

1996

03 The Chester County Death Register, 1893-1899: an analysis of sources

Vincent Civiletti

West Chester University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_wchest



Part of the [Public History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Civiletti, V. (1996). 03 The Chester County Death Register, 1893-1899: an analysis of sources. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/hist_wchest/114

This Resources for Genealogists is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History of West Chester, Pennsylvania by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wccressler@wcupa.edu.



The Chester County Death Register, 1893-1899: an analysis of sources

by Vincent Civiletti, HIS 480 (submitted May 13,
1996)

Web adaptation copyright 2004 by Jim Jones

All histories are ultimately based upon primary sources. The historian extracts from the sources those facts which pertain to his subject and builds his history. Historians often ignore that these primary sources are also the product of other primary sources. This of course is necessary; otherwise, the historian would be compelled to chase an ever-receding trail of evidence. Nevertheless, each step back along that trail can potentially illuminate or discredit histories which assume a later starting point.

The Chester County death register is a valuable primary source for the writing of local history. But an incomplete understanding of why it was begun, how it was produced or how valid its information is, can lead the historian into false avenues of investigation and ultimately into erroneous conclusions. This paper will therefore investigate the death register itself in an attempt to make it a more reliable source and to illuminate future histories of Chester County. The scope of the paper will be narrowed to the first volume of the register, which covers the years 1893-1899. The paper will try to answer the above questions by discussing the legislation which initiated the register, the collection of the data, its documentation in the register, and some of the types and possible causes of errors it contains.

The legislation for the register was enacted on June 6th 1893, when Pennsylvania Governor Robert E. Pattison approved Act 281, which ordered the Clerk of Orphan's Court in each county to be responsible for registering all births and deaths within their respective counties. The categories of information for the death register were "the full name of the deceased, color, sex and age, whether married or single, place of birth, occupation, date and place of death, duration of illness, place and date of interment ... and the date

of making the record" and in the case of "a minor, the name of the father and mother."(1)

What was the purpose of the register? By the end of the nineteenth century, it became apparent to government officials that the ten-year census was no longer timely enough to keep track of the country's citizenry. Industrialization and the growth of cities had led to an unprecedented movement of the population. The country was no longer primarily agricultural, and people no longer spent their entire lives in one place.(2) Also, the science of statistics, which was more advanced in England, began to find adherents in the States. It was realized that vital statistics were valuable in the "adjustment of the representation in legislative bodies ... to commerce, pension plans, military service, settlement of estates and inheritances, [and] ... in the guidance of public health authorities."(3)

For instance, in 1887, six years before the keeping of the death register in Chester County began, a Philadelphia woman placed an advertisement in the *Daily Local News* in which she asked for help in establishing the date of death of her late husband. She believed that he had died in West Chester, but because she could not prove the date of his death, she was unable to collect his veteran's pension.(4) Indeed, the act establishing the register provided that it would serve as "prima facie evidence [and would] be admissible in all judicial proceedings."(5) During discussions concerning the act in the House of Representatives, one representative offered "humanitarian purposes" as one of the many reasons for keeping track of births and deaths.(6)

This intense interest by the state in vital statistics at this time can be seen in another act passed in May 1893, which ordered the establishment or reestablishment of the board of health in every borough in the Commonwealth. Among the many mandates of this legislation was the requirement to keep records of all births and deaths,(7) which duplicated information found in the registers kept by the Clerk of Orphan's Court.

Who exactly is in the register? According to the act, "the register is a record of all deaths occurring within the county."(8) The vast majority of those in the register fit this requirement, but a quick glance at the register exposes some obvious exceptions. For instance, Deliah L. Meader of West Chester died in German Hospital in Philadelphia,(9) and Anthony Conor of Avondale also died in Philadelphia.(10) Both of these people are in the register, although they obviously did not die in Chester County. But both were citizens of Chester County and their bodies were brought back to their homes for burial. There are at least 115 such examples in the register, which might lead one to

conclude that the assessors were confused as to whether Chester County citizens should be recorded, regardless of where they died.

The counterpart to the previous example is those people residing outside the county who died in Chester County but were returned to their homes for burial. They are not in the register, although they fit the requirement. An example of this is James Armstrong, an eighteen year old man from Philadelphia who committed suicide in Devon after an unsuccessful job hunt.⁽¹¹⁾ The number of people in this category cannot be determined without an extensive search of the newspapers and the death registers of other counties.

One might reasonably expect that the people who are in the death register would, for the most part, be found in Chester County's cemeteries. However, a survey of five cemeteries yielded unexpected results. First, at Honey Brook Presbyterian Cemetery, there were as many as 76.6% of people missing from the register, but this may have been partly the result of its great distance from the county seat and its closeness to the Lancaster county line. It is possible, especially in a rural area like Honey Brook, that many people were brought there from the next county, since it was the closest town in the vicinity. Northwood Cemetery in Downingtown, which is ten miles closer to West Chester, had a somewhat better results at 48.3%, but still less than might be expected.

An examination and comparison of three cemeteries contiguous to the county seat in West Chester provide better examples. Of the three cemeteries, one might expect that the largest number of discrepancies to be in Chestnut Grove, the black cemetery, assuming official neglect of a socially and economically repressed class. Surprisingly, the exact opposite was found. Chestnut Grove had the lowest number missing, 27.5%, whereas Greenmount Cemetery, which catered to whites, had 32.9% missing, and the Friend's Burial Company cemetery on Rosedale Avenue, a Quaker cemetery, had 54.4% missing. In the 1890s, whites were certainly more socially and economically advantaged than blacks, and Quakers were still at the top of white society in Chester County. As it turned out, the wealthier classes were the least represented in the register. To explain this, a new hypothesis was required.

Many of missing names must be of people who lived and died outside the county, in contrast to those in the register who died elsewhere but who had permanent residence in the county. They would therefore not be registered, but were nevertheless brought back to the county to be buried in family plots.

Transporting the bodies of relatives from outside the county to family plots was expensive, so only the wealthier citizens were able to do so. This explains why the cemeteries in which many of the wealthier citizens were interred would have the largest number unregistered.

Evidence that the transportation of bodies was commonplace at this time is found in an 1888 advertisement by Abram G. Williams, a West Chester furniture dealer and undertaker, which reads: "Funerals arriving here by railroad can be furnished with carriages and hearse at the lowest price."⁽¹²⁾ Further evidence is provided by an 1895 law forbidding the transportation of a body by steamboat or railroad without obtaining a permit from the Board of Health.⁽¹³⁾ Evidently, transportation of bodies was common enough to require legislation.

An example of this custom can be seen in the story of the Maris family. The Maris' were a wealthy and prominent Quaker family who lived in West Chester as late as 1893.⁽¹⁴⁾ Noris Maris, the patriarch of the family, died in Wilmington, Delaware in 1893 and was brought to his son's home in West Chester to be buried in their family plot in Rosedale Cemetery. His son, George L. Maris, moved to Newtown, Bucks County shortly thereafter, where he established the George School.⁽¹⁵⁾ In the following two years, he buried two daughters, Jennie Bond Maris⁽¹⁶⁾ and Lucy A. Maris,⁽¹⁷⁾ a son Dr. Willis Maris,⁽¹⁸⁾ his mother Ann D. Maris,⁽¹⁹⁾ and his sister Elizabeth J. West,⁽²⁰⁾ all of whom died outside the county but were buried at their family plot in Rosedale Cemetery.⁽²¹⁾

Not all of those who are in local cemeteries but not in the register were transported in from other counties. There is evidence that many lived and died in Chester County, but were simply missed by the tax assessors. Ironically, some of them were very prominent citizens. Martha Bostick, a black woman who lived on East Barnard Street in West Chester, was very active in social movements of her day and a leader in several religious and benevolent associations such as the Star of the West Tent and the Lady Masons. Her funeral was attended by throngs of friends, family members, and admirers. She was buried in the Chestnut Grove Cemetery, but her death was missed by the West Chester assessor.⁽²²⁾ Another example is Lorenzo Beck of East Washington Street in West Chester, who was for many years a prominent banker and one time County Commissioner of that city, but who is not in the register.⁽²³⁾

Another phenomenon which may shed some doubt on the completeness of the register is the unauthorized and (by 1893) illegal practice of burying family

members on one's own property without notifying the proper authorities.(24) An incident in March of 1894 illustrates this. It came to the attention of the District Attorney and the Coroner that two twins of a colored woman named Josephine Draper, who lived at 429 East Barnard Street, were buried in the yard along her house. This was confirmed when "the parents stated that they were too poor to make a proper internment and consequently just buried the bodies in the yard. ... The children were subsequently taken to Chestnut Grove Cemetery."(25) These twins, Bertha and Hattie Draper, are in the register, but one must wonder how many such incidents, especially in rural areas, went unnoticed by the authorities.

The assessors had a difficult and many-faceted job, and they evidently did a less thorough job in registering deaths than their oath of accuracy and due diligence would lead us to believe. This fact was probably known at the time by the state, and was the reason for a supplement to act 281 in 1895 which required a formal affidavit to be filed along with their returns.(26) The difficulties of the job are best summed up in an 1892 newspaper excerpt:(27)

"In regard to the complaints of defective work upon the part of our Borough Assessor in the past, Assessor Al Ingram said to a reporter last evening: `It is no wonder there are complaints of the work. It is a work in which it is impossible to avoid some errors. Changes are constantly taking place about the borough. New people are moving into town, others leaving, and properties changing hands every day, and it is an impossibility for the Assessor to follow these changes accurately and keep a complete record of them. There is no manner in which the work can be done perfectly. ... The duties of the office involve a great deal of guesswork."

Although this refers to the assessors' job just prior to the creation of the death register, it would still seem to have been applicable. The additional work couldn't have made things any easier for the assessors.

To better understand how errors in the register occurred, it is helpful to discuss the manner of data collection and its documentation in the register. The tax assessors of every ward, borough and township were given the duty of compiling a semi-annual list of births and deaths in the county. This information was to be collected while making their regular tax assessments.(28) Their regular tax assessing duties were updated yearly with a complete reassessment of the county every three years, at which time they were allowed to hire two assistants each to complete the enormous job.(29) In addition, the assessors had the job of compiling a triennial list of all persons

liable for military service, the registration of all eligible voters, and a list of all children of school age.(30)

The new duty of compiling information on births and deaths was a burdensome addition to their workload which had to be performed twice a year. The periods covered May 1 to October 31, and November 1 to April 30.(31) Parents, guardians or anyone else who had any pertinent information were obliged by law to provide it to the assessors.(32) Assessors whose districts were located in urban areas may very well have canvassed their areas on foot. In rural areas, the assessors had to hire a horse and carriage to make their rounds.(33) What resources the assessors used to collect the data--obituaries, undertakers' records, information from the board of health, or general hearsay--has not been determined. The assessor recorded his findings on blanks of the register sheets which were furnished by the county commissioners.(34)

In the weeks following the end of the recording period, the assessors intermittently and, at their convenience,(35) returned their lists to the county commissioners to be tabulated. The assessors received five cents for each birth and death recorded.(36) Especially in the early years of the register, it was common to publish the assessors' returns in local newspapers as they were brought in. The lists were then filed with the Clerk of Orphan's Court(37) with an affirmation by the assessors of their accuracy and due diligence.(38)

At this point, it only remained for the Clerk of Orphan's Court to have the assessor's lists copied into the official registry books, which were also furnished by the county commissioners.(39) The copying was probably done by clerk's assistants and began after all the assessors' lists were in, approximately two months after the end of the recording period, although some lists were not copied until as much as eight months afterwards.

Since the register is organized alphabetically, the procedure was probably as follows. The copyist sat at a desk with the register book and a large pile of assessors' lists. The copyist would work on one list at a time and make entries alphabetically until that list was finished, before going on to the next list. The work regularly took from two to three months.(40) The Clerk of Orphan's Court, like the assessor, received five cents for every death registered.(41)

Thus far, this paper has discussed discrepancies between the register and actual deaths. There are additional problems caused by errors in the process of documentation itself. The first type of error is double entries, of which there are at least 133 examples. Many times, the information in one listing differs

from the information in its duplicate. One type of duplication error occurred when an assessor listed a name in two different registering periods, as in the case of Mary T. Apple, who was listed twice on page one of the register. Her first entry was recorded by the Clerk of Orphan's Court copyist on January 19, 1894, which would have been from the assessor's lists covering May 1 to October 31, 1893. Her second entry was recorded on October 10, 1894, which would have been from the assessor's lists covering November 1, 1893 to April 31, 1894. Her age in the first entry was recorded as 67, and in the second, it was 68. Obviously, the assessor for her district forgot that he had registered her in the preceding period, or there may have been a different assessor, but in any case, the error was not caught. Another example is Mrs. Levi Jones, whose name appeared on pages 124 and 125 with different ages (63 and 64) and death dates (April 22 and 23, respectively.)

By analyzing the handwriting in the register, it is evident that the copyists changed regularly, and some periods have as many as four different copyists. The changing of copyists during the recording of the same period is the cause of another duplication error. Mary Austerberry is recorded on the same page, but by two different copyists on two different days, December 28 and 30, 1899. The second copyist was obviously not aware that the first copyist had already entered the name. This mistake is pervasive throughout the register during the entry dates of December 26 through 30, 1899. Sometimes the same copyist copied a list over again on two different days, as in the case of M. H. Dunning and Mary E. Berkstrusser.

Another duplication error was caused when the same name appeared on two different assessor's lists. The entry for Warren Ash appeared at the bottom of page 2 and then again at the top of the page 3, but the information differs in each entry.

3, Ash, Warren, white, male, 8, single, , 1897/02/05, West Caln, accident, 30 hours, USA

2, Ash, Warren P., white, male, 8, , , 1897/02/05, West Caln, kicked by a horse, 1 day, USA

Ash's name was evidently on two different assessors lists. Because there were many names located between the two entries, and the names appear on different pages, the copyist did not notice the duplication. Another such example is John McCann, although his entries appear on the same page.

The duplication of entries smacks of cupidity. Totals for births and deaths in any one period might range from 103 in a borough like West Chester(42) to as few as 5 in an outlying area such as Atglen.(43) The assessors received five cents for each name on their lists, so this did not bring in a lot of money, especially for assessors in rural areas who had greater distances to travel and who incurred added expenses in order to compile their lists. Assessors throughout Chester County were dissatisfied with their fees and believed that the law should be changed so that they would get a reasonable amount of compensation.(44) The more names they turned in, the more compensation they received.

This arrangement was probably made to insure that the assessors would do a thorough job, but it also had other consequences. Just as census takers today (who get paid by a similar arrangement) are ecstatic to find that a nursing home or apartment complex is within their surveying area, our assessors did not shrink from taking advantage of institutions like the Chester County Home or the Chester County Hospital to "plump out" their lists. Regardless of who had the official jurisdiction of registry for these institutions, it commonly occurred that the deceased would end up on two different lists; in the district where the institution was located and again in the district where the person had family or property. Some examples of this tendency are Laura A. Taylor, Martha J. Thomas, James Harbison, Cilia E. Hiddlelson, and Eli Sloyer, who were listed as having died in the Chester County Home and the Chester County Hospital.

Besides the duplication of names on the assessors' lists, the copyists sometimes failed to enter all names that were on the lists. Although the actual assessors' lists are no longer extant, it was common practice in the early years of the register for the newspapers to reprint the lists as they were brought in by the assessors. Archibald Jay, an 8 year old boy who died of diphtheria in 1894,(45) was listed in the West Chester assessor's list which was reprinted in *The Jeffersonian*, a local newspaper,(46) but was not listed in the register.

Another area of concern is the validity of the particular information which is in the register. Comparisons with the information on headstones in the cemeteries reveals many inconsistencies. In the [Friends Burial Company cemetery](#) on Rosedale Avenue, 15 of 26 names (53.8%) in the register contain discrepancies, 16 of 45 (35.6%) in Northwood Cemetery, 18 of 47 (38.3%) in Greenmount Cemetery, 14 of 29 (48.3%) in Chestnut Grove Cemetery, and 8 of 11 (72.7%) in Honey Brook Presbyterian Cemetery.

Many of the discrepancies relate to date of death. Some differ by a day or two, others by months, and some even disagree on the year of death. The age at death was another common cause of discrepancy. It seems that the assessor would often give a person credit for having started another year of life. In other words, if a person was in his 73rd year of life when he died, he would be registered as 73 when he was really 72 and some months. In some cases the register used nicknames like Sullie instead of Sarah, some names have different spellings, such as Clemens for Clements, and in one case, a two year old girl named Grace Day was registered as George.

In most cases, it is difficult to determine which is correct, the register or the headstones. Assessors may have been hurried to complete their lists before exact information could be obtained, or the families may not have been able to recall data when headstones were erected, sometimes years after a death occurred. And if the stone cutter made a mistake on the headstone, it would have been too expensive to correct the error. Sometimes, obituaries agree with the register and other times with the information on the headstones. In many cases, corroborating evidence is difficult to find.

The inaccuracies in the Chester County Register were evidently common in the registers of other counties in the Commonwealth. In 1906, the State of Pennsylvania took over the responsibility for compiling the register from the information which the assessors collected. Most counties stopped keeping their death registers at this time.(47) Chester County's register was kept until 1907. In 1915, Act 281 was repealed and the State Board of Health took full charge of the collection and compiling of all vital statistic data.(48)

This paper has shown that the Chester County death register for the years 1893-1899 contains many errors, and the newspapers of the time agreed. The following excerpt appeared after the filing of the very first returns:(49)

"There are some errors in the returns as made. They are now being filed, but have not yet been transcribed to the records. If the readers of the News will scan the published lists and note any errors or omissions, and then call the attention of the Assessor of the proper district or the Clerk of the Courts, it is probable that trouble may be avoided in the near future. A record of births and deaths is valuable when accurately and officially kept. But if there are inaccuracies and omissions they may cause no end of troubles in later years when the record is needed for practical purposes."

This paper has discussed some of the categories in the register where errors are likely to occur. Further research in other categories such as occupation, cause of death, and place and date of interment is required to fully understand the problems the historian faces when using the register as a documentary source. Nevertheless, the register can be an important document for the study of Chester County history, provided that the historian pays due attention to its many inadequacies.

NOTES

1. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, Act nº281, section 1 (1893), 340.
2. Brinkley, Current, Freidel and Williams, American History: A Survey, 8th edition, vol. 2 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).
3. Hugh H. Wolfenden, Population Statistics and their Compilation (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1954), page number?.
4. *Daily Local News* (February 17, 1887), in Chester County Historical Society (henceforth CCHS) clipping file.
5. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 281, section 5 (1893), 341.
6. Legislative Journal, part 1, volume 2 (May 25, 1893), 2853.
7. *Daily Local News* (August 3, 1893), in CCHS clipping file.
8. County Government and Archives in Pennsylvania (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Historical Survey, 1947), 286.
9. *Daily Local News* (July 2, 1897), in CCHS clippings file.
10. *Daily Local News* (December 20, 1897), in CCHS clippings file.
11. *Daily Local News* (June 11, 1896), in CCHS clippings file.
12. West Chester Pennsylvania: The Most Important Suburb of Philadelphia (West Chester Board of Trade, 1888), 80.
13. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 258, section 36 (1895), 363.
14. *Daily Local News* (August 12, 1893), in CCHS clippings file.
15. *Daily Local News* (December 12, 1893), in CCHS clippings file.
16. *Daily Local News* (June 19, 1895), in CCHS clippings file.
17. *Daily Local News* (December 12, 1893), in CCHS clippings file.
18. *Daily Local News* (December 11, 1895), in CCHS clippings file.
19. *Daily Local News* (December 23, 1895), in CCHS clippings file.
20. *Daily Local News* (September 6, 1895), in CCHS clippings file.

21. Jim Jones, David Flogaus, Kelly Kulp-Bosler, Mike Wolford and Bob Gialanella, report on "The Friends Burial Company of West Chester, Pennsylvania" (West Chester, PA: HIS480, spring 1995).
22. *Daily Local News* (March 15 & March 20, 1893), in CCHS clippings file.
23. *Daily Local News* (February 1, 1893), in CCHS clippings file.
24. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 258, section 36 (1895), 363.
25. *Daily Local News* (March 16, 1894), in CCHS clippings file.
26. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, nø156, section 1 (1895), 246.
27. *Daily Local News* (February 6, 1892), in CCHS clippings file.
28. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, nø281, section 2 (1893), 341.
29. County Government and Archives in Pennsylvania (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Historical Survey, 1947), 100-101.
30. *Daily Local News* (December 21, 1895), in CCHS clippings file.
31. *Daily Local News* (December 20, 1893), in CCHS clippings file.
32. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, nø281, section 2 (1893), 341.
33. *Daily Local News* (June 4, 1895), in CCHS clippings file.
34. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, nø281, section 3 (1893), 341.
35. *Daily Local News* (December 20, 1893), in CCHS clippings file.
36. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, nø281, section 4 (1893), 341.
37. *Daily Local News* (December 21, 1895), in CCHS clippings file.
38. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, nø281, section 2 (1893), 341.
39. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, nø281, section 3 (1893), 341.
40. Ibid.
41. Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, nø281, section 4 (1893), 341.
42. *The Jeffersonian* (June 9, 1894), in CCHS.
43. *The Jeffersonian* (February 2, 1894), in CCHS.
44. *Daily Local News* (June 4, 1895), in CCHS clippings file.
45. *Daily Local News* (January 8, 1894), in CCHS clippings file.
46. *The Jeffersonian* (June 9, 1894), in CCHS clippings file.

47. County Government and Archives in Pennsylvania (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Historical Survey, 1947), 286, note 134.
 48. Laws of Pennsylvania, act 402 (William Stanley Ray, State Printer, 1915).
 49. *Daily Local News* (December 12, 1893), in CCHS clippings file.
-