

# Guide to Death Records

## Chester County Archives

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Chester County kept death records for the years 1852-1855 and 1893-1906. In **1906** the State of Pennsylvania began keeping the records. Other than the listed years the county **did not** record deaths and alternative sources should be consulted.

### 1852-1855 Death Records

On January 12, 1852, the Pennsylvania Legislature enacted its first statewide law requiring the registration of vital records. As stated in the preamble, the law was prompted by a need to document births, deaths and marriages that could not be substantiated for legal cases, whereby "the rights of many have been sacrificed, and great wrongs done" as well as to validate "important truths, deeply affecting the physical welfare of mankind" that could be drawn from the recording of these records. [1] The law, however well intentioned, was short lived. The Registration Act of 1852 was repealed on January 31, 1855 [2], only 3 years after its inception. During those three years, only a few births, deaths and marriages were recorded within the county. This dearth of records may be an indication of a lack of compliance with the law, which may have lead to its eventual repeal.

The records in this index begin on July 1, 1852 and end in January 1855. These records do not represent all the deaths that took place in Chester County during this time period. There are several townships that never submitted any returns to the Register of Wills Office and a large majority only submitted a few. The closer the event took place to West Chester, the higher probability it was recorded.

The 1852-1855 death records contain detailed information, including date and place of birth, names of parents, and name of spouse. The records are incomplete; many deaths were not recorded.

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### Death Records, 1893-1906

Between 1893 and 1906, information on deaths was compiled by local tax assessors and then turned in to the county. Often a death was recorded six months to a year after the actual event. The records do not include the names of parents unless the deceased was a minor. Records are incomplete; not every death was recorded. The only record that exists is the register itself; there are no certificates on file.

[Online Index](#)

### Death Records, Post-1906

Beginning in 1906, the state government of Pennsylvania began keeping death records. These records are available by mail. Contact: [Pennsylvania Department of Health](#)

## **Alternative Sources**

### **Coroner's Records, 1720-1957**

The Coroner's Office is responsible for holding inquests when an individual dies of a suspicious or unknown cause, by misfortune, suicide or violence. The inquests or coroner's reports are the result of these investigations.

The information contained in each inquest varies by time period. The following is a general guideline of the information that may be found:

**1720-1916** – Name of deceased, place of inquest, jurors & witnesses, cause of death

**1930-1957** – Name of deceased, place of inquest, witnesses, cause of death, age, occupation, race, sex and marital status

Please note that all of this information may not appear on every inquest. The information provided depended on the circumstances of the inquest and the individual filing the report. Some records may even supply more information such as parents (usually in the case of a minor) or spouse's name. It should also be noted that the date listed in the index may not correspond closely with date of death. It is important to view the original documents.

The following records are included in this index:

**Coroner's Reports (Inquests)**- Record produced by the Coroner during an inquisition

**Coroner's Dockets**- Log book of investigations done by the Coroner's Office

**Coroner's Bills**- Document submitted to the County Commissioners requesting reimbursement for expenses related to Coroner activity

**Quarter Sessions Inquests**- According to an 1841 state law, Justices of the Peace could hold inquests but only with the approval of the Court of Quarter Sessions. This index includes both docket entries and reports of inquests conducted by Justices of the Peace.

[Online Index](#)

### **Poorhouse Records, 1800-1910**

Deaths that occurred at the county home can be found in the indexes to the admissions books (1800-1910) and steward's books (1821-1823, 1825-1829). Occasionally, deaths were recorded in outdoor allowance books (1801-1856).

[Online Index](#)

## **Proof of Death Registers, 1875-1893**

(1875-1893 are considered bulk dates. Many entries contain individuals who died prior to 1875.)

An act of legislature passed on May 15, 1874 required that "all persons applying for letters testamentary or letters of administration shall, before the issue of said letters, file with the register of wills an affidavit, setting forth as nearly as can be ascertained the day and hour of the decedent's death to which said letters respectively relate." This information was recorded in volumes until 1893. After that date the affidavits are filed within the decedent's estate file.

Entries provide full name of decedent; residence, date, time and place of death; name of attorney; name and signature of individual filing for letters; date of recording and signature of register of wills.

**Notes:** Dates in [] indicate the year of recording. The full date of death was not provided.

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## **Veterans Burial Cards**

These cards include burial location and military service information for veterans buried in Chester County cemeteries, as compiled by the Chester County Office of Veterans Affairs. Cards are arranged alphabetically or by cemetery and are available on microfiche.

## **Veterans Burial Records, 1885-1979**

Records veterans buried at county expense. For the years 1917-1961 there are also records for the burials of veterans' widows.

[Online Index](#)

## **Wills and Administrations, 1714-1923**

Beginning in late 1874, the date of death was entered in the probate index. If the death occurred in 1906 or after, this date can be used in a request for a death record from the state.

[Online Index](#)

In addition to the material listed above, the Archives has other records that may be used to determine death dates. Please ask a reference archivist for assistance.

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[1] "An Act To provide for a registration of marriages, births and deaths," Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, (1852).

[2] "An Act To repeal the Registration Act," Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, (1855).