

10 Ways to Document Disasters in Genealogy Research

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How did our ancestors persevere and survive in the face of disaster - natural, manmade and financial - so that we could be here today to tell their stories? Learn how to not only locate your ancestors amidst the rubble but give voice to their stories.



- Research historical newspapers.** Not every disaster was headline news; read small town “gossip” or “goings on” columns to find more information. And certain misfortunes might not be mentioned so as to not embarrass a family or other reasons. Read between the lines and connect the dots.
- Check for victims lists.** Some newspapers and websites will list victims of a disaster and sometimes also link to their obituaries. Cause of death might be listed but realize that there were secondary causes of death from disasters. And not all victims died instantly or within days of a disaster.
- Consult census records.** Determine not only when a cluster of people died but look for those family members left behind. Some households will be populated with a new configuration of relations such as cousins, aunts and uncles after a disaster. Also trace migrations to new locations, new occupations.
- Don't forget mortality schedules!** For the 1850 to 1900 US Federal Censuses, enumerators gathered data on those who had died in the 12-month period prior to the census.
- Look up court records.** Many disasters resulted in lawsuits and court records. Ex: a lawsuit against a building owner for violating local fire codes resulting in a major fire such as the Iroquois Theater Fire in Chicago in 1903. Also check probate and estate records for victims.
- Conduct cluster and collateral searches.** Using census and other records, look for a spike in deaths in certain locations or on certain dates. Don't limit yourself to just your ancestor's immediate family.
- Consult diaries and letters.** Our ancestors were good about letter writing and diary keeping. Just as with newspaper accounts of incidents, you may need to do some sleuthing and decipher “coded” words about an accident.
- Conduct family interviews.** While the victims most likely left no information as to what occurred or how they suffered, almost always there were family members who may have witnessed the event, were maimed or injured, or recall the impact of the event on the family.
- Check classified ads.** When disaster struck, many small-town newspapers would see an increase in advertisements for estate auctions, missing persons, etc.
- Use necrologies.** A necrology is a list of deaths over a period of time and was printed in local newspapers at the end of the year. These lists make it easy to do cluster searches and correlate deaths to specific incidents.

Check out the **Documenting Disasters Resource List** on the back page!

Documenting Disasters Resource List

- Ancestry.com – Disaster Message Board
<https://boards.ancestry.com/topics.disasters/mb.ashx>
- Burned Counties Research - FamilySearch Wiki
https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Burned_Counties_Research
- Cyndi's List: Diseases & Medical Terms
<https://www.cyndislist.com/medical.htm#Diseases>
- Eastland Disaster, Chicago, Illinois - July 24, 1915
<https://www.eastlanddisaster.org>
- GenDisasters
<https://gendisasters.com/>
- Holes in History: The 1890 Census Fire – Family Tree Magazine
<https://www.familytreemagazine.com/premium/holes-history-1890-census-fire/>
- National Transportation Safety Board Accident Reports
<https://www.ntsb.gov/investigations/AccidentReports/Pages/AccidentReports.aspx>
- Online Historical Newspapers
<https://sites.google.com/site/onlinenewspapersite/Home>
- Raking the Ashes: Genealogical Strategies for Pre-1906 San Francisco Research
<https://amzn.to/2SyUVQZ>
- Sam Fink Index – Cook County, Illinois Marriages and Deaths
<https://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=2433>
- The Cleveland Necrology File
<https://cpl.org/newsindex/>
- US Census Mortality Schedules
<http://www.mortalityschedules.com/>
- Weather For You
<https://www.weatherforyou.com>
- Weather Underground Historical Weather
<https://www.wunderground.com/history/>
- Wikipedia: List of Epidemics
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_epidemics
- Wikipedia: List of Natural Disasters
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_natural_disasters