

Cause of Death - August 2015 - Barbara Wich

“The charm of history and its enigmatic lesson consist in the fact that, from age to age, nothing changes and yet everything is completely different.” Aldous Huxley ~ *The Devils of Loudun* ~

Always consider the historical landscape & human geography of when and where an ancestor lived.

There are 4 general pathways to death which can act alone or act in an additive fashion: Infections, Trauma, Poisons or Toxins, & Chronic Diseases. Risk factors for death include gender, age, time period (historical landscape), location, life circumstances, and natural disasters including war & epidemics. Human health is divided into three time periods - 1) all human history until mid to late 1800s marked by high mortality rates due to communicable diseases that tended to select young victims. 2) through early decades of 20th century in developed countries when communicable diseases decreased due to sanitation, better nutrition and medical interventions. 3) Now degenerative diseases predominate as the major causes of mortality, concentrated in older ages.

Top ten causes of death in the 3 periods of human health history. Infectious diseases in bold.

<u>1850</u>	<u>1900</u>	<u>2000</u>
Tuberculosis	Diarrhea	Heart Disease
Dysentery/Diarrhea	Pneumonia	Cancer
Cholera	Tuberculosis	Stroke
Malaria	Heart Disease	Lung Disease
Typhoid Fever	Stroke	Accidents
Pneumonia	Liver Disease	Diabetes
Diphtheria	Accidents	Pneumonia/flu
Scarlet Fever	Cancer	Alzheimer's
Meningitis	Normal Aging	Kidney Disease
Whooping Cough	Diphtheria	Blood Poisoning

Thomas Jones defines “Genealogy as a research field concerned primarily with accurately reconstructing forgotten or unknown identities and relationships.” We use records / documents in our research. Think about the sources you consult while trying to reconstruct an ancestor’s life. Records can be ORIGINAL - not based on prior records & often made at the time of the event or DERIVATIVE - created from prior records - a transcription, abstraction, translation, or reproduction. Think copying errors. The information on the document may be PRIMARY in nature - eye witness report or SECONDARY - second hand or hearsay or may be INDETERMINABLE - just who was the informant? A document may contain all three types of information. Thomas W. Jones, *Mastering Genealogical Proof* (Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2013).

Any record of death has limitations. It can be frustratingly difficult to find, read or understand & may be inaccurate or just wrong. Here are possible sources to begin the study of a life through death records -

Death Certificate	U.S.GenWeb - possible list county resources
Register of Deaths	SSDI* - post 1936
Burial Permit	Diary / Journal Entry
Cemetery Record	County Mug Book

Grave Monument	Institutional Records - insurance, hospital, prison
Funeral Home	Family Lore
Coroner's Report / Autopsy	Newspaper -
Church Book	Death Notice
1850-1880 Mortality Census	Obituary
Pension Papers - job, military	Burial
Bible - family vital records	News !

* Not all classes of workers covered by SS. For most years since 1973, the SSDI includes 93% to 96% of deaths of individuals aged 65 or older.

Court Records for wills, probate, letters of administration & City Directories which follow person over time may provide a date of death so other documents can be sought. Finding & evaluating a death record can be an invaluable way to begin your exploration of an ancestor's life and relationships.

Cause of Death - Bibliography

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Barbara Jean Evans, *A to Zax - A Comprehensive Dictionary for Genealogists & Historians* (Alexandria, VA: Hearthside Press, 1995).

David J. Eveleigh, *Privies and Water Closets* (Oxford, UK: Shire Publications, 2008).

Atul Gawande, *Being mortal : Medicine and What Matters in the End* (New York : Metropolitan Books: Henry Holt & Company, 2014).

Google.com & other search engines - look for accurate sources of medical and historical information. University sites, medline, NIH, Family Search wiki, etc.

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Judy Melinck, MD & T. J. Mitchell, *Two Years, 262 Bodies, and the Making of a Medical Examiner* (New York: Scribner, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2014).

Erik Seeman, *Early American Studies: Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800* (University of Pennsylvania Press, September 2011) - an e-book.

The United States National Library of Medicine, operated by the United States federal government, is the world's largest medical library. Located in Bethesda, Maryland, the NLM is a division of the National Institutes of Health. <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/smallpox/>