.gov.pl/inwentarze/testy.html (AGAD Archives, Poland)