



Madison County Genealogical Society



Madison County Genealogical Society
P.O. Box 1031, Norfolk, NE 68702-1031
mcgs@telebeep.com
www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nemcgs/
www.nesgs.org/~mcgs

DEATH CERTIFICATES, AN ALTERNATE SOURCE?

By Nancy Zaruba

DEATH CERTIFICATES. WHAT ARE THEY? WHY WERE THEY CREATED?

Death certificates are documents required by the state for statistical record keeping purposes to (a) provide for the registration of vital events as accurately as possible, (b) secure information about the economic, educational, occupational, and sociological backgrounds of the individuals involved in the registered events and their parents as a basis for statistical research in order to reduce morbidity and mortality and improve the quality of life. Death and fetal death certificates shall be completed by the funeral directors and embalmers and physicians for the purpose of filing with the [Nebraska] department [of Health] and providing child support enforcement information.

*If there is an attending physician they have the responsibility and duty to complete, sign and file, within twenty-four hours from the time of death, that part of the certificate of death entitled medical certificate of death. In the case of a death when no person licensed as a physician was in attendance, the funeral director and embalmer shall refer the case to the **county attorney** who shall have the responsibility and duty to complete and sign the death certificate. The county attorney shall, within twenty-four hours after taking charge of the case, state the cause of death as ascertained, giving as far as possible the means or instrument which produced the death. All death certificates shall show clearly the cause, disease, or sequence of causes ending in death. A completed death certificate shall be filed with the department within five business days after the date of death. If it is impossible to complete the certificate of death within five business days, the funeral director and embalmer shall notify the department of the reason for the delay and file the certificate as soon as possible.*

The standard form shall include a space for veteran status and the period of service in the armed forces of the United States and a statement of the cause of death made by a person holding a valid license as a physician who last attended the deceased. The standard form shall also include the deceased's social security number. The above information was condensed from Nebraska Statutes.

WHY DO GENEALOGISTS NEED THEM?

A modern death certificate includes lots of information you probably never thought of. Besides the full name of the person, his birth and death dates, his nationality, and his parents names, they also include such things as primary and secondary causes of death, veterans status, social security number, home address, place of death, place of interment, whether buried or cremated or shipped out to somewhere else, marital status, spouse name, the name of the informant (the person giving this

information), whether or not the person was pregnant, whether the death was natural, accident, suicide, homicide, undetermined, if Transportation injury, if the coroner was contacted, whether an autopsy was done, where and how the injuries occurred, date and time of death, whether tobacco use contributed to the death, and whether organ and tissue donation was considered and consent granted.

Older death certificates have less information on them but the information can sometimes be very surprising compared to what you were told or what the family stories said. Death certificates in Nebraska were required starting in late 1904 but were not always consistently filed until 1912-1920, depending on the location in the state.

Genealogists should consider collecting the death certificates of as many relatives as possible. You may discover a stillborn child listing on a siblings birth or death certificate. You may be able to track hereditary diseases or family illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease. You may be surprised at who is listed as parents, ages, etc. There are mysteries to be solved and mysteries that only get deeper but Death Certificates are another valuable clue in your research.

WHERE CAN YOU GET THEM?

The usual source in Nebraska is the State Department of Vital Statistics in Lincoln. You are not allowed to search yourself but must pay the state a search fee whether or not they actually find any. In Nebraska birth and death certificates are not available at the county courthouses in most instances. The counties were required to send all of their records to the State and for the most part, no local copies were kept. Many other states are different. In Iowa and Minnesota, death certificates are available at the county courthouses and are open to anyone to look at. You cannot always make a copy but you are usually welcome to copy out the information yourself. Some counties also allow photocopies for genealogical purposes. The point is that you can search for yourself for free, thus looking for misspellings and misfiled documents.

HOWEVER—THERE IS ANOTHER SOURCE IN NEBRASKA!!

Did you know that if a person owned land or property at the time of his death that notice had to be filed in the Register of Deeds Office in the county in which the property is located? That's right. In early years the will and final decree are filed against the land record in the Register of Deed's office. If he died without a will there is still a court notice, determination of inheritance tax and determination of who gets the property. Since 1952, the actual death certificate has been filed in most instances. Many of these certificates are for persons who may have died many years before but the certificate didn't have to be filed until the property is sold. Madison County started indexing death certificates in a separate book in 1952 and continued until about 1979 filing them separately. Before and after that date the information is filed against the legal description. Remember you will not find a death certificate for a child, or infant but if the person owned land when they died, that death certificate should be on file. For Madison County that becomes even easier to search. The Title Insurance company I work for kept a separate index continuing where the courthouse index left off and it continued doing so up until March 2007. They are no longer keeping the separate index but there are several thousand death certificates indexed. Hopefully if your ancestor or relative owned land in another county you can find a death certificate there, and if you have an idea of where in the county the search will be even easier. While you are searching, explore the other wonderful tidbits hidden in the Register of Deeds Office. We'll talk about some of these other things in later articles.

The index for the two death certificate books in the Madison County Register of Deed's Office will be published in this newsletter over the next several months. The rest of the index for the more recent certificates will also be made available though I haven't yet decided if I should publish them here or make a separate booklet available to all. **If you find names of death certificates that you would like copies of please contact me and I can get them from my office for a \$1.00 copy charge from the microfiche. You can also go in person to the Madison County Register of Deed's Office and copy it yourself. Please DO NOT send mail or phone requests directly to the courthouse.**
Nancy Zaruba, 304 N. Cottonwood, Norfolk, NE 68701 nzaruba@kdsi.net

Death Certificates Program

By Nancy Zaruba

Some of this information was in the last issue but here is a concise version of the program I presented at the June meeting.

Death Certificates: Their use in Genealogy and some of the places to find them.

1. What information is on a death certificate? Information about –the person and – information about the person's death
2. Information about the PERSON may include: first name, middle name, last name, age, sex, race, date of birth, place of birth, marital status, spouse's name, occupation, father's name (& birthplace), mother's name (& birthplace) and home address
3. Information about the PERSON'S DEATH may include: date of death, primary cause of death, contributing cause of death, duration of the causes of death, the physician, location of the death, place of burial, date of burial, undertaker/mortician, date when death certificate was filed, whether burial, cremation, donation, removal, etc.
4. Not all of this information will be on every death certificate. The forms were not always complete and earlier death records frequently used abbreviations and medical terms that are now outdated for illnesses. Some death certificates will also show whether the person was pregnant at the time of death, whether an autopsy was performed, whether the death was Natural, Accident, Suicide, Homicide, or undetermined, sometimes also other interesting information.
5. History of Death Certificates: Death certificates are documents required by the state for statistical record keeping purposes to: provide for registration of vital events; secure information about the economic, educational, occupational and sociological backgrounds of the individuals involved as a basis for statistical research to reduce morbidity and mortality and improve the quality of life; death and fetal death certificates for the purpose of providing child support enforcement information.
6. Death certificates were started in different years in different states; in Nebraska, late 1904; in Minnesota, 1908 but records were kept locally far earlier, 1870 in New Ulm, etc.

7. Creating a death certificate is not an exact science. Causes of death are frequently wrong because without an autopsy the exact cause of death is just a guess. In Nebraska, by law, the County Coroner is the County Attorney who may have absolutely no training in death scene investigation. If a family doctor filled out the death certificate the cause of death is more likely to be accurate.
8. Misspellings by family and errors in transcription: Information on death certificates is usually supplied by either a spouse, a child, a sibling or other family members at a time of great stress and grief. They may give erroneous information to authorities, and errors of communication can occur between the person giving and the one receiving information in stressful circumstances. People frequently are not thinking clearly and may not remember or recall at the moment.
9. The information given is a good place to start but do not take it as absolute fact. Death certificates especially before the 1970s were transcribed by hand, (no photocopiers). Therefore, names and places, etc. may be misspelled because the transcriber could not read the handwriting.
10. In addition, people can make mistakes in entering data into forms and databases. Thus, you should consider all the possible errors and spelling variations when trying to locate a death certificate. Check, for example, the various spelling for last names (e.g. Johnson, Johnsen or Jonson).
11. In addition certain letters such as a cursive "Z" may look like a "J" and an "a" that does not close may be mistaken for a "u", and a cursive "r" can be mistaken for a "c", etc. This was brought home to me when I finally found a marriage record for a great uncle wherein: Zaruba was filed under Jacobu.
12. 13.14.15. What's on them that would be helpful to genealogists? 1. Birthplace and birth date (will let you look for other family members, census records, newspaper articles) 2. Burial location and date (you can then look for an obituary and other family members gravestones), 3. Cause of Death (possibly genetic?, tendency to run in family?, unusual cause of death would generate an addition story in the newspaper) 4. Name and Father and perhaps Mother's maiden name and their birth places (opens up a whole new line of research) 5. Occupation (insight into his life and perhaps information on work organizations = postal worker, railroad, labor union) 6. Military service (military records, war records, insight into their lives & travel) 7. Social Security Number (which would allow you to send for a social security application record, which is actually filled out by the person and therefore more accurate in giving birth and family information) 8. Where they died at, which may tell you who a family member was, i.e. they may have died at a daughter's house in another state 9. Who gave the information = therefore a clue as to how accurate it is (given by a spouse, son or daughter, or a cousin, or a neighbor, etc.) (also gives you a name and perhaps another relative!) 10. Where their home was, street address and/or a legal description of property they owned.
16. Where to get them: 1. County Clerk or county Registrar in many other states (Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota) 2. State Vital Statistics office (Nebraska) 3. County Register of Deeds offices indexed against land records (most states), 4. Many Title Insurance companies maintain an in-house file of the records at the County Register of Deeds Offices.

17. How to get them: Nebraska does not allow non-certified copies for genealogy purposes only (many other states do) consequently all copies are certified and expensive: Nebraska Dept. of Health & Human Services, Div. Of Public Health, Vital Records, PO Box 95065, Lincoln, NE 68509-5065, email: vitalrecords@dhhs.ne.gov Cost is currently \$11.
18. In Minnesota: There is an online index to death certificates and they've started indexing birth certificates as well www.mnhs.org The index gives: first middle and last name, date of death, county of death and the certificate number. At this point the death index covers 1904-2001. All records earlier are at the county courthouses and later records at the State Vital Records. You may make copies at the Minnesota Historical Society for 35 cents or you may send for non-certified copies for \$9 each. If you need certified copies the cost is \$13 and must be gotten from the State Vital Records office through a process similar to Nebraska's.
19. Iowa has the records in each county registrar's office and you may search each county locally. However some do not allow photocopies, other do, but all will allow you to search the records yourself and handcopy any information you find. You can also send to the State Vital Records office for certified copies similar to Nebraska's procedures.
20. Other research tips and warnings— Keep in mind that certificates are issued and registered in the county in which the death occurred . This may be different from the county of residence. For example: my great grandmother was resident of Renville county most of her life, but, she died in the hospital in Minneapolis. Her death certificate is not available in Renville county but rather is in Hennepin County.
21. In Nebraska, certificates are not generally available in the counties, but only at the State level but many other states have the certificates at the county level and you may search for yourself. If the person died outside of Nebraska, the death records would be in the state in which the person died. (Unless they owned property, then look in the County Register of Deed's Office).

There were then a handful of death certificates presented with different features pointed out on each.

Then an example of Land Records and how to identify a death certificate or various information from the abbreviations used in the Index Books.

Ownership Terms: PD= Patent Deed, WD=Warranty Deed, WRR= Warrant Railroad, TD=Trustee's Deed, PAT=Patent (Deed), Cont=Contract (maybe), Trans=Transfer, SD=Survivorship Deed, Cert=Certificate (maybe), ED=Executor's Deed, SWD=Survivorship Warranty Deed, CWD=Corporate Warranty Deed, SherD=Sheriff's Deed

Lien Terms: MTG=mortgage, MR=Mortgage Release, MA=Mortgage Assignment, Cert Satis=Certificate of Satisfaction, CofS=Certificate of Satisfaction,McLien=Mechanics Lien, DT=Deed of Trust, Rel=Release, Assign=Assignment, Sub Tr=Substitute Trustee, Not.Def=Notice of Default, F/S=Financing Statement, Contract=(maybe), Agreement (maybe)

Other Terms: Decree=court decision, LisP=Lis Pendens (court proceeding),Ease=easement, Afft=Affidavit, Nunc Pro Tunc= court proceeding, Agrmt=Agreement, PA=Power of Attorney, DC=Death Certificate, Plat, Covenants——

**And finally the two most helpful things to remember:
GRANTOR= person/company giving & GRANTEE=person/company receiving**