

# Resources for Finding (& Understanding) Causes of Death

Lyn Gesch 4/3/2019 VCGS Wednesday Workshop

*Disclaimer: This is not an exhaustive list, but a “live” document that welcomes your input and experience in researching death records. (That includes favorite resources, as well as your corrections to this list!) Contribute your ideas in class or by contacting Lyn at [geschm@hotmail.com](mailto:geschm@hotmail.com).*

## Questions to Ask

1. What was the cause of death and how was it defined at this time?
2. Where was my ancestor living at the time?
  - What conditions and health risks was s/he exposed to?
  - What medical help was available?
3. What were practitioners able to do for him/her? What experience of illness did s/he have?
4. What outbreaks of disease or epidemics are documented for this place and time?

## Medical Dictionaries

Foster, Frank Pierce, Appleton's medical dictionary; an illustrated dictionary of medicine and allied subjects in which are given the derivations, accentuation, and definition of terms used throughout the entire field of medical science (New York, 1904). Download from Internet Archive at <https://archive.org/details/appletonsmedical00fost>

A general search on “medical dictionary” at this site ([www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)) will deliver hits from a range of time periods as well as foreign language books. For ex., there is a French-English medical dictionary from 1921 at <https://archive.org/details/cu31924000275887>

Gunglison, Robley, Medical Lexicon: a dictionary of medical science (Philadelphia, 1846). Download from the U.S. National Library of Medicine for the best copy: <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101515244-bk> *Note: It takes awhile to download; be patient.*

## Books

### *With Definitions:*

Jerger, Jeanette L., A Medical Miscellany for Genealogists (Heritage Books 1995), provides brief definitions of historical names of diseases.

### *Histories of Medicine:*

Grob, Gerald N., The Deadly Truth: A History of Disease in America (Harvard Univ. Press 2002)

Bynum, William and Helen, Biographies of Disease (Oxford Series). Each volume “tells the story of a disease in its historical and cultural context.”

Also look for books on specific epidemics or natural disasters of interest to you. For ex., The Black Death by Sean Martin, or The Great Influenza by John M. Barry.

Use the Internet Archive ([www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org)) or HathiTrust ([www.hathitrust.org/](http://www.hathitrust.org/)) websites to find historic volumes (out of copyright) that were reference books in every home for home medical care. For ex., on HathiTrust you will find a publication entitled The family nurse, or, Companion of the frugal housewife by a Mrs. Child, published 1837. The author provides great detail on a wide range of treatments for conditions that the home “nurse” could provide.

### Websites

With death record databases (or links to):

[www.Ancestry.com](http://www.Ancestry.com)

- Search catalog from the keyword field, then filter by location, date, etc. in left frame.

[www.FamilySearch.org](http://www.FamilySearch.org)

- For death records or medical records, search in catalog on place / location first, then select “Medical” from the listed categories of record types for available hospital records, or “Vital Records” for available death indexes or records.

[www.deathindexes.com](http://www.deathindexes.com) (links to websites with information or records, organized by state then county)

For a list of state-level websites for vital records, go to the VCGS website (<https://venturacogensoc.org/>). In the left frame, select “Library” then “Workshop Handouts.” Click on 2016 and look for Fran’s handout on “States With Online Death Certificates.” Because things change online over time, you may need to update this information, but it’s an excellent start to your search.

Do web searches for [state] hospital records to see if anything is available for your area of interest:

Ex. *Historic Collections, Pennsylvania Hospital, Philadelphia PA*. The Finding Aid says the bulk of the collection covers 1751 to 1929. *Caveat*: Research has to be done onsite. Go to <http://www.uphs.upenn.edu/paharc/collections/finding/index.html> for more info.

Use Archive Grid / OCLC World Cat to find manuscript collections for those hard-to-find records: <https://researchworks.oclc.org/archivegrid/> Type search terms into upper right search box. If you aren’t getting relevant hits, scroll to bottom of screen and click on “How to Search” for tips.

The National Archives is a repository for St Elizabeth’s Hospital in the DC area; records cover 1855-1916. <https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/418.html> Search their catalog for medical records pertaining to war veterans as well.

Links to British sources for medical records at the Wellcome Library website:

<https://wellcomelibrary.org/collections/about-the-collections/archives-and-manuscripts/finding-medical-archives-elsewhere/>

- Hospital Records Database
- Medical Archives and Manuscripts Survey

*Note: I haven’t investigated this site so I don’t know the extent to which actual records are available, or extracts from records perhaps. You will need to read through the narratives carefully and work through their instructions for getting the best use of this resource.*