

Pennsylvania Vital Records: An Overview

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I. County Formation

A. Original Counties (1682)

- i. Bucks
- ii. Chester
- iii. Philadelphia

B. Last county (Lackawanna) formed in 1878

C. Counties have a genealogy just like people

II. Birth and Death Records

- i. County-level civil registration starts in 1893
 - a) Usually held in the Register of Wills Office
 - b) Usually in ledger books
 - c) Most have been filmed by the Family History Library
- ii. State-level civil registration starts in 1906
 - a) Births registered more than 105 years ago and deaths registered more than 50 years ago now public records

- Births available 1906–1909
- Deaths available 1906–1964
- Indexes available at
http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/genealogy/3183/birth_indices/1962923
- Death records 1906–1963 available on Ancestry.com in database Pennsylvania Death Certificates 1906–1963 (<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=5164>) – Pennsylvania residents can access this database for free. The State Archives has posted instructions on how at http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/research_topics/3162/ancestry_com_pennsylvania/1575348
- Pennsylvania State Archives has birth and death records that are public
- Order certified copies of more recent (non-public) records from the Pennsylvania Division of Vital Records (<http://www.health.pa.gov/MyRecords/Certificates/Pages/11596.aspx#.VNAAz3vxQZw>)
 - Genealogical requests can only be made by mail
 - Limits on who can request copies
 - Birth certificate fee is \$20.00
 - Death certificate fee is \$9.00
 - Must send a photocopy of valid government-issued photo ID with application

- iii. Some cities kept records at different times
 - a) Allegheny City
 - b) Harrisburg
 - c) McKeesport
 - d) Philadelphia
 - e) Pittsburgh
 - f) Scranton
 - g) Wilkinsburg
 - h) Most of these records have been microfilmed by the Family History Library
- iv. County-level affidavits of death
- v. Delayed birth records
 - a) Created for people to use to apply for Social Security
 - b) Kept at county level, usually in the Register of Wills Office

III. Marriage Records

- A. Civil registration starts in 1885
- B. Application changes over time
- C. Records kept at the county level, usually in the Register of Wills Office
- D. Family History Library has microfilmed some of the records
- E. FHL films have been digitized on FamilySearch (<http://www.FamilySearch.org>)
 - i. Database Pennsylvania County Marriages 1885–1950
 - ii. Are searchable
 - iii. Are gaps in the holdings
 - a) Records from Centre, Lycoming, Mifflin, Monroe, Pike, and Union counties have not been microfilmed and are not in the database
 - b) Allegheny County records for 1906–1937 were not microfilmed and are not in the database
 - iv. Philadelphia records are in a different database – Philadelphia Marriage Indexes 1885–1951

IV. Divorce Records

- A. Early divorces granted by private acts of the state legislature
- B. Later divorces granted by the county Courts of Common Pleas
- C. County records usually held by the Prothonotary's Office

V. Early Records

- A. Birth, marriage, and deaths recorded from 1852 to 1854
- B. Kept at the county level
- C. Compliance not good
- D. Some microfilmed by Family History Library
- E. Some published in book form

Annotated Bibliography

Family History Library (FHL) Catalog (<https://familysearch.org/catalog-search>)

(You can search the catalog by county or city to see what records the FHL has. If you find microfilmed records you're interested in, you can order the film (for a small fee) and have it delivered to a Family History Center to use. There are Family History Centers in Cranberry Township, Plum, Green Tree, and Greensburg. The Carnegie Library's Pennsylvania Department, the Butler Library, and the Beaver County Genealogy & History Center are affiliates where you can have films sent.)

Freilich, Kay Haviland, *Research in Pennsylvania*, 2nd edition (Arlington, Va.: National Genealogical Society, 2007)

(Freilich's expertise is in eastern Pennsylvania research, so the book focuses more on that.)

Humphrey, John T., *Pennsylvania Research: County and Township Records* (Washington, DC: PA Genealogy Books, 2006)

(Lists county and township formation dates and describes some of the records available for each county. Butler County section missing from initial printing.)

Iscrupe, William L. and Shirley G. M. Iscrupe, *Pennsylvania Line: A Research Guide to Pennsylvania Genealogy and Local History*, 4th edition (Laughlintown, Penna.: Southwest Pennsylvania Genealogical Services, 1990)

(Out of print. Northland, the Butler Area Public Library, and the Cranberry Family History Center have copies. The Carnegie Library's Pennsylvania Department has an earlier edition. Includes information on county formation, with maps showing the changes in county boundaries.)

Livengood, Candy Crocker, *Genealogical Abstracts of the Laws of Pennsylvania & the Statutes at Large* (Westminster, Md.: Willow Bend Books, 2001).

(Livengood abstracted names from private acts passed between 1682 and 1820. Northland has a copy.)

"Pennsylvania County Marriages," *FamilySearch Wiki* (https://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Pennsylvania,_County_Marriages_%28FamilySearch_Historical_Records%29 : accessed February 2015)

(This article lists counties not included in the database and discusses the marriage records in general.)

Szucs, Loretto Dennis and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking, editors, *The Source: A Guidebook of American Genealogy*, revised edition (Salt Lake City, Utah: Ancestry, 1997).

(Discusses various types of records and how to use them. Northland has a copy of the revised edition. Ancestry published a third edition in 2006. Most of the text from the third edition is available on Ancestry.com's Family History Wiki at http://www.ancestry.com/wiki/index.php?title=Main_Page, which is available for free to non-subscribers.)