

## Step 7: Primary Sources and Vital Records — Terry and Jim Willard

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is the seventh in our continuing series "Family History Made Easy: Step by Step."* <http://ancestry.com/library/view/ancmag/2082.asp>

In the first six articles of this series, we have shown you how to get your genealogical project started and how to continue using information found around the home or obtainable from living relatives. We have also covered the essentials of library research—from getting organized for the research trip to using published secondary source materials in your research. We will now turn our attention to the nuts and bolts of genealogical research: the various primary sources, vital records, and other official documents. As is the case with all of us today (although not quite to the same extent), our ancestors left a paper trail. In addition to the documentation of the major life events (birth, marriage, and death), other events occurred which provide further documentation of their lives. They belonged to churches, went to school, served in the military, owned property, paid taxes, were counted in various censuses, and, when they died, left written instructions on how to dispose of their property. These various records, when used properly, tell the stories of the lives of our ancestors.

In future articles, we will help you learn to use these documents as you build your pedigree, fill in your family group sheets, and move toward a greater understanding of your progenitors. In the articles that focus on using the various types of records, we will define the meaning of each record type, discuss the various ways to access a copy of the record, and explain how to use each record once it is obtained. Our objectives are for the beginner to fully understand the wide variety of research records available and to feel comfortable using these records when researching.

### Primary Sources

In this article, we will examine the most fundamental of all written records: primary source materials and vital records. A primary source is a record of an event written, spoken, or photographed by an eyewitness to that event at or near the time the event occurred. Examples of primary source materials include:

- Letters
- Eyewitness newspaper accounts
- Ship passenger lists\*
- Diaries
- Deeds\* and other land ownership records
- Baptismal certificates
- Photographs of family reunions
- Business ledgers with notes in the margins
- Military records\*
- Family Bibles with a listings of births, marriages, or family events
- Census records\*
- Home videos
- Voice recordings, oral histories

- Immigration records\*
- Wills\*

*(\*This record type will be covered in more detail later in the series.)*

Hopefully, you will have uncovered some of these materials from a close relative or as you looked around your house. Any of these examples could yield valuable genealogical information. It is from these sources that we often gain valuable insight into the personality of our ancestors. One of our most valued possessions is a business ledger written by Jim's grandfather in the 1930s. At first glance it does not seem like much, but his comments and observations in the margins provide hints to his personality. Jim was only thirteen when his grandfather died and the ledger gives him a connection to the man he had previously known only as a youth. In one entry, Jim's grandfather comments on Jim's father's reaction to a baseball glove he received as a present on his fourteenth birthday. This glimpse into the past is what makes primary source research so valuable. While it provides evidence of an event (as in the previous example, the entry was for 8 October 1931; the birth date can be implied to be 8 October 1917) it goes beyond the facts and fleshes in a relationship or a personality.

Primary sources, as beneficial as they are, still have potential shortcomings. In the PBS television series "Ancestors," records expert John Phillip Colletta uses the example of a baptismal record recorded on 31 February. Obviously, a situation such as this would require additional research. In your research log you should note the information exactly as it appears in the original source. Then you should add any other evidence you discover as well as an anecdotal footnote describing your opinion on the date of the event. Remember that an eyewitness can unintentionally distort his or her perception of an event. In our college psychology class, an individual burst in on the lecture and shot the professor. After the class had recovered from the very real shock caused by the mock attack, we were required to write a description of what we had witnessed. Amazingly, there was little similarity between accounts. This concept applies to any firsthand account of an event. They must be interpreted cautiously.

### Vital Records

Vital records are records of life events important enough that some level of government acquires, organizes, and preserves them. While the term "vital records" is often applied to a wide variety of life events, family historians use the term to refer specifically to birth, marriage, divorce, and death events. Since at least the Middle Ages, governments have considered these events so significant that their occurrence is required by law to be recorded in some type of official ledger, generally accessible by the public. As a general rule, these records are maintained by the level of government closest to where the event actually took place. In most of the United States a clerk in the city, town, or county government maintains the records. And since the end of the nineteenth century, each state also records each of these events. These are maintained at the state's capital by an office of vital records, vital statistics, etc. A good guideline to keep in mind is: If the event occurred before 1900, the local community would be the best place to seek the vital record; if the event occurred after 1900, either the local or state level would be a good place to start.

It is rare for the researcher to be able to view these records personally. Instead, a records request form must be completed, either at the appropriate office or by mail. After doing so, and as long as the necessary information is supplied, you will receive a copy of the record(s) requested. As you might expect, there are fees for these copies which vary from locality to locality. Some localities also distinguish between a "copy" and an "official copy"—the latter is impressed with a seal of the office.

The obvious problem in conducting vital records research is knowing where to go or where to write for the information. Fortunately, the solution is readily available from several prominent sources.

1. For those who enjoy library research, use the reference shelves of the genealogy section in your public library. There you will find several books, such as *Ancestry's Redbook: American State, County and Town Sources* edited by Alice Eichholz, Ph.D., C.G., or *The Source* edited by Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking. Appendix F, "Where to write for vital records," lists the addresses and names of the offices that maintain these records.
2. For those who enjoy having a handy, inexpensive guide available in their own home, the U.S. Government Department of Health and Human Services publishes a handy little guide entitled "Where to Write for Vital Records: Births, Deaths, Marriages, and Divorces." This guide, available from the Government Printing Office (PHS 93 1142), is updated regularly and currently sells for \$2.50.
3. For researchers who are Internet savvy, there are several Web sites dedicated to locating vital records, some of which are maintained directly by the level of government responsible for the vital records. These are best accessed by connecting to a general genealogy Web site such as Ancestry.com and following links to find the Web site of your desired locality. Another excellent site for learning how to get copies of vital records is <http://www.vital rec.com>.

Should you decide to write and request a copy of a vital record, there are some general guidelines you should follow:

- A. Determine the cost of the copy of the vital record you seek using one of the sources listed above.
- B. Write your request letter as simply as possible.
  - Indicate who you are with name, address, and phone number.
  - Indicate the type of record you are seeking—birth, death, marriage, divorce or death.
  - Supply as much information as possible about the person or persons involved in the event (their full names and any other identifying information). Be as thorough as possible.
  - Enclose your payment.
- C. Provide a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

D. Be patient and wait for a reply. It is not unusual for this process to take two or three letters to complete successfully.

Once you have located either a primary source document or a copy of a vital record, extract the information from it. Again, there are some important points to remember. As you copy the information from the record to your genealogical chart—pedigree chart or family group sheet—be certain to copy the information accurately. This copying process, known as transcription, is often where errors are made.

Copy the information exactly as it appears on the original source even if the information appears to be incorrect on the original. This is especially true of spelling. As mentioned earlier, copy the original and then make a footnote. If a census record shows the person to be WILLIARD, Charles Morse, then record it by that spelling. Then make a footnote to the effect that his name was spelled WILLARD (without the second "I") on all other documents.

Do not make assumptions about the data. If a birth date recorded in a family Bible appears as 2-12-94, enter it that way. Do not assume it is 12 February 1894, because it could also be 2 December 1794.

Whenever possible, attach a copy of the source document to your genealogical chart. In the future, should you decide to convert your research into a family history book, some of these documents would make excellent illustrations. Most importantly, record the source of your information everywhere you write the information. Most genealogists agree that the three general rules of research are:

1. Document your sources
2. Document your sources
3. Document your sources

If you follow this simple advice, anyone who sees your work in the future will know exactly where you discovered your information. Who knows? This could be next summer at a family reunion or a hundred and fifty years from now.

Records expert, John Phillip Colletta, describes records research as the "great fun of genealogy." Nothing is more rewarding than to see your ancestors' names as they appear on a record that proves a connection you have sought for some time. All the discomfort of research—the eyes red from hours of reading difficult handwriting in bad lighting, the backaches from sitting long hours in uncomfortable chairs, the frustration of waiting for a copy of a birth certificate being sent from Anywhere, USA—quickly disappears the minute you discover another piece of your family puzzle.