Birth, Marriage, and Death Records

Most U. S. states did not pass “vital records” laws requiring registration of births and deaths until around 1910-1915. Marriage records are more complete, because marriages were already being recorded at the county courthouse. But even if there is not an official government record of your ancestor’s birth, marriage, or death, there are other sources.

How do I order a copy of a birth, marriage, divorce, or death certificate for someone in my family?
A quick web search for “vital records” plus the name of your state will usually get you the address to write to, plus a fee schedule; or go to the links page maintained by the Centers for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w.htm. A company called VitalChek can order records through any state agency (www.vitalchek.com). This is typically more expensive than writing to the state vital records office directly, but faster and easier (you can order on-line).

Can I order a birth certificate if I don’t know exactly when this person was born?
You’ll need to know which state and what approximate year. The state agency will be willing to search a certain time span (usually three years) for the name you request. You can usually determine an ancestor’s approximate year of birth, and the state they were born in, from census records. The process is similar for death records.

Will a death certificate name the parents of the deceased?
There was always a blank space on the certificate to list the names of the parents of the deceased. But the coroner would rely on a relative for this information (the informant’s name should be on the certificate). Sometimes, these fields are blank. Even if names are listed, you have to be careful — this information is only as good as the informant.

Can I find a birth certificate for someone who was adopted?
In most states, the original birth certificate of an adopted person is sealed (along with the court proceedings) to protect the privacy of the birth parents; and a new certificate listing the adoptive parents is issued. The process for un-sealing records varies by state. See the tip sheet on “Adoption and Birth Parent Searches” for more information.

Can I get information through the Social Security System?
Persons who died during or after 1962 and had a Social Security card should be listed in the on-line Social Security Death Index (SSDI), available at several websites. It lists each deceased person’s name, date of birth, Social Security Number, and date of death. Better still, you can order a deceased person’s original Social Security application form, which will give the full names of both of the applicant’s parents. A copy of the original application (which costs $27.00 if you have their Social Security number and $29.00 if you do not) can be ordered using Form SSA-711, “Request for Deceased Individual’s Social Security Record.” Go to www.ssa.gov and type SSA-711 into the “Search” box.

What if I can’t find a state-issued document?
If you can’t find an official document (or if you just want more information), you might try checking:

Newspaper obituaries. Call the county library of the county in which this person died. Ask for the local history and genealogy department, and then ask the librarian to do an obituary look-up for you. Find out whether there is a fee for this service. Then mail or e-mail a formal request with the person’s name and date of death.

Funeral home records. Funeral homes stay in business a long time. You may be able to find out the name of a funeral home from a newspaper obituary or from a death certificate. Do a web browser search to find out if the institution is still in business, and call them up. Funeral home records can be surprisingly informative: who paid for the funeral? Was there a minister from a particular denomination? A flag-draped coffin? A special hymn?

Tombstone inscriptions. Inscriptions often list dates of birth and death (and, more rarely, marriage).

Church registers of christenings, marriages, and burials. The Catholic Church has been particularly good at keeping these kinds of records – contact the local diocese. Many other churches have kept such records as well.

Marriage registers at the county courthouse. The local courthouse in each county usually kept a Marriage Book, starting at the date the county was organized. Most of these books have been indexed for quick reference.

Family bible records, and other family information. Often, someone in the family has kept a written record of family birthdays and similar information. Check with older relatives (such as your parents’ first cousins).

Probate court records. You may be able to get an approximate idea of when a person died by finding out when their estate was probated. Check the county Will Books to see if this person left a will. Even if they didn’t, there may still be a probate packet filed separately, listing assets and liabilities at the time of this person’s death.