

VITAL RECORDS OF PENNSYLVANIA

What are Vital Records?

Vital records are documents issued by state, county, or city governments recording the birth, death, or marriage of an individual.

The law determines the content of and requirement for any vital record. Every vital record evolves in format and complexity over time. Factors that affect completion rates include: economics, travel required, ethnicity, and language ability.

Laws on Vital Records

1852	Law: Register of Wills to register births, marriages, and deaths in county.
1854	Philadelphia County now City.
1855	1852 law rescinded.
1860	Philadelphia began birth & death reg.
1870	Pittsburgh began birth & death reg.
1872	Marriage age set to min. 16 years old
1873	Allentown began birth & death reg.
1874	Reading began birth & death reg.
1874	Proof of death required for probate.
1885	County Clerk of Orphans Court issues marriage licenses, data sent to Harrisburg.
1893	County Clerk of Orphans Court registers births and deaths, data sent to Harrisburg.
1895	County Prothonotaries process and file divorce proceeding affidavits & petitions.
1903	Marriages under age 21 req. parent appr.
1905	County birth and death registration ended.
1906	PA Department of Health issues birth certificates and death certificates, and continues to collect marriage data.
1915	First class cities stopped issuing birth certificates and death certificates.
1940	Birth certificate compliance approx. 85%.
1941	County Clerk of Orphans Court issued delayed birth certificates. Ends
1950	Birth certificate compliance approx. 98%.
1953	"Vital Statistics Law of 1953" codification of vital records into state law.
1970	Adoption paperwork standardized.
1972	Marriage age set to 18 years old.
1984	Adoption records sealed.
2017	Adoptees can request original birth cert.

Finding State Vital Records

The State of Pennsylvania's Department of Health (DOH), issued birth certificates and death certificates starting 1 Jan 1906.

Ancestry has an ongoing contract to make and index full color digital images of the originals.

The DOH created their own index to look up records. View the indexes at the PA State Archives website: pastearchives.org -> vital statistics records.

Finding County Vital Records

Every county in PA has a courthouse which issued all county records since the county was formed. Some county courthouses have moved older original records to an archival facility.

FamilySearch microfilmed original courthouse records in the mid-20th century. Check familysearch.org -> catalog -> [PA county] -> vital records, for the digitized microfilm.

Ancestry often has copies of what is on *FamilySearch*. Check ancestry.com -> card catalog -> [search by county name]

Before the internet, county genealogical societies created indexes and copies of their local county vital records. To find, go to genpa.org

Finding City Vital Records

Pennsylvania cities with their own health departments began vital records before counties.

Detailed list of cities and dates:

- 1 July 1860, Philadelphia registration books began.
- 1 May 1870, Pittsburgh registration books began.
- 1 May 1873, Allentown registration books began.
- 5 May 1874, 3rd class cities reg books could enact.
- 5 May 1876, Any city Board of Health could enact.
- 1 July 1881, 3rd class cities required registration.
- 24 May 1887, 4th-7th class cities could enact birth & death registration system, not required.

Few of these records are microfilmed or digitized.

Check county and city genealogical societies for location of originals and indexes. Completion rates for these records varied greatly prior to 1885.

VITAL RECORDS RESEARCH RESOURCES

Pennsylvania Vital Records History and Laws - *Pennsylvania Vital Records Research*, by Denys Allen

Genealogical Map of the Counties https://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Documents/securedpennsylvania_genealogical_map_of_the_counties.pdf

Pennsylvania State Archives

Birth Certificate (1906–1916) and Death Certificate Indices (1906–1971) <https://www.phmc.pa.gov/Archives/Research-Online/Pages/Vital-Statistics.aspx> *request uncertified copies if ordering from Dept. of Health

Ancestry Databases (these are free to PA residents thru PA State Archive)

Pennsylvania, U.S., Births, 1852–1854 <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2349/>

Pennsylvania, U.S., Birth Certificates, 1906–1914 <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60484/>

Pennsylvania, U.S., Death Certificates, 1906–1971 <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/5164/>

Pennsylvania, U.S., Marriages, 1852–1854 <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2486/>

Pennsylvania, U.S., Marriage Registers, 1885–1889 <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/2489/>

Pennsylvania, U.S., County Marriage Records, 1845–1963 <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/61324/>

FamilySearch PA County Courthouse Records

Some are indexed and searchable. Most are not, but can still be viewed as images.

[familysearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org) -> Catalog -> Location enter Pennsylvania, <county name> -> scroll down to vital records to see digitized microfilms. May be computer indexed. If not use clerk's index found in book.

PA County Courthouse and Genealogical Societies - *Archives of Pennsylvania*, by Denys Allen

Vital Record Substitutes

- Probate records - will may state how old at time will was written and name of spouse. Probate packet contains date of death, name of spouse, and possibly age at death.
- Naturalization records - date of birth or age, and name of spouse may be noted.
- Passport applications - date of birth or age.
- Military pension applications - date and place of birth, age, and name of spouse along with marriage date.
- Mortality schedules - completed as part of the U.S. census for 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880.
- U.S. census - date and place of birth, age, spouse name and length of marriage.
- Property deeds - spouse name, marriage date, last place lived, and date of death may be noted.
- Tax lists - marriage date and birth date may be calculated as man goes from "single" to "married."
- Civil court records - lawsuits and other disputes will list vital record type information as part of the case.
- County home records - also known as the almshouse or poorhouse. Check admissions ledgers.
- Religious records - baptism, marriage, burial, confirmation, membership.
- Cemetery tombstones
- Burial records - also check for city permits needed for burial.
- Funeral home records
- Newspaper obituaries and news articles
- Fraktur - artwork made in 17th and 18th centuries, often digitized by museums.
- Family Bibles
- Diaries, letters, and other personal papers - often found in archives collections.
- Family genealogies and county biography compilations - while authored works usually without citations, these may provide information leading to one of the original records listed above.