

West Virginia Archives & History NEWS

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WEST VIRGINIA
DIVISION OF
CULTURE & HISTORY

From the Editor:

We have enjoyed working with the many researchers who traveled from the corners of West Virginia or from out-of-state to use the collections of the Archives and History Library this summer. We have welcomed beginning family historians and expert genealogists, and all experience levels in between. Several academic researchers have expressed delight at their finds in our Special Collections and Archives (State Government Records) Collections, so we look forward to seeing an acknowledgment of the Archives in upcoming academic papers and books. A number of our research letter patrons drove in to continue their research in the Archives Library, as happy to meet us in person as we were to meet them. We hope to see you in November for the Mining Your History Foundation Annual Meeting and Workshops.

Vital Records in West Virginia: Deaths

West Virginia counties first began keeping birth and death records in 1853 under Virginia law, and continued keeping them following West Virginia statehood in 1863 up through the present. Unlike Kentucky and several other states, West Virginia does not have any periods of time after 1853 where none of the counties kept birth and death records. Enforcement of the requirement to register births and deaths was lax or non-existent in various time periods and/or counties, and the quality of the record keeping and condition of the extant record books differs widely as well, but for the most part a sizeable body of records exists. County death records were microfilmed, largely by the Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU) in collaboration with the State Archives, with the inclusion dates depending on the date each county was visited for microfilming, usually 1968 to 1971. Exceptions are Mingo County, due to its late creation as a separate county in 1895, and Lincoln County due to the courthouse fire in 1909, both having been skipped in

the preliminary round of microfilming. These two counties' records were filmed in 1991, after certain privacy laws had been passed, with death records only through 1927 for Mingo and 1936 for Lincoln filmed. For a listing of county records available on microfilm in the Archives and History Library, go to <http://www.wvculture.org/history/countrec.html> and click on the county name.

Beginning in 1917, counties fulfilled a new requirement to use standardized reporting forms and to send the information to the West Virginia Dept. of Health Vital Registration office. In addition, counties continued to record deaths in handwritten ledger entries or abbreviated, typed and formatted ledger page entries, or retained their copies of the standardized forms as the county record. The percentage of death records filed continued to improve over the next two or three decades, but even in the 1950's some deaths were not recorded. The following facts and research tips for locating death records are offered as

guides to where to search for documents for various time periods in a complicated array of overlapping records, as well as what to expect

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THE WAR, World War II Documentary by Ken Burns

The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) will air the new Ken Burns seven-part documentary series, *THE WAR*, beginning on September 23. A repeat of the documentary as a weekly series, plus additional rebroadcasts and marathon showings, will provide many opportunities to view the documentary in its entirety. *THE WAR*, directed and produced by Burns and Lynn Novick, explores the history and the horror of the Second World War from an American perspective by following the experiences of ordinary men and women. Visit the PBS website for the documentary at <http://www.pbs.org/thewar/> for more information, film clips and a viewer's guide.

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when actually searching a specific body of records, in hope of making the best use of research time and funds.

Facts and Research Tips

No death records were kept in Virginia (West Virginia) counties before 1853. As an alternative, check wills for death dates, or use the dates of probate records as an approximate date of death. For example, if a will was written on April 18, 1834, and was probated on June 1, 1834, you know the person died somewhere in between. If a local newspaper exists for the time period in question, search for a death notice, obituary or notices of estate sales, etc.

Ignore statehood and follow the Virginia/West Virginia county name for county records. No counties were divided between the two states, no counties changed names, and each county kept the originals of its own records, even if copies were sent to Richmond. (There are a few West Virginia counties that lost records in the Civil War for which copies of birth, death and marriage records from approximately 1853–1860 survived in Richmond. These records are available on Library of Virginia microfilm in the West Virginia Archives and History Library.)

There are no statewide indexes for West Virginia births and deaths prior to 1917. (You can search all of the counties included in Vital Research Records simultaneously, currently 16 of the 55 counties.) If you do not know the county of death, start with the person's county of residence as recorded in the last census in which they appear. If surviving family members appear in a different county in the following census, check that county also. If adult children of elderly parents live in differing

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counties from the parents, check those counties as well, since many aged people, particularly if widowed, moved in with their children.

Deaths are legally recorded in the county where the death occurred, not in the county of residence or of burial; however, there are exceptions. If the person you seek belonged to a fraternal organization or burial society that maintained cemeteries for membership, the body may have been transported to another county for burial. Look in both the county of death and the county of burial for a death record, just in case. For example, the Harrison County clerk recorded many deaths for persons whose bodies were transported into the county for burial in the Odd Fellows cemetery in Clarksburg. Some had death records in the county of death and some had only the Harrison County record. Sometimes county clerks recorded out-of-county and even out-of-state deaths when bodies were brought home for burial, or at the request of family members. I have seen a West Virginia home county record for a Civil War soldier who, according to a newspaper account, died in a Maryland hospital after being transferred there from a POW camp elsewhere and was buried in Maryland. The clerk made a note in the ledger that he was recording the death at the request of the soldier's father. One way to determine place

of death and place of burial, and thereby determining counties in which to look for death records, is by finding an informative obituary or news article.

If you don't find a death record in the expected county, check adjacent counties, particularly counties with hospitals, or state hospitals, such as Weston State Hospital in Lewis County, or Lakin Hospital in Mason County, or state prisons. Although the state hospitals were created for treatment of mental illness or tuberculosis, they usually were the only hospitals in their areas, served as nursing homes for elderly victims of dementia (arteriosclerosis, popularly known as "hardening of the arteries," was the most common cause given), and served local patients in need of hospitalization. In contrast many times in the 1920's and 1930's especially, people who died in hospitals or institutions such as prisons do not have official death records. Look for obituaries that mention place of death.

Death records before 1917 are commonly line item entries in ledgers,

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NARA Historic Films Available from Amazon.com

The National Archives and Records Administration is now offering its collection of Universal Newsreels dating from 1929 to 1967 for purchase on DVD through Amazon.com. The newsreels include important events in world history, World War II, current events of the times, space exploration, social and environmental issues, military and industrial training films, and more. To see the available titles, go to <http://www.amazon.com>, choose DVD in the Search box, then enter National Archives in the adjoining box.

with the following information: name of decedent, residence (usually the name of the community, sometimes only the county, never a street address), date of death, cause of death, place of death, age at death, and name of informant. Records may also have birth date, name of parents (possibly mother's maiden name), date of the report, relationship of informant to the decedent, place of birth (usually county if West Virginia and state or country if not West Virginia, sometimes with a community name), occupation, spouse's name, marital status, and rarely, place of burial. Don't be surprised to find that clerks did not collect and record information for all categories for which they had ledger columns. There are few things more disappointing to a researcher than seeing page after page with the columns for parents' names left blank!

Don't be surprised if you don't recognize the condition or disease given as cause of death. If the cause of death is not one you readily recognize, try a large dictionary, a medical dictionary, or Internet sites for archaic or current medical terms. Terms that are no longer used, such as "consumption" for tuberculosis, have been misinterpreted by some of the beginning researchers I have assisted. Several have called me over the years after receiving death records, all upset, because great-grandma or great-great-grandpa was called a drunkard, assuming "consumption" to mean over-imbibing of alcoholic beverages. Common causes of death given for elderly people in early records are "old age" and "worn out" or "wore out." Some terms are actually descriptions of symptoms, not necessarily the true cause of death. A death attributed to dyspepsia, a term for indigestion and heartburn, could also have been ulcers, stomach cancer, heart disease or a heart attack. Dropsy

means edema, or swelling, which can be caused by kidney or heart disease, blood clots, or any other condition causing the body to retain fluid and swell. Dropsy of the brain could have been encephalitis, meningitis, hydrocephalus or cancer. The more modern the record, the more exact the cause of death will be, using true medical terminology, citing contributing causes of death, with date of onset of illness or accident, date last seen by the physician, whether the decedent had been hospitalized, etc.

Almost all records prior to the 1930's were handwritten, with the percentage of typed records increasing in the 20th century until becoming a large majority by 1950. This includes state death certificates that were printed forms but filled out by hand, as well as county ledgers. If you find a typed record for the years prior to 1900 in particular, chances are that an efficient county clerk made a typed copy of the original handwritten record, perhaps indexing the names alphabetically or grouping the deaths by alphabet and by year. (Note that handwritten copies were made on occasion, too.) Sometimes the original handwritten book has been microfilmed as well. Hopefully it has been retained in the courthouse if needed for reference, but it may no

longer exist. If you are looking at a typed record that appears to be a transcription of an earlier record and you can not find the person you seek, or if you have a question about the entry as typed, you may be able to request a search of the original book or a photocopy of the original page from the courthouse. There have been instances of skipped lines, omitted information or typing errors in transcribed records that can be resolved by viewing the original.

While the typed transcriptions of county records included in the Historical Records Survey made by employees of the WPA (Work Projects Administration) Historic Markers Commission in the 1930's and 1940's are full of typographic and other errors, they still serve a purpose. If the county record you need from that time period is illegible or missing, whether it is an entire ledger or a single page, check the WPA transcript as well. The Archives and History Library holds notebooks of typed onionskin paper copies in its Special Collections, and makes bound photocopies available for browsing by the public. These transcriptions are an especially helpful resource for counties that experienced flooding in 1937, the 1950's and later; water

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A Note Regarding the Jennings Randolph Photo Collection

The **Jennings Randolph Photograph Collection** information available on our Web site at <http://www.wvculture.org/history/images/randolphphotos.html> is a *finding aid only*. The photographs themselves cannot be viewed online. If you find a described photograph that you would like to make arrangements to view in person in the Archives and History Library, please note the box or folder number and the exact description as mentioned in the

online list and provide that information to Debra Basham, (304) 558-0230, debra.basham@wvculture.org. If you are unable to visit the Library in Charleston, contact Ms. Basham for other options. Copies are available of these photographs. For more information regarding photograph copies, usage rights and fees, visit <http://www.wvculture.org/history/rr.html> and read section 7.2, Photograph Fees.

Quick Guide to West Virginia Death Records

- Prior to 1853:** deaths not recorded.
- 1853–1916:** deaths recorded at the county level only. No statewide index exists. Originals are in the county courthouses, with a few original records located in the West Virginia University West Virginia and Regional History Collection. Records microfilmed by the Genealogical Society of Utah are available in the West Virginia Archives and History Library and elsewhere.
- 1853–1860:** some duplicate county records are preserved on Library of Virginia microfilm, available in the Archives and History Library and elsewhere.
- 1917–1956:** as of 2007, all state death certificates for 1917 through the currently eligible year (present year minus 51 years) are available free online in a searchable database on the Archives and History Web site, http://www.wvculture.org/vrr/va_select.aspx; as uncertified copies from the Archives and History Library with a \$2.50 statutory fee; or as certified copies from the Vital Registration office with a \$10.00 fee. (Note that each January another year of state death records will be added, such as 1957 in January 2008.) Digitized images of actual county death records for selected counties for this time period are available in the searchable WVRRR database, and original records are available in the county courthouses. A microfilmed statewide annual index is available in the Archives and History Library.
- 1957–1973:** all state death certificates for these years are available as uncertified copies from the Archives and History Library with a \$2.50 statutory fee each, or as certified copies from the Vital Registration office with a \$10.00 fee each. A microfilmed statewide annual index is available in the Archives and History Library. The county records are available in the county courthouses and are available on microfilm approximately up to the year each county's records were filmed, usually 1968–1971. (For a listing of county records available on microfilm in the Archives and History Library, go to <http://www.wvculture.org/history/countrec.html> and click on the county name.)
- 1974 to present:** all state death certificates for these years are available only as certified copies from the Vital Registration office with a \$10.00 fee. A microfilmed statewide annual index is available in the Archives and History Library only up through 1991. The county records are available in the county courthouses. Neither county nor state death records for this time period are available on GSU microfilm or through the Archives and History Library.

leaks; improper handling by staff or the public; misguided attempts at preservation involving lamination or tape; less than desirable storage conditions (temperature extremes, mice, mold), etc., that accelerated deterioration of ink and paper or

otherwise obscured legibility. There is also the simple fact that ink that may have faded 150 years after being applied to a page was probably much more legible only 80 years after use. Unfortunately, in addition to losses due to natural disasters, wartime

conflict or neglect, records have been stolen over the years by unscrupulous researchers who have ripped out ledger pages or tucked loose documents into notebooks or pockets.

The statewide West Virginia Dept. of Health Death Index on microfilm is

an annual index, and the death certificate numbers start over every year. When using the index, you must note the year of death as well as the certificate number. The index includes the name and age of the deceased, as well as date and county of death. The West Virginia Archives and History Library has the microfilmed index for the years 1917 through 1991. Copies of state death records up through 1973 may be obtained through the Archives and

Are You Preparing for History Day 2007?

Local groups with an interest in history or genealogy are invited to participate in the 12th West Virginia History Day on Thursday, Feb. 21, 2008, at the State Capitol Complex during the regular session of the West Virginia Legislature. Authorized by the legislature, West Virginia History Day commemorates local groups' efforts to preserve, protect and promote the study of the Mountain State's past. Established under the leadership of the West Virginia Archives and History Commission, co-sponsors have included history-related organizations such as the West Virginia Division of Culture and History, West Virginia Historical Society, West Virginia Historical Association, Preservation Alliance Inc., West Virginia Association of Museums, West Virginia Humanities and the Mining Your History Foundation.

In order to acquaint legislators and the public with their activities and services, the sponsors encourage local, regional and statewide historical organizations to provide displays and reenactments in the Rotunda of the State Capitol. Historians, genealogists, educators, preservationists, veterans, fraternal organizations, librarians, ethnic

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History Library after payment of the statutory fee of \$2.50 each. *Copies of state death records from 1974 through the present and all certified copies of state death records must be obtained from the Vital Registration office.*

Copies of county death records may be obtained from the county courthouse, or from the microfilmed county records found in the Archives and History Library as well as many other libraries and organizations. Some county death records have been digitized and included in the West Virginia Vital Research Records (WVRR) searchable database available free online on the West Virginia Archives and History Web site at http://www.wvculture.org/vrr/va_select.aspx. Death records are held back fifty years from the date of the record, so currently records through 1956 are available.

If you need a legally certified, raised-seal record, you must obtain it from the issuing agency, either the appropriate county clerk or the Dept. of

Web Sites of Interest

The following Web sites were spotted in *Rootsweb Review*, 18 July 2007, Vol.10, No. 29:

- **National Yearbook Project**, <http://www.rootsweb.com/~usrbook/>, has images from yearbooks, links to yearbook sites and more.
- **U.S. School Yearbook Database**, available on Ancestry.com (subscription site) and Ancestry Library Edition (available free to patrons in the West Virginia Archives and History Library, and other subscribing institutions), provides digital images of pages of entire yearbooks in a searchable database.
- **Economic History Services** has a very informative Web site offering a range of services for the novice browser to the most erudite economics scholar. A good starting point is the "How Much is That?" page at <http://eh.net/hmit/>. Many of the databases contain information from the 18th century to the present. Handy economic calculators are found on a related Web site, **MeasuringWorth**, <http://measuringworth.com>. You can use these sites to determine the worth of an ancestor's estate, compare the value of real estate or personal property in today's dollars, convert English pounds to dollars, etc.

Note: You can read this issue of *Rootsweb Review* online at <http://ftp.rootsweb.com/pub/review/2007/0718.txt>.

Health Vital Registration office. The Archives and History Library will certify pages as true copies from the microfilm or an original document for genealogical and historical purposes only, for a fee of \$2.50 per page. Notary services are available on a case by case basis.

Free Genealogy Research Forms on RootsWeb

A variety of forms useful in family history research are available free on Rootsweb in PDF format at http://helpdesk.rootsweb.com/get_started/charts_forms.html. In addition to a standard ancestral chart and a family group sheet, the site provides several ways to organize and track research, including a research calendar, research extract, correspondence record and source summary. Census forms can be printed for United States, United Kingdom and Canadian census years.

Calendar of Events

Please check our web site (<http://www.wvculture.org/history>) for genealogical and historical society meeting announcements, and for more complete information on activities listed below.

“FROM DAWN UNTIL DUSK: FARMING, AGRICULTURE, AND RURAL LIFE IN UPSHUR COUNTY,” June 10–September 30: Upshur County Historical Society, The History Center Museum, Buckhannon.

LABOR DAY, September 3: Archives Library will be *closed*.

JENKINS PLANTATION MUSEUM ANNUAL HOMESTEAD GATHERING, 172ND ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION, September 22:

Jenkins Plantation Museum, Green Bottom. For more information, visit <http://www.wvculture.org/news.aspx?Agency=Division&Id=692> or call Matt Boggess, site manager, (304) 762-1059.

“PORTE CRAYON’S MEXICO: DAVID HUNTER STROTHER’S DIARIES,” September 27: Dr. John E. Stealey III, lecturer, Robert C. Byrd Center for Legislative Studies, Shepherd University, Shepherdstown.

LEGACY OF MARY INGLES LIVING HISTORY DRAMA AND ENCAMPMENT 2007,

September 29–30: Sponsored by Mary Ingles Trail Associates, Weiford Settlement, Winfield. For more information, visit <http://mypeoplepc.com/members/chingwe/trailsinc18thcentury/id3.html> or call Amy Fairchild, (304) 757-0464.

For reservations, call Putnam County Parks & Visitors office, (304) 562-0518.

COLUMBUS DAY, October 8: Archives Library will be open*

**WEST VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL MEETING:
JACK DICKINSON, CURATOR, ROSANNA BLAKE LIBRARY OF
CONFEDERATE HISTORY, MARSHALL UNIVERSITY,
October 12:** North Briefing Room, The Cultural Center, Charleston.

WEST VIRGINIA BOOK FESTIVAL, October 13–14: Charleston Civic Center, Charleston. For more information, visit <http://www.wvhumanities.org>.

**CIVIL WAR SCHOLARS LECTURE: DR. JOHN M. COSKI,
THE CONFEDERATE BATTLE FLAG, October 16:**

Sponsored by the Kanawha Valley Civil War Roundtable, The Cultural Center, Charleston. For reviews, visit <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog/COSCON.html?show=reviews>.

**2007 BETSY K. MCCREIGHT LECTURE IN THE HUMANITIES: JOYCE
CAROL OATES, SPEAKER, October 18:** University of Charleston, Charleston. For more information, visit <http://www.wvhumanities.org/mcreight.htm> or call the West Virginia Humanities Council at (304) 346-8500.

**RECORDS MANAGEMENT AND PRESERVATION BOARD
COUNTY GRANT APPLICATION DEADLINE, November 1:**
County applications must be postmarked or hand delivered by November 1 to RMPB, West Virginia Archives and History, The Cultural Center, Charleston.

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groups and families with an interest in West Virginia's history are invited to provide exhibits featuring historical documents, photographs, artifacts and publications. Other attractions usually include re-enactments of events in the state's history, music, storytelling, and more. At the annual awards ceremony in the Norman L. Fagan State Theater of the Cultural Center, "History Hero" awards will be presented to people who have made significant grass-roots contributions to the preservation of local or regional history. Local historical, genealogical, preservation, museum, patriotic and other similar groups are encouraged to provide nominations for the awards.

All of this takes planning, organization and work by dedicated organization members and volunteers! If you have not already started a discussion, put History Day on your meeting agenda now. Put together your display, choose History Hero nominees carefully, and encourage members to make transportation arrangements to travel to Charleston to participate. Information and forms for History Day 2008 and History Hero nominations will be mailed to all historical, genealogical and preservation societies on the History Day mailing list. (If your organization has been receiving *West Virginia Archives and History News*, then you are on the list.) If your group has not participated before, or has had an address change in the past year, contact the Archives and History staff at (304) 558-0230 to be sure you are added

to the list and/or that we have your correct current mailing address. Whether as exhibitor or visitor, we hope to see you in Charleston on February 21, 2008 for a very

enjoyable and informative day, and we encourage you to include a visit to the West Virginia Archives and History Library as part of your trip.

Calendar of Events

MINING YOUR HISTORY FOUNDATION ANNUAL MEETING AND WORKSHOPS,

November 3: The Cultural Center, Charleston.

GOODBYE, MISS FOURTH OF JULY, FILM SHOWING WITH SPECIAL GUEST, CHRISTOPHER JANUS,

November 10: Sponsored by the West Virginia Labor History Association and the South Charleston Museum, LaBelle Theater, South Charleston.

VETERANS DAY, November 12: Archives Library will be open*

**Only the Archives Library will be staffed—all other Archives offices will be closed.*
 The West Virginia Library Commission Library in the Cultural Center is closed weekends and all holidays.

NARA Fee Increases Amended: Most Civil War Pension Files to Cost \$75 Effective October 1, 2007

In the June 2007 issue of *West Virginia Archives and History News*, we reported that the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) was raising its fees for reproduction of records, with the most substantial fee increase applying to copies of Civil War pension files (as well as all files from the Civil War to the present), raising the fee from \$37 to \$125, regardless of file size. Following public comment and further review of actual Civil War pension file reproduction orders over the past few years, NARA has settled on a fee of \$75 for Civil War pension files containing 100 pages or less. When the file is more than 100 pages, NARA reference staff will inform the customer of the number of additional pages and will quote a price of \$.65 per page for the remaining pages. The

customer has the option of paying for the additional copies or simply accepting only the first 100 pages covered by the \$75 fee.

The fixed fee for pre-Civil War pension packets, including Revolutionary War pension files, was lowered to \$50 from \$60. The fee for copies of any military service file over 75 years old, passenger lists, census records, bounty land warrant application files and pension document packets containing selected records will stand at \$25. These fees are all part of a final rule reported in the *Federal Register*, Vol. 72, No. 159, dated August 17, 2007, and are effective October 1, 2007. Orders received before October 1 will be honored at the fee schedule in effect on the date received.

Archives and History News
is available on the
Archives and History Web site
<http://www.wvculture.org/history/ahnews/ahnews.html>

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West Virginia
Archives & History
NEWS



We would love to hear from you.

Let us know what you find helpful in the newsletter, and what new topics you would like covered.

Contact *West Virginia Archives and History News* Editor Susan Scouras, (304) 558-0230, Ext. 742, or by e-mail: susan.scouras@wvculture.org.

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