

# WHAT DID MY ANCESTOR DIE OF?

Finding, Understanding and Interpreting Death Certificates

A Presentation by David Bradford

## OVERVIEW

Death records contain a wealth of genealogical information. To extract the useful information from a death certificate, one must know how to find and interpret them, as well as understand their source reliability and evidentiary uses. It is also helpful to appreciate the state of medical training and practice from the era in which the certificate was produced.

## COLONIAL ERA MEDICINE

Trained physicians were few in cities and altogether absent in the wilderness. Sick people turned first to folk remedies and then to barbers for a bleeding. Because they were expensive, physicians were a last resort. Also practicing were other “healers” including apothecaries, midwives, liberally trained ministers and potion & elixir peddlers.

Until the mid-19th century, doctors generally did more harm than good. Therapies were primitive, using centuries-old methods like purging, blood-letting, dousing & enclosing the suffering in their home. Organized medicine ignored *Germ Theory* until nearly 1890; doctors went from patient to patient without washing – spreading disease in their wake.

## MEDICAL TRAINING IN AMERICA

Early physician training was rudimentary – often brief, superficial and sometimes without patient contact of any kind:

- **PHASE 1 – Apprenticeship Training (1750-1800)** – teens indentured themselves for years to a local practitioner.
- **PHASE 2 – University “Lecture” Training (1800-1840)** – 4 universities lent their name-only to medical schools.
- **PHASE 3 – Proprietary Medical Mills (1840-1876)** – dozens of “lecturer and a box of bones” schools opened.
- **PHASE 4 – Halting Emergence of Professionalism (1846-1910)** – attempts to introduce standards like “grading.”
- **PHASE 5 – Modern Era of Medical Training (after 1910)** – rigorous scientific standards; 50% of “schools” close.

Meager training made the “Causes of Death” on death certificates idiosyncratic and highly suspect through 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

## COMMON DISEASES OF ANTIQUITY

**Disease and Indigenous Peoples** - Some illnesses were absent from North America before 1492. The indigenous people lacked resistance to these new infections and suffered 80-90% mortality when exposed to smallpox, measles and tuberculosis. Mass deaths occurred as a result of exposure to Spanish explorers, French trappers and later Colonists.

**Colonial Illnesses** – The disease environment was hostile to European settlers, and mortality was high for new arrivals especially in the malarial Southern Colonies. Mortality was highest for slaves, women, infants and small children.

**Disease and Immigration** - Port cities quarantined sick sailors and passengers. Pest houses were established throughout the early 1700s. Many arrivals were not allowed off-ship and compelled to return to Europe or die en-route.

### Civil War Diseases

As many as 850,000 soldiers died in the US Civil War. More than half died of disease, not battle injuries. Commonly, soldiers died of bacterial dysentery. Camps were breeding grounds for diseases due to poor sanitation (cholera and typhoid fever), close quarters (tick, lice and flea-borne typhus), open air living (mosquito-borne malaria), communicable disease (tuberculosis) and, because many soldiers had never been “off the farm,” childhood diseases (especially measles).

**Historical Diseases** - Old diseases (except small pox) are still with us, but now occur at low rates. We now immunize against diseases like measles, mumps, rubella, chicken pox, polio and tetanus that were once universal. Poor drinking water resulted in Typhoid Fever where streams or wells became fouled by human waste. Dietary Diseases like Scurvy (Vitamin C deficiency), Goiter (iodine deficiency) and Pellagra (Niacin or Vitamin B3 deficiency) were common. Parasites were pervasive in the new world, and fleas, ticks, lice, scabies and intestinal parasites were difficult to treat.

## LIFE EXPECTANCY

Colonial lives were “nasty, brutish and short.” City dwellers died sooner than rural, and as late as 1800, average Colonial life expectancy was only 25 years. More than a quarter of the Anglican missionaries died within five years of arrival in the Carolinas, and half of fertile women died between 20 and 30 years of age. Slave life expectancy was even worse at only 20 years. Infant mortality was worse yet; 16% of Massachusetts infants died in the first year (vs 1% today) and half of all children died by age 10. Public health measures didn’t emerge until after 1900... except in the South where it took an additional 50 years.

## DEFINITION OF DEATH CERTIFICATE

Death records are variable; each governmental jurisdiction is different. Death certificate can be either a physician's medical document certifying a death, or a registrar's legal document declaring the date, location and cause death.

## USES OF DEATH CERTIFICATES

Death certificates have several uses, including ruling out foul-play, facilitating burial or cremation, providing legal evidence of death for probate or life insurance and supporting public health measures - and family research.

## FINDING DEATH RECORDS

In Wisconsin, government filing of birth, marriage or death was not mandatory until 1907. Family may request certified copies, but anyone may request a non-certified version from their county court house or the WI Vital Records Office.

Other death records are found in state archives, city & county civil registries, but also church & burial records, online sites like Ancestry, FamilySearch, Footnote, World Vital Records, Heritage Quest, newspaper accounts of deaths, family bibles, biographies, obituaries, tombstones, genealogies posted by others and online search tools like Google, Google News & Google Books. Death certificates are organized differently in different jurisdictions – often idiosyncratically by clerk. Don't overlook neighboring county courthouses which may have been closer and more convenient to your ancestors.

## WHAT INFORMATION TO EXPECT

Death records are especially helpful to family researchers, because they may provide information on a person's birth, spouse, and parents – and because there are often death records for persons who have no birth or marriage records.

- **Names:** Death records always provide the deceased person's name, and often maiden name, parents', children's, spouses', or witness's name. The names of the cemetery & funeral home, can also lead to further information.
- **Dates:** Death records contain the deceased person's birth and death dates & may provide duration of illness.
- **Locations:** Death records provide place of death and possibly place of birth, residence, and burial location.
- **Circumstances of Death:** Death date can help identify a newspaper articles or obituaries especially for prominent citizens, accidents or unusual death circumstances. Cause of death can help develop a family medical history.
- **Miscellaneous Information:** You may find occupation, employer, parents' nativity, marital status, duration of residence, nativity and year of immigration.

Doctors provide "primary" death facts (date, time, place and cause of death); all other information is provided by an "informant" and should be considered "second-hand," and verified elsewhere. Informants' facts are often wrong.

## INTERPRETING DEATH CERTIFICATES

**Get the Original Death Certificate** - Many death records (cards, logs, indexes) lack detail. Some records compiled by religious or military organizations and web sites are incomplete. Get the original death certificate for the full information.

**Context is Important** - Location, time period, urban or rural, war or peace, newspaper accounts of disease outbreaks or disasters, obituary description of death, illness duration and recent deaths of other family members can be helpful.

**Don't forget the Obituary** - Through the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, obituaries were salaciously detailed with regard to causes and circumstances of death. Always try to look them up in local newspapers.

**Cause of Death Accuracy** - Prior to the 19th century, doctors didn't have lab tests, x-rays and autopsies for a diagnosis, so the terms used may describe symptoms they observed or patient complaints, rather than a medical diagnosis. Dropsy, also called edema, meant swelling; consumption usually meant tuberculosis, but could describe any wasting disease; and apoplexy meant stroke, but could mean loss of sensation or movement of body or a part or loss of blood to any organ.

**Archaic & Confusing Diagnostic Terminology** – Absent accurate diagnosis, dozens of unrelated illnesses were generically called "the fever." Conversely, a single disease was called many different names; small pox was called black pox, toxic pox, purpuric pox and hemorrhagic pox. Typhus (different from typhoid fever) is spread by lice, ticks & fleas and was called "ship fever," "war fever," "trench fever," "camp fever," "hospital fever" and "jail fever." Malaria, literally "bad air," was called "periodic fever," "remitting fever," "paroxysmal fever," "jungle fever," "swamp fever" and "marsh fever."

**Look out for "Default Diagnoses"** - some doctors & coroners used "heart failure" a default diagnosis when they had no specific cause of death. It's not entirely wrong, because everyone's heart stops upon death.

**Handwriting Issues** - Illegible doctor & clerk handwriting is common, but there are tools to help. Interpret as best you can, then search partial terms in Google or Bing which offer spelling corrections. If the first few letters are legible, use an Archaic Medical Dictionary (see links below) to narrow the diagnosis. ICD diagnosis codes may be found after 1900.

## APPENDIX 1 – LINKS

### Finding Rock County Death Records

- *Rock County Genealogy Records Search* - birth, cemeteries, census, death, marriage, obituaries, land.  
<http://publicrecords.onlinesearches.com/view/lid/169065>
- *Hedberg Public Library* - genealogy records such as census records, cemeteries, obituaries, and more.  
<http://publicrecords.onlinesearches.com/view/lid/169080>
- *Rock County Register of Deeds*,  
Rock County Courthouse, 51 S Main St., Janesville, WI 53545, Phone (608)757-5650 Fax (608)757-5563  
<http://publicrecords.onlinesearches.com/view/lid/14981>

### Finding Death Records Elsewhere

- *Joe Beine's Online Searchable Death Indexes & Records*  
<http://www.deathindexes.com/index.html>
- *"FamilySearch Guide to finding Death Records in the US by State"*  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/How\\_to\\_Find\\_United\\_States\\_Death\\_Records](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/How_to_Find_United_States_Death_Records)
- *"The Cemeteries Wiki Page"* discusses Funeral home records  
[https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States\\_Cemeteries](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Cemeteries)
- *"U.S. Military Death Records"* for soldiers who died in the military or are buried in military cemeteries.  
[www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United\\_States\\_Military\\_Records](http://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Military_Records)
- *"Social Security Death Index (SSDI)"* contains deaths reported to SSA since 1935, mostly since 1962  
<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=3693>

### Archaic Medical Dictionaries (check more than one)

- *"English Glossary of Archaic Medical Terms, Diseases and Causes of Death"*  
[www.antiquusmorbus.com/English/English](http://www.antiquusmorbus.com/English/English)
- *"Terminology Cause of Death Look-up Site"*  
<http://www.archaicmedicalterms.com/>
- *Archaic and Obsolete Medical Terminology*  
<http://www.neonatology.org/classics/old.terms.html>
- *RootsWeb's Old Medical Dictionary*  
<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~usgwkidz/oldmedterm.htm>
- *Glossary of Medical Terms from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries*  
<http://www.thornber.net/medicine/html/medgloss.html>
- *Fenton Historical Society's Old Medical Terms*  
<http://fentonhistsoc.tripod.com/id121.html>
- *Colonial Diseases & Cures* – an online reference  
<http://homepages.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~sam/disease.html>
- *Sub-classification of Archaic Amentias* (Types of "Idiocies" or mental impairments)  
<http://studymore.org.uk/xmn1928.htm#51>

### Causes of Death

- *"Decennial Cause of Death in England, 1851–1910."* A searchable database.  
[www.visionofbritain.org.uk](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk)
- National Center for Health Statistics. "Leading Causes of Death, 1900–1998."  
[http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/lead1900\\_98.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/lead1900_98.pdf) .
- *"Historic Mortality Datasets"* are found in The National Archives (UK).  
<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>

### International Classification of Disease System (ICD)

- Article: "The Secret Codes on Death Certificates That Can Tell You How Your Ancestors Died"  
<https://familyhistorydaily.com/free-genealogy-resources/icd-codes-death-certificates-genealogy/>
- Article: "Having trouble reading cause of death on an ancestor's death certificate? Just use the ICD"  
<https://sheaffergenealogy.com/2016/10/19/having-trouble-reading-cause-of-death-on-an-ancestors-death-certificate-just-use-the-icd/>
- Historical Versions of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD)  
<http://www.wolfbane.com/icd/index.html>

## APPENDIX 2 – Archaic & Obsolete Medical Terminology

- Ablepsy - blindness
- Ague - intermittent fever & chills; usually, most often associated with malaria.
- Aphonia or Aphasia - A suppression of the voice; laryngitis or as a result of stroke.
- Apoplexy - A disease in which the patient falls down suddenly without other sense or motion; stroke
- Biliousness - jaundice
- Black Pox – Small Pox; also called Toxic, Purpuric or Hemorrhagic pox from Variola virus.
- Bloody Flux - dysentery; an inflammation of the intestine causing diarrhea with blood.
- Brain Fever - an inflammation of the brain, including encephalitis, meningitis and cerebritis
- Break-bone Fever - dengue fever, also known as Break-Heart or Bilious Remitting fever
- Camp Fever – Typhus; also called ship fever, war fever, trench fever, hospital fever and jail fever.
- Chlorosis - anemia; also called green sickness
- Cholera infantum - infant diarrhea; sometimes called "summer diarrhea" or "summer complaint"
- Chrisomes – death of an infant less than one month old
- Catarrh - excessive buildup of mucus in the nose or throat, also bronchitis or the common cold.
- Consumption – Tuberculosis; but can mean any disease resulting in wasting of the body.
- Creeping paralysis - Syphilis
- Debility - "failure to thrive" in infancy, or old age; loss of weight from undiagnosed cancer or other disorder.
- Distemper - Disturbed condition of the body or mind; a mental or physical disorder; a disease or ailment.
- Dropsy – edema or swelling; often caused by congestive heart failure
- Erb's Paralysis – late stage syphilis
- Fatuity - meaning imbecility, dementia.
- Febrile Intermittens - intermittent fever & chills; usually, associated with malaria.
- Falling sickness - epilepsy
- Flux - diarrhea
- French pox or French disease – syphilis (though the French called it the English Disease)
- General Paresis of the Insane – insanity caused by late stage syphilis
- Grip or Grippe – influenza
- Gripe - a spasmodic pain in the colon
- Iliac Passion - a particularly violent gastrointestinal disorder
- Infantile Paralysis – polio myelitis
- Jacksonian March – a simple or partial seizure; often progressive from fingers to the limb and half body
- Jaundice – Yellow: liver obstruction; Black: Melanea (dark stool); Blue: cyanosis
- Marasmus - a wasting of the flesh without fever or apparent disease; severe malnutrition
- Milk sickness - poisoning from milk of cows that have eaten the white snakeroot plant; only in the US Midwest.
- Mortification – tissue death; gangrene; necrosis
- Nostalgia - homesickness; yes, this was occasionally listed as a cause of death
- Palsy – reduced or lost sensation or movement – often wit stroke; may be “creeping” or progressive
- Paralysis Agitans – Parkinson's Disease
- Pernicious Fever – a severe intermittent fever – often danhgerous & deadly
- Phrenitis – phrenzy or inflammation of the membrane of the brain; meningitis
- Phthisis - French for "consumption"; 1 Pulmonary tuberculosis. 2 Any lung or throat affections; a cough; asthma.
- Phthiriasis - an infestation with lice
- Pleurisy – congestion of the lungs and swelling
- Putrid fever - typhus
- Quince – also called Scrofula; a nodular lymph node enlargement – particularly of the neck
- Quinsy - a peri-tonsillar abscess, a known complication of tonsillitis
- Scitta - Epidemic dysentery
- Scrupox - skin disease; usually an infection caused by the herpes simplex virus
- (the) Shakes - The fever and ague; sometimes Parkinson's Disease
- Sore Throat Distemper – The croup, diphtheria
- Tormina - Acute wringing pains in the abdomen; colic, gripes.
- (the) Vapors, the Vapours - Typhoid Fever, Febricula, Little Fever; thought to be from “bad air”
- Zona or Zoster – Shingles caused by Herpes Zoster