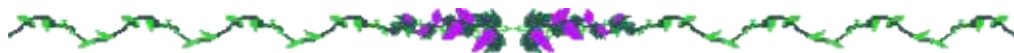


Researching Funeral Home Records A Genealogical Tool



Researching funeral home records is a much-neglected genealogical tool. These seldom-tapped records can be a goldmine for the researcher, often yielding information unobtainable elsewhere. First, we will look at what you can expect to find in these records, and then we will discuss methods for gaining access to them.

One category of information in these records is the **death certificate data**. Contrary to popular notion, the funeral director, not the doctor, is the person responsible for initiating and filing the death certificate. So, in the funeral home file will be much of the basic genealogical information about an individual: full name, date and place of birth, date and place of death, marital status at death, name of spouse (if living), name of father, full maiden name of mother, place of residence at death, occupation, whether the person had military service, name and location of cemetery. In some cases, the parents' places of birth -at least the state- will be included. Also listed will be the name, address and relationship of the "informant", the person who supplied the information to the funeral director.

All states did not require death certificates until the second decade of this century, so earlier funeral homes records will not yield as much of this type information as more recent ones. There may be only an entry in a daybook regarding the charge for the funeral! Even after death certificates became required, compliance was spotty for a while, and many funeral directors merely filled out a certificate form by hand and filed it with the health department but failed to make a copy for the funeral home file.

There is much more to be found in the typical funeral file. The funeral director is also responsible for placing obituaries in the news media, so the file will probably have a list of the surviving immediate relatives: spouse, children, siblings, parents. Sometimes the names of grandchildren, in-laws, and other relatives are included. The city and state of residence of each of those listed is usually noted. In addition, there is usually some biographical information: former residences, educational institutions attended, employment, church affiliation, military service, memberships in clubs, lodges and other organizations, hobbies, civic endeavors, personal accomplishments, honors, etc. There may even be mention of the individual's ancestors and perhaps siblings who had died before this person. Even the person's date of marriage may be noted. There will probably be a list of the newspapers in which the person's obituary appeared. You can use this list to obtain copies of the actual obituaries.

There is one caution at this point: **ALL** of this information **MAY** be accurate, or it may be rife with errors. It is only as reliable as the person who gave it. For that reason, you should plan to use what you obtain from the funeral file as a guide to further research. If possible, everything should be verified by documentary evidence from official sources: birth certificates, marriage records, etc.

In many cases, the funeral home records will also contain copies of some or all of the following: military service record, marriage certificate, birth certificate, insurance policies, and last will and testament. There may also be details about the location of the grave and the type of monument or marker. There may even be a photograph of the person in the file! Other items, not necessarily genealogical but interesting, are notes about the funeral services: officiating minister, pallbearers, music, etc.

Now that your appetite for these records is sharpened, we come to the hard part: **gaining access** to funeral home records. The most important thing to remember about funeral home records is that they are **PRIVATE** records and the funeral home has **NO** obligation to permit you to examine them. Your unexpected appearance at the funeral home office demanding to see funeral records from decades ago would likely kill your chances of **EVER** getting the information.

Funeral homes are not in the archives business, so older records are usually not readily available, **IF** they still exist at all! Many funeral homes keep recent records in file folders in cabinets easily accessible to the staff. These are usually kept alphabetically by year. Others use bound funeral record books, in which the records are entered chronologically, with pertinent papers kept separately. Seldom is an index maintained, so knowing the year of death is usually required. Even when there is an index, it may be incomplete due to clerical oversights in entering names over the years.

Practices vary among funeral homes, but usually older records -after ten years or so- are placed in storage..in the attic, or basement, or garage, often in no particular order. As a practical matter, they are then very difficult to retrieve. In many cases, particularly with firms over a hundred years old or that have changed ownership several times, the very old records have either been destroyed or no one presently on the staff has any idea where they are!

I recently spoke with a fellow funeral director who is the current head of his family's mortuary that has been under the same family's ownership since 1882. He has **NO** records prior to 1945! During a move to a new location in the 1960s, all the old records were thrown out!

Another complicating factor is the funeral director's reluctance to release information that might be sensitive. A family he has served has entrusted him with some private information that they might not want passed out to just anyone, so the funeral home might require approval from the family before releasing anything to you. This is particularly true of records for deaths occurring in recent years.

In any case, you will probably not be allowed to browse through the records; most likely, you will be required to ask for specific information and a staff member will retrieve that for you from the file. Since retrieving old records is not an everyday activity and is usually a bother (dank basements, stuffy attics, dusty boxes), many staff members are not very cooperative. This is especially so if the researcher shows up at an inconvenient time.

The best way to obtain information from these records is to write the manager of the funeral home, asking for specific information about a specific individual. Enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope and offer to pay for any copying expenses. While the manager might not do the actual search, you can be reasonably sure that he or she will be receptive to your request and will see that it is answered. You may hit it lucky and receive photocopies of everything in the file. Unless there is a lot of material to copy, there will probably be no charge for the copies. After all, the manager, perhaps more than anyone else there, knows the public relations value of accommodating requests like this.

If you are personally acquainted with anyone on the funeral home staff, you might be able to arrange a personal visit and, with luck, an opportunity to peruse the files in which you are interested. Be forewarned, though, that you might wind up with the job of organizing the old files! That could be a real pill! The founder of a firm with which I was once associated (which started back in 1905), kept records for years on the backs of used envelopes (times were hard back then).

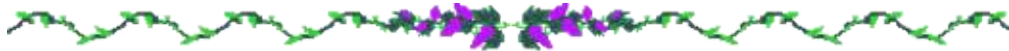
In cases where a firm has gone out of business, the old records may have been taken in by another firm in town or they may have been taken home by the owner and now rest in some relative's attic. The local librarian or genealogical society may know who and where. In many cases, old funeral homes' records have been transcribed or microfilmed and can be found in the local library.

If you need to contact a funeral home in a distant place, you can visit your local mortuary and ask to see its directory of funeral homes. Every funeral home has at least one such directory, commonly called "Red Book," "Blue Book," or "Yellow Book." These list every funeral home in the United States, Canada and many foreign countries, with addresses and telephone numbers.

If you do not know the name of the funeral home which handled the funeral, ask older relatives if they remember, refer to obituaries that might have been clipped and kept, or inquire at the cemetery office, **IF** there is an office and **IF** you know which cemetery. If you have obtained a copy of the death certificate, you will find the funeral home noted on it. Where there are several funeral homes in the town, you can narrow down the search by determining which would have been in business at the time of the death.

The directories mentioned above contain ads from many of the listed funeral homes; these often note the year the firm was founded. You can also ask one of the funeral directors about which firms would have been in operation at the time. There may have been ownership changes, and the firm you are seeking is still operating, but under a different name. Most funeral directors are fairly knowledgeable about the histories of the funeral homes in town and may be able to help you determine which one you need to contact or be able to help you locate the records if the firm no longer exists. If all this fails, you can always inquire at every funeral home in town, hoping to score a hit at one of them.

Remember that most funeral directors are nice people and will respond favorably to your request if you go about it in the right way.



The above article was used as a lecture in the AOL Genealogy Forum. The author, [Mark Barker](#), is a licensed funeral director and embalmer, and has been actively working in the funeral profession in Tennessee for 45 years. A resident of Kingston, TN for 30 years, he is currently employed by Rose Mortuary in Knoxville. Mark is a family genealogist, a past president of the Lillard Family Association and of the Roane County Genealogical Society. He is also a member of the Genealogy Forum staff on AOL, where he hosts a weekly session on War Between the States and a monthly session on Confederate History. Use of this article was granted by Mark Barker for the TNGenWeb Project; ©Mark Barker 1997, 1998

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