



Secretary of the Commonwealth William Francis Galvin
Massachusetts Archives Division

Guide to the Massachusetts Vital Records

Government-mandated recording of vital records in Massachusetts began in 1642, when the colonial legislature required all town clerks to keep a record of births, marriages, and deaths in their respective towns.

This system has continued uninterrupted – albeit with major modifications – through to the present day.

Where to find the records?

While *Civil Registration* formally began in Massachusetts in 1642, some towns have records of births, marriages, and deaths dating back to the 1630s. These were either created at the time or compiled afterwards from a variety of sources.

Additionally, *Parochial Registration* in some seventeenth-century towns date to the earliest period of settlement and in many cases are still held by the local Congregational churches.

Early colonial laws also required towns to file copies of their births, marriages, and deaths with the *County Court* and, after 1692, the separate county *Courts of General Sessions of the Peace*.

In 1902, the state launched a program to transcribe and publish the early vital records of Massachusetts cities and towns. This program continued through 1917 with state funding and for some time afterwards with independent funding. The published records produced through this program usually have the title *Vital Records to 1849* and are colloquially known as the “tan books” because of their binding.

In 1842, the state government implemented a centralized system of vital records collection and ordered town and city clerks to submit annual copies of their birth, marriage, and death records to the Office of the Secretary of the Commonwealth.

In 1976, the government transferred record-keeping responsibilities for vital records to the Registry of Vital Records and Statistics within the Dept. of Public Health, who currently maintain control over active birth, marriage, and death records.

The Massachusetts Registry of Vital Records and the Massachusetts Archives provide access to vital records in accordance with state laws. The two institutions operate under an agreement which provides full access to vital records more than 95 years old at the Archives, while records less than 95 years old are held by the Registry of Vital Records and subject to the restrictions promulgated by state law.

Restricted vital records include records of adoptions, some name changes, illegitimate births, and a few other special scenarios.

Currently, Massachusetts vital records are stored in three separate locations:

1. Records from 1642 (or earlier) to the present are held by the City and Town Clerks
2. Records from 1841 through 1925 are held at the Massachusetts Archives
3. Records from 1926 to the present are held at the Massachusetts Registry of Vital Records & Statistics.

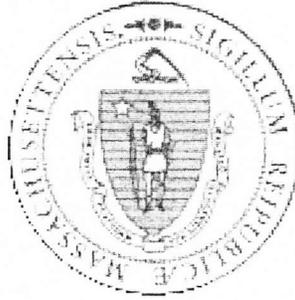
What to find on the records?

It is important to note that for the entirety of the nineteenth-century, vital records held at the state level are recorded in oversized, register book format. The state did not keep copies of birth, marriage, or death certificates as we understand them in the modern sense until 1904 (for deaths) or 1918 (for births and marriages.) Prior to those years, the only record that exists is the register book.

In general, vital records – whether in register book format or as certificates – contain the following information:

Names of individuals of record, date of event, location of event, names of parents, birthplaces of parents, occupation of father, names of husbands for married women (after 1887), maiden names of married women (after 1890), mother's maiden names (after 1897), cemetery where burial took place (after 1897)

After 1904 (for deaths) and 1918 (for births and marriages), the certificate formats often contain more information, including ages and dates of birth of parents, names of attending physicians at births and deaths, and detailed information about cause and manner of death.



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Between:	Records held by:	
	Local Level	State Level
1642 and 1841	Town or City Clerk's Office	County Courts or Courts of General Sessions of the Peace (to 1814)
1841 and 1925	Town or City Clerk's Office	Massachusetts Archives
1925 and Today	Town or City Clerk's Office	Massachusetts Registry of Vital Records and Statistics

Contact Information:

Massachusetts Archives
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Boston MA 02125
Ph: 617-727-2816
E-Mail: archives@sec.state.ma.us
Website: www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/

Registry of Vital Records & Statistics
150 Mount Vernon St.
Boston MA 02125
Ph: 617-740-2600
E-mail: vital.regulation@state.ma.us
www.mass.gov/orgs/registry-of-vital-records-and-statistics

Massachusetts City and Town Clerk Directory
Website: <https://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/eleclck/clkidx.htm>