

West Virginia Vital Research Records Project

Online Searchable Database and Digital Images of Selected Birth, Death and Marriage Records

The West Virginia Vital Research Records Project is a collaborative venture between the West Virginia State Archives and the Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU) to place online via the West Virginia Archives and History Web site selected West Virginia county birth, death and marriage records, and selected statewide death records in a viewable, downloadable and searchable format accessible at <http://archive.wvculture.org/vrr/>. While the majority of the eligible records are now in the database, the project is on-going, with more records being added when possible and the system undergoing refinement as needed. In Virginia/West Virginia, births and deaths were first reported to the counties in 1853, while marriages were recorded in the counties from the inception of each county (see West Virginia Counties chart in our brochure or online at <http://archive.wvculture.org/history/counties/wvcounties.html> for formation dates). All three types of records are still reported to county clerks today. In 1917, the West Virginia Dept. of Health Vital Registration office began collecting the county reports of births and deaths and issuing official state birth and death certificates from that year through the present, as well as creating "delayed" birth records by affidavit. Additionally, the state issues copies of marriage applications from 1964 to the present, available through the Vital Registration office. Please note that divorce records are available only from the appropriate circuit court clerk, and are not available from county court clerks, the Vital Registration office or the West Virginia Archives and History Library.

The death records made available online in the Vital Research Records database come from two sources: county records as recorded on microfilm by the GSU largely from 1967 to 1970, and statewide death certificates as

selected for release by the West Virginia Dept. of Health Vital Registration office. Currently both state and county death records are withheld 50 years from date of issuance. State death certificates for individuals from all 55 counties dating from 1917 through 1964 are available online through this project. Additional state death certificates will be added in a batch once a year (usually January 1) as all the certificates for a given year pass the 50-year mark of issuance. For example in 2016, the state death certificates for 1965 will be added to the database.

Six counties were included in the initial database for birth, death and marriage records: Calhoun, Gilmer, Hardy, Harrison, Mineral and Pendleton. For these six counties, as for all the other 49, marriage and death records are included up to the last record microfilmed for that county by GSU: Calhoun, Gilmer, and Mineral through 1969; Hardy, Harrison and Pendleton through 1970. For these six counties birth records may include up to 1938, with records 75 years or older at the time of selection posted online. Due to a change in the selection parameters since the records of the initial six counties were posted, subsequent counties added include only births recorded in those counties more than 100 years ago, meaning in 2015 only births for 1853 through 1914 are available, with additional births in one year batches to be added sometime after all the records for that year pass the 100-year mark, usually the number of the year recorded plus 101 years. For example, 1915 birth records will be available in 2016. The addition of state birth certificates and of state delayed birth certificates to the database is not anticipated, although some delayed birth records may show up in the regular county birth records.

The records in the database are not fully transcribed and are searchable only by the

information requested in the search boxes for each type of record. The "Detail" pages were set up to transcribe most of the record, but once the tasks of indexing and transcription were underway, GSU found full transcription to be far too complicated and time-consuming, so while earlier entries in the database include more details, most of the subsequent records have basic information with explanatory notes where applicable. The county record images are double-paged, as they were microfilmed, so if the record you want is not visible on the first page shown on the screen, scroll right or left to the adjacent page to find your record. Some of the certificate-like marriage records were recorded two to a page and filmed two pages at a time, so scrolling up and down, left and right, may be necessary to locate a record.

Regarding West Virginia state death certificates, a group of 1920 death certificates, #4501 through #5000, are not available. Sometime after the deaths for 1920 were indexed, but before the record books themselves were microfilmed and transferred to the State Archives, that certificate book was lost. The following information appears in the Vital Registration index: name, date of death, county of death, and original certificate number. Although the Dept. of Health and the State Archives do not have copies of these particular death certificates, the relevant county courthouses should be able to provide county death records for them, and the county records are included in WVRR. The Archives and History Library has the county records on microfilm for the use of its patrons, and also can provide copies by mail in response to mailed research requests that enclose the required \$5.00 fee for in-state requests, or the \$15.00 fee for out-of-state requests. (Please note that only the county that issued the certificate can provide a certified copy for legal purposes.)

You may notice some dates earlier than 1853 for county births and deaths. These are either delayed records accepted by the clerks, errors by an original clerk or by a transcriber, or due to an exceptional circumstance as noted on the Details page and/or in the record itself. You may also disagree with the spelling of a name as entered or as transcribed. We have been correcting transcription errors of all

types as we find them; however, we can not correct errors in the original records, only errors made in the transcription and indexing process. To correct errors in the original information recorded by a county clerk or by the Dept. of Health, researchers must contact the relevant agency. To report transcription errors, indexing errors or broken links, send an e-mail identifying the problem to chwvrr@wv.gov. Due to staff time limitations, please do not telephone Archives and History with questions about Vital Research Records, and please do not make research requests to the WVRR e-mail address. For instance, if a researcher does not find a record as expected, and would like the staff of the Archives to conduct further research to locate that records, or a substitute source such as a census record or an obituary, a written research request letter is required. Research requests must be sent in writing by regular mail, with the proper fee enclosed, to the West Virginia Archives and History Library (address and details posted at <http://archive.wvculture.org/history/archives/services.html>). The West Virginia State Archives can not provide certified copies of any of these records. For certified copies of records, most often needed for legal purposes, contact the issuing agency, either the county clerk or the West Virginia Dept. of Health Vital Registration Office, (304) 558-9100, online at <https://www.wvdhhr.org/bph/hsc/>.

We are aware that the images are oversized and that a user must scroll up and down, left and right, to view the entire record. Also, many of the two-page record images do not print in a legible size. Before notifying the Archives of any problem encountered in downloading and printing, please fully explore your options on your own computer first. Unfortunately, identification of the ledger in which a record was found was not included in the transcription, so those needing a specific citation of the county ledger volume in which a record appears will have to refer to the microfilm itself, or contact the county of record or the Archives. We have been unable to determine any way to improve these situations.

The Vital Research Records database has been one of the most well-received projects

we have undertaken, and is probably the most used portion of our Web site. We ask for your patience if the system times out on you by reporting "Records found," but listing none. Try making your search more specific, or try again at a less busy time. Upgrades of the image server and the database server have significantly improved service, so system time-outs should be rare now. While there are limitations and restrictions pertaining to both the contents and the use of the Vital Research Records Project database, we are offering these records online as a public service to family history researchers. We think the ability of researchers to view digitized photographic images of the actual records rather than typed transcriptions is very important and contributes to increased accuracy in family history research. Please continue to send us your comments, suggestions and corrections for the database to our special e-mail address for the site, cultwvrr@wv.gov. If you do not have access to e-mail, call Debra Basham, (304) 558-0230.

For greater understanding of West Virginia's vital records, we refer you to articles in our monthly newsletter and Quick Guides derived from those articles. While the newsletter articles remain as written at the time of publication, the Quick Guides were most recently updated in October 2021.

- **Vital Records in West Virginia: Deaths**, *West Virginia Archives and History News*, September 2007: <http://archive.wvculture.org/history/ahnews/0907news.pdf>
- **Vital Records in West Virginia: Births**, *West Virginia Archives and History News*, October 2007: <http://archive.wvculture.org/history/ahnews/1007news.pdf>
- **Vital Records in West Virginia: Marriages**, *West Virginia Archives and History News*, November 2007: <http://archive.wvculture.org/history/ahnews/1107news.pdf>
- **Quick Guide to West Virginia Birth Records**: <http://archive.wvculture.org/history/archives/quickguidetobirth.pdf>
- **Quick Guide to West Virginia Death Records**: <http://archive.wvculture.org/history/archives/quickguidetodeath.pdf>
- **Quick Guide to West Virginia Marriage Records**: <http://archive.wvculture.org/history/archives/quickguidetomarriage.pdf>

Organizations, societies and teachers are free to copy the Vital Records articles, the Quick Guides, and this WVRR article for use as handouts or for reprint in other publications, as long as each Guide is printed in full with the statement of origin that appears at the bottom of the page, and as long as the reprint is not used for commercial purposes.

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