



Ancestors Revealed

Professional Genealogy Services

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What will they say about you when you're gone?



Beth Mariotti, Genealogist

One of the most valuable sources of genealogical information is the obituary. This might surprise you, judging by today's obituaries which are most often just a brief account of achievements and a list of relatives with a cause of death rarely ever mentioned. Obituaries usually sound very business-like and sterile today. But obituaries from previous generations offer up detailed information about the life **and death** of the subject; describing their work and relationships and extolling their virtues.

Through the years, styles of writing for obituaries have changed. In the mid-1800s, obituaries were rare; usually only a line stating the date

that the person had "passed". To be worthy of even that small note, a person would have to be considered a "great and important man". By the late 1800s piety was the main theme of an obituary and the subject could be a woman as well as a man. Note the following from 1894. "Miss Samantha Franklin was released from suffering and translated to her heavenly home on the last day of 1891. Miss Franklin had a sympathetic nature and possessed those modest, lovely traits of Christian character that won tender love and high appreciation from all of her acquaintances. As the end of life came in view, she was anxious it should not be prolonged, thereby requiring personal sacrifice from friends. She has been a devoted and loyal member of the Methodist church for years."

By the early 1900s, detailed descriptions of the death scene were in vogue. Take these examples from 1905 and 1908. In the first case, the subject of the obituary "arose at the usual hour and prepared the usual meal, after which she complained of not feeling well and a few moments later fell to the floor and in less time

than it takes to tell it she had breathed her last, death occurring at 7:45. She had been suffering for years with heart disease and it was this that caused her death." In our second example the man "aged 49 years was found dead in bed at his home yesterday forenoon at 11 o'clock. When he retired Monday night he was in the best of health. Early yesterday morning his wife arose and went about her household duties. About 11 o'clock his brother Frederick called at the house and inquired for him. Mrs. Laigle told him that he was still asleep, but that if he wanted he could go in and wake him up. When he entered the room Frederick found his brother dead."

By the 1930s, obituaries gave a more complete picture of a life. Luther Smith's 1936 obituary has a headline declaring him "Long a member of the Granite Lodge, Long a Textile Overseer". The article describes his parents, his working life and his religious and community affiliations. It lists his wife and children and describes his funeral including the names of ministers and pallbearers.

You can learn a lot from obituaries. They not only tell us about the person, but also about the time in which the person lived

Did You Know?

- More Americans died of Influenza in 1918 than died that year in WWI
- Tuberculosis killed 1 in every 4 Americans in the 1800s
- Malaria plagued the Southern & Mid-western states in the late 1800's

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“OBITUARIES
TELL US AS
MUCH ABOUT
THE TIME IN
WHICH THEY
WERE WRITTEN
AS THEY DO
ABOUT THE
SUBJECT.”

Where to find Obituaries

Libraries and Historical Societies are great resources for obituaries. Local and State Libraries usually have newspapers on microfilm. You can go to the library, search the newspapers around the date that your ancestor died and then print the obituary. Most libraries will also provide this service for you, if you know the date of the obituary. Some have a small fee and

some charge nothing at all. Some libraries even have an obituary index or a database which you can search on their website.

Historical Societies may also have microfilm of the local newspapers and will do a search for a small fee.

There are some subscription databases online for historic newspapers. That is a great place to search for obituaries and old articles about our ancestors. All the major

newspapers, such as the New York Times, Boston Globe and Chicago Tribune also have their archives online. Some are accessed by subscription and some are free. Often, these larger papers have brief death notices rather than obituaries.

Also, remember to check with family members for old scrapbooks or photo albums that may have obituaries pasted into them.

What's Dropsy and how does it kill you?

Today, most deaths occur as a result of chronic diseases, such as cancer or heart disease. But, in the 1800s, most deaths occurred due to infectious and communicable diseases. With no vaccines, diseases such as tuberculosis, diphtheria, small pox and influenza were major causes of death. Poor water quality was to blame for the spread of typhoid and cholera. Gastrointestinal and respiratory diseases such as dysentery and bronchitis were deadly. Yellow Fever and Malaria were transmitted by mosquitoes.

Oldtime diseases sometimes had odd names. Dropsy, for example, was short for Hydropsy and described excess fluid build-up in the tissues; today called Edema. Phthisis and Consumption were names for Tuberculosis. Both of these names were descriptive; Phthisis literally meaning “wasting disease” and Consumption describing the action of the disease on the body. It was not unusual in the 1800s for old age to be listed as the cause of death. Neither was it unusual for childbirth to result in death. In the 1800s most births

were performed by midwives in the home. Ether and chloroform were used for pain. These, however, slowed the contractions and necessitated the use of forceps. Many women who died after childbirth died from infection or a disease which caught hold of them in their weakened state.

In 1800 the avg. life expectancy was about 40. This, of course, is skewed by the large rate of infant and childhood mortality. With no birth control, women often gave birth to large numbers of children. But, depending on where and how the family lived, they might only expect 1/2 to 2/3 of them to live to adulthood.

Certainly, people suffer greatly from illnesses today. But in the 1800s life must have seemed so much more precarious. An immigrant woman living in a lower east side tenement with her many children and husband could hear him coughing one day and a month later be out on the street with her children in an orphanage. Thank goodness for modern medical treatment and insurance.

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The Galveston Daily News
January 5, 1883