

Town/City Clerks Records for the Genealogist

By Howard Maynard Faulkner

This information is generic and will vary within and between states. It will also vary over time and is subject to local/state and other rules/laws/guidelines. Some clerks may require advance notice for certain records to be made available. Other variations and /or restrictions may apply. It is advisable to inquire in advance if you are seeking rare or obscure documents. While Public Records MUST be made available for inspection there are rules and common courtesies that are to be followed. A FOIA application may be required in some instances, but this is not common. Letters and email should be brief and to the point.

Commonly Available Records

Vital Records - Birth, Marriage, Death (Less often, divorce/adoption records, but ask where kept)
Cemetery Information (Usually only general information but ask where specific records are kept)
Minutes of Meetings of Town/City (Historical)
Voter Registration Rolls (With Party Affiliation too)
Tax Records (May be in Assessor's Office)

Less Common Records But They May Be Available

History of Town Officials (Names, dates, positions)
Licenses (Animal, hunting, fishing, business, liquor, etc)
Election Results (Historical)
Political Party Affiliation of Registered Voters
Maps: Town, City, County, State (Old and current)
Town/City Directories (These were very popular from the late 19th until the mid/late 20th centuries)
Naturalization papers (Application, Declaration, & Naturalization Records. Most now at NARA)
Old Photographs of People, Buildings, Homes, Schools, Businesses

Ask the Clerks Office About...

Local Historical Society
Libraries
Funeral Homes
Cemetery Locations (And responsible parties for records)
Churches (Location and names of those that have records)
Early Land Records (Ask where kept)
Local Businesses (May have information about early businesses of the community/area)
Schools (Including private, public, state, religious etc.)
Museums (Including Home Museums)
Name Changes and/or Border Relocations (Local Municipalities, County, and/or State)
History of the Town/City (Frequently published copies are for sale or at Local Libraries)

NOTE: Request Photocopies *NOT* TRANSCRIPTS of Original Documents

When communicating with the Clerks Office Staff explain you wish to have only *photocopies* of original documents for genealogical purposes. Avoid transcripts! Although they may be less expensive these are NOT considered *primary source documents* as they could have errors of many types and you may never know the difference. The experienced clerk understands this and will comply with your request. Although the cost may be a little more you will have an accurate document with the photocopy.