

No Death Certificate?

John M. Hoenig describes 10 tricks for when the paper trail goes cold

FINDING A DEATH certificate can be a simple matter: look up the name in an index to find the certificate number, then look for the certificate. However, sometimes you can't find the name in the index and you're stuck. This can be a major research impediment because a death certificate can link three generations — the decedent, the decedent's parents and sometimes, an informant who could be a relative, such as a child, of the decedent. Here are some techniques for solving this problem.

First, look again. Sometimes, I just miss finding a name even though it's right there where it should be. So, if it's important, I've found it pays to try again. When I do this, I also try various spellings and alternative names. One relative went by the name of Abraham for many years. However, his death certificate (and the index) has the name Irving instead. I have found the surname Peller spelled Peler, Piller, Paller and even Pellu. Once I found there were mistakes in alphabetizing the names in the index so the name was there but about two inches above where it should have been in the index. If you have some information about the person's demise, such as a narrow range of years, you can search more name variations.

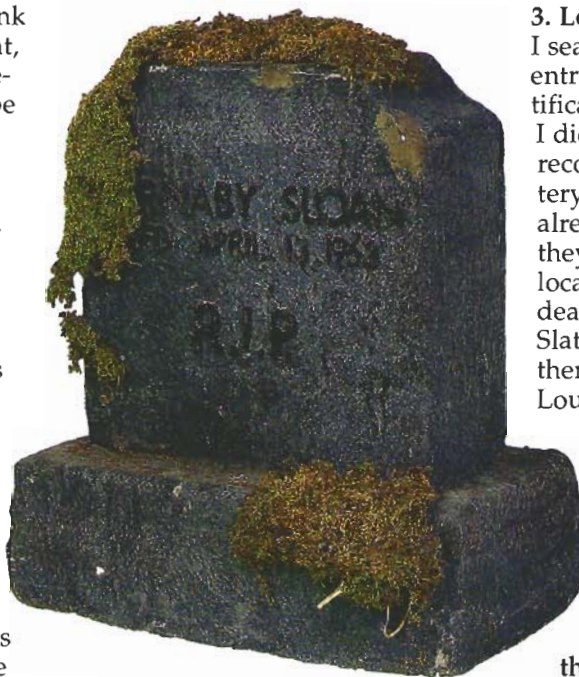
Brute Force Searching

The number of death certificates for the boroughs of Manhattan or Brooklyn in the 1920s might total 20,000 records in a single year. This is too many to search manually. However, the records, arranged by certificate number, are in rough chronological order. I found out Louis Fitzter died on or shortly before 22 December 1923. Therefore, I only needed to search the end of the roll of microfilm. This was do-able. For a smaller city, you might be able to scan a whole year of records but several years might be too much. The techniques here can often be used

to find the year or the date of death:

1. Look for the Grave and Cemetery Information.

I couldn't find a death certificate for Ishaie Peller but I found his



grave. That told me his date of death and his age. When I looked in the index for that year, I found only one Peller — Sam Peller. However, Sam died within one day of what was in the cemetery record, and his age was just one year off from the cemetery record. It appears that Ishaie was also known as Sam.

2. Find a Descendant.

An obvious way to find a grave, which is often overlooked, is to ask descendants. Even if they don't know the location of the grave, they may know where other family members are buried, and people are often buried near their relatives. Once you locate the grave, you will have a date of burial which is helpful. Occasionally, a relative will have a death certificate in their possession. My cousin Marcia had the death cer-

tificate for her aunt Clara because she handled Clara's estate. I spent a lot of time looking for Clara's death information until I happened to ask Marcia. Relatives sometimes have a family Bible that lists births, marriages and deaths.

3. Look for the Spouse's Grave.

I searched a 20-year block of index entries for Louis Fitzter's death certificate without success. However, I did find his wife Slate's death record which told me the cemetery where she's buried. I had already called the cemetery and they had told me they couldn't locate a record without a year of death. However, once I knew Slate's year of death, I could ask them to check a plot map to see if Louis is buried near her. They said he's right next to her, and they told me his date of death and last address.

Remember that cemeteries will sometimes confuse the date of death with the date of burial, so the actual death might be several days before the date you're given. It is important to note that burial practices vary among ethnic groups. Jewish people try to bury the deceased as quickly as possible (but not on Saturday) while Christians often wait several days.

4. Check Probate Files.

On a couple of occasions, I have found death certificates included in probate files. The deaths were so recent that the death certificates were not public records and couldn't be obtained from the office of vital records except by a member of the immediate family. However, the probate files are public records so I got the certificates. Most of the time, the probate file does not contain the death certificate but it almost always contains the date of death.

5. Narrow the Dates.

You can narrow the range of years in which a death may have

1 PLACE OF DEATH		STATE OF NEW YORK	
BOROUGH <u>Manhattan</u>		Department of Health of The City of New York	
		BUREAU OF RECORDS	
		CERTIFICATE OF DEATH	
No. <u>44 Heclauey</u> St.		Registered No. <u>30736</u>	
Character of premises, whether tenement, private, hotel, hospital or other place, etc. <u>Resident</u>			
2 FULL NAME <u>Louis Pitzer</u>			
3 SEX <u>M</u>	4 COLOR OR RACE <u>W</u>	5 SINGLE, MARRIED, WIDOWED, or DIVORCED (Write the word) <u>M</u>	15 DATE OF DEATH <u>Dec 22</u> 19 <u>23</u> (Month) (Day) (Year)

Death certificate for Louis Pitzer actually pertains to Louis Fitzer, the author's great-grandfather's brother. This is based on matching the date of death, address, profession, approximate year of birth and father's name.

occurred by looking for the person in city directories, phone books and federal and state/provincial censuses to see when the last entry appears. For the years 1850 through 1880, don't forget to check the US federal census mortality schedules. Of course, the Social Security Death Index (SSDI) can give you the date of death. This makes it much easier to search death indexes.

6. Look for Obituaries.

An obituary or death notice will tell you a person's date of death (at least approximately) and will often tell you the jurisdiction in which the person died. This makes searching indexes much easier. Many major newspapers can now be searched electronically. For small town newspapers, you might do well to contact the local public library, which is likely to have a clipping file with obituaries.

7. Check Church/Synagogue Records.

Churches and synagogues can often provide information on the date of death of a person as well as where the person is interred. I have not used this approach very often but once it provided extremely quick results for a relative who died in Strasbourg, France.

8. Records of Clubs and Professional Societies.

I once asked the American Dental

Association's archivist for information about a cousin and she provided me with obituaries, photographs and a pile of other documents. Fraternal and civic organizations, local historical societies and similar organizations might also be helpful.

9. Check Property Records.

If your relative owned property, then upon his or her death the property would change hands. Thus, the date of property transfer can help narrow down a date of death.

10. Funeral Homes.

Some funeral homes have records from way back. One I called kept records for only three years, but it's worth a try. Some localities kept body transit records that might be worth investigating too.

Proof is in the Pudding

On a recent trip to New York City, I decided to look for three death certificates that had eluded me for several years. Louis Fitzer died on, or shortly before, 22 December 1923, according to the cemetery records. There were 31,384 death certificates filed in Manhattan during 1923. I went to the end of the last roll of microfilm for 1923 and scanned 343 certificates before I found him. It took 17 minutes. His name was listed as Louis Pitzer but all the other information was consistent with what I knew.

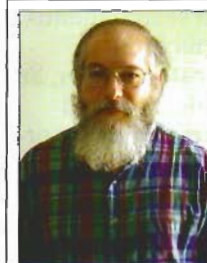
I then tried looking for Rose

Peller, who died on 11 August 1914, in Brooklyn. Instead of searching 24,132 certificates, I spent five minutes searching for the roll of microfilm containing certificates dating from around 11 August. I then scanned 107 certificates and found Rose in 11 minutes. She was listed as Rose Peller but the handwriting was so poor it looked like Rose Pelier.

I tried the same technique for Sam Peller but couldn't find him despite spending 45 minutes searching 560 certificates. Interestingly, after finding Louis' and Rose's certificates, I got curious and searched the death index for the names Pitzer and Pelier but did not find them. I have no idea why.

Finding two out of three problematic death certificates is not bad at all. If a death record is important to you, you should be able to find it even if it is not indexed properly. It may take some effort, but you can do it.

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When he's not researching his own family, he works on computerizing archival records from his family's ancestral towns.