

GENTREK: Coroner's Reports

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How many cemeteries have you traipsed through looking for ancestors?

How many obituaries have you collected to learn more clues about your family?

Have you ever visited a Funeral Home to locate records on a deceased family member?

Most of the individuals we are searching for are dead, right?

We routinely look for death certificates, but we often fail to consider other records that may be generated by the death of our ancestor. One of the overlooked records is coroners' records.

Let's discuss the following topics:

- [When does the Coroner get involved?](#)
- [Types of records to be found](#)
- [How to locate the records](#)
- [Online Resources](#)
- [Summary](#)

Mayhap we shun to think of anything violent happening to our ancestors that overshadows our thoughts when it comes to these records. Still, there are cases where the cause of death of an ancestor may have generated a coroner's inquest.

TIP: Coroners' records may exist although your ancestor didn't die a brutal death.

When the Coroner gets involved

We often assume that the coroner was called only when the death was of a violent nature. (Thank you, network television.) However, this is a faulty assumption. The coroner could also have been required when the death was of an undetermined, mysterious or accidental nature as well. Coroners are likely to be involved in the following types of death:

- suicide, accident, or sudden death of a person in apparently good health;
- person unattended by a practicing, licensed physician at death;
- death involving suspicious or unusual circumstances;
- poisoning or adverse reaction to drugs and/or alcohol;
- disease constituting a treat to public health;
- disease, injury, or toxic agent resulting from [employment](#);

- death during medical diagnostic or therapeutic procedures;
- in any prison or penal institution; while involuntarily confined in jail, prison, hospital, or other institution or in police custody;
- whenever a body is to be cremated, dissected, or buried at sea;
- any unclaimed body;
- any dead body brought into a new medico-legal jurisdiction without proper medical [certification](#);
- D.O.A. (dead on arrival) at hospital.

Consider the mission statement of the Medical Examiner's Office in San Diego, California:

"Investigate and determine the Cause of Death through Forensic Pathology in all homicides, suicides, motor vehicle fatalities, occupation related deaths, drug abuse deaths and deaths due to apparent natural causes in which the decedent has not been seen by a physician within 20 days prior to death or in which the attending physician is unable to determine the cause of death."

As family researchers, we often incorrectly assume that coroners' records are a more recent invention. Coroners have existed for hundreds of years, and in some localities those old records still exist. Indeed, the original word was "crownor." We still use the word "coronation," don't we?

The coroner's qualifications and personality often determined how and what kinds of records were kept. In many counties in the United States, the coroner is an elected position and may be one of the most powerful in a given county. Typically, the coroner's job has gone to a local funeral director with sufficient funds for a winning campaign. Conflict of interest has always been a subject of contention in those cases, but a coroner's training or lack of training in forensic investigation now has become a more important issue. Some counties have completely eliminated coroner's positions, and inquests are conducted by the Medical Examiner's Office.

Types of Records

Some of the different types of records that in a coroner's report, include the following:

- Jury reports
- Necrology reports
- Pathology reports
- [Police reports](#)
- Testimony offered at the inquest
- Toxicology reports

Coroner's records are normally a "public record" and available to genealogists to research. Like other records, the coroner's records can be found at different jurisdictional levels including city, county, and state. Most places will have a county examiner, however larger cities will have medical examiner offices. It follows that with more people there are more deaths.

Locating the Records

Locating these records requires us to determine the local jurisdiction where the ancestor died. Oftimes the death record may tell you that there was a coroner's investigation. Some death certificates may indicate they are temporary, pending the outcome of the coroner's report. Usually attached to such a certificate is the final answer in revised form from the coroner. This is especially true in California and Illinois.

Some localities have already allowed their coroner's records to be microfilmed by the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. This should be one of the first places you check, unless the ancestors died locally in which case you can contact the local coroner's office to learn where those records are now stored.

You should examine family traditions and records for any potential clues that would point to coroners' records. Sometimes a death certificate will state that a coroner's inquest was held. Anytime there is a suspicious death or a death by any of the afore-mentioned causes, an investigation may be in order. Newspaper accounts of unusual deaths are a good way to find dates — an important tip, since most coroners' records are not indexed and may be found only by date of the event.

Example #1:

One inquest, "upon the body of Alexander Goetzinger Murray," dated 19 May 1903 in Cook County, presented the following verdict: "The said A.G. Murray now lying dead at 205 North Pk Ave in said City of Chicago, County of Cook, State of Illinois, came to his death on the 18th day of May A.D. 1903 on the lawn at the NE corner of Washington Blvd. and Franklin Ave., Austin, Illinois, from valvular disease of the heart."

Juror names were of no genealogical value, but the list of witnesses together with their addresses provided good hints for follow-up research. Interestingly enough, the more important clues came from the "description of property found on the body," in this case, a lodge button that led to an investigation of Masonic records.

Example #2:

Now and then there are discrepancies in the information found in coroner's records. The medical examiner or coroner must be very careful in determining the cause of death since in many instances what may appear at first to be a suicide is actually a murder. There was a case in which the investigators had determined that a man had committed suicide. The body was found in a car in a closed garage with a note on the dashboard, and all the physical signs pointed to suicide. So they reported it as such. Shortly after his arrival on the scene, however, another investigator determined that it could not have been suicide: upon looking under the hood, he found no engine in the car!

Some Online Resources

Following are a few web sites with Coroner's Records. This is by no means all of them, but it gives you an idea of what is available.

[Chester County, PA, Archives & Coroner's Records](#)

[City of London Corner's Inquests](#)

[Cook County, IL, Coroner's Inquest Record Index 1872-1911](#)

[DeWitt County, IL, Coroner's Inquest Files Index, 1924-1977](#)

[Dutchess County, NJ, Coroner's Report 1908](#)

[Funeral and Coroner's Records, Shelbourne County, Nova Scotia](#)

[Inventory of Lane County, OR, Coroner's Records at Archives](#)

[Montgomery County, OH, Coroner's Office](#)

[Vermilion County, IL, Coroner's Inquest Files Index, 1908-1956](#)

[Wayne County, IL, Coroner's Inquest Record Index, 1888-1960](#)

[White Pine County, NV, Coroner's Inquest Book 1910 - 1914](#)

Summary

Whenever you discover an ancestor who died under questionable circumstances, follow up by tracking down coroner's records. I found a cousin who was struck by lightning in Mitchell County, Kansas, this way. So remember: you may not always enjoy the answer you discover.

When you look through coroner's records, you will eventually find yourself thinking like a detective—and that is what all good family historians *should* do. While examining these records, you will realize that it is true: dead men do tell tales!