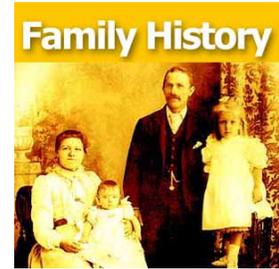


Family History: Genealogy Made Easy with Lisa Louise Cooke



Welcome to this step-by-step series for beginning genealogists—and more experienced ones who want to brush up or learn something new. I first ran this series in 2008. So many people have asked about it, I'm bringing it back in weekly segments.

Episode 4: Attending Genealogy Conferences and Vital Records Requests

In our first segment, our guest is the longtime online news anchorman of genealogy, Dick Eastman, the author of Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter. He talks about the changing industry and the benefits of attending genealogy conferences.

Next, you'll learn the ins and outs of using some "vital" sources for U.S. birth and death information: delayed birth records, Social Security applications (SS-5s) and death certificates.

Genealogy Conferences Conversation: A Few Updates

- Dick and I talk about Footnote.com as a relatively small site. Has *that* ever changed! Footnote.com is now Fold3.com and it's a go-to site for millions of online American military records.
- Family History Expos <https://www.familyhistoryexpos.com/> still offers an exciting conference, especially for first-timers. But there are others as well: In the United States, there's RootsTech <https://rootstech.org>, the National Genealogical Society http://www.ngsgenealogy.org/cs/conference_info and many state and regional conferences (like one near my home, the Southern California Genealogical Society's annual Jamboree <http://genealogyjamboree.com/>). Find a nice directory at Cyndi's List <http://www.cyndislist.com/education/conferences-seminars-and-workshops/>. Many conferences are starting to offer live streaming sessions for people who can't attend: check websites for details. In addition, Family Tree University <http://www.familytreeuniversity.com/virtual-conference/> offers regular virtual conferences—where sessions and chat are all online! If you live outside the U.S., look for conferences through your own national or regional genealogical societies. If you can get to London, don't miss Who Do You Think You Are Live: find details at <http://www.whodoyouthinkyouarelive.com/>.
- Dick now writes all of his Plus content himself. If you haven't already checked out Eastman's Online Genealogy Newsletter <http://eogn.com/>, you should! Both his free and Plus newsletters are great insider sources on what's new and great (or not-so-great) in the family history world.

The SS-5

You can order a copy of the application that your ancestor filled out when they applied for a Social Security Number: **the SS-5**. I have done this, and they really are neat, but they aren't cheap. So let's talk about the facts you're going to find on them so you can determine if it is worth the expense.

The SS-5 has changed slightly over time, but may include the applicant's name, full address, birth date and place and BOTH parents' names (the mother's maiden name is requested). If your ancestor applied prior to 1947 then you will also very likely find the name and address of the company they worked for listed, and possibly even their position title.

Here's an example of a Social Security application form:

U. S. SOCIAL SECURITY ACT
APPLICATION FOR ACCOUNT NUMBER 259-10-6780
 (Revised July 1957) EACH ITEM SHOULD BE FILLED IN. IF ANY ITEM IS NOT KNOWN WRITE "UNKNOWN"

1. **PRINT NAME**
 Ashby Harrison Johnson
(MARRIED WOMEN: GIVE MAIDEN FIRST NAME, MARRIAGE LAST NAME, HUSBAND'S LAST NAME)

2. **EMPLOYER'S NAME**
 Unemployed
(BUSINESS NAME OF PRESENT EMPLOYER)

3. **DATE OF BIRTH** 7-12-1886
(MONTH) (DAY) (YEAR) (SUBJECT TO LATER VERIFICATION)

4. **PLACE OF BIRTH** Hart Co. Pa.
(PLACE OF BIRTH)

5. **FATHER'S FULL NAME, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER LIVING OR DEAD** Abraham Johnson
(MOTHER'S FULL MAIDEN NAME, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER LIVING OR DEAD)

6. **MOTHER'S FULL MAIDEN NAME, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER LIVING OR DEAD** Manah Brown

7. **SEX:** MALE FEMALE
(CHECK (✓) WHICH)

8. **COLOR:** WHITE NEGRO OTHER
(CHECK (✓) WHICH) (SPECIFY)

9. **GIVE DATE YOU BECAME AN EMPLOYEE (IF YOU BEGAN EMPLOYMENT AFTER NOV. 21, 1946)** 1-2

10. **HAVE YOU FILLED OUT A CARD LIKE THIS BEFORE?** NO
(IF ANSWER IS "YES" ENTER PLACE AND DATE OF ORIGINAL FILING AND REASON FOR FILING AGAIN)

11. **DATE** 7-19-38
(DATE DATED)

12. **EMPLOYER'S SIGNATURE** Ashby Harrison Johnson
(MARRIED WOMEN: SIGNATURE OF MAIDEN NAME, MARRIAGE LAST NAME, HUSBAND'S LAST NAME) (FULLY WRITTEN - DO NOT PRINT)

13. **DETACH ALONG THIS LINE**

In the 1970s, the Social Security Administration microfilmed all SS-5 application forms, created a computer database of selected information from the forms, and destroyed the originals. So it's important to order a copy of the microfilmed original, rather than a printout or abstract from the Administration's database. And luckily now you can request a Social Security Application SS5 Form online under the Freedom of Information Act.

It will help to have your relative's Social Security Number (SSN) when you apply for a copy of their SS-5. First, it gives you greater confidence that their SS-5 exists. Second, it's cheaper to order the SS-5 when you have their SSN. Third, the Social Security Death Index, in which you'll find their SSN, usually has death data that makes your application for their SS-5 stronger. Privacy concerns have caused some genealogy websites to pull the SSDI, but you can still search it (in many instances for free) at the links provided in Episode 3 at <http://lialouisecooke.com/?p=3654>.

Finally, here's a little background on the Social Security Number itself. The nine-digit SSN is made up of three parts:

The first set of three digits is called the **Area Number**. This number was assigned geographically. Generally, numbers were assigned beginning in the Northeast and moving westward. So people whose cards were issued in the East Coast states have the lowest numbers and those on the West Coast have the highest numbers.

Prior to 1972, cards were issued in local Social Security offices around the country and the Area Number represented the state in which the card was issued. This wasn't necessarily the state where the applicant lived, since you could apply for a card at any Social Security office.

Since 1972, when the SSA began assigning social security numbers and issuing cards centrally from Baltimore, Maryland, the area number assigned has been based on the ZIP code of the mailing address provided on the application for the card. And of course, the applicant's mailing address doesn't have to be the same as their place of residence. But in general the area number does give you a good lead as where to look for an ancestor.

The next two digits in the number are called the **Group Number**, and were used to track fraudulent numbers.

The last set of four digits is the **Serial Number**, and these were randomly assigned.

UPDATE: The website for ordering Social Security applications (SS-5s) has changed since the podcast first aired. For current ordering instructions, including online ordering, click here: <http://www.ssa.gov/online/ssa-711.pdf>. The cost is still \$27 to order a deceased relative's SS-5 if you know the Social Security number and \$29 if you don't know it.

Delayed Birth Certificates

After 1937 folks who qualified to apply for social security had to have proof of their age. If they were born prior to official birth certificates being kept in their state, they applied for a delayed birth certificate.

Anytime someone needs a birth certificate for any reason, they have to contact the state—and often the county—in which the birth occurred. If a birth certificate exists, they can simply purchase a certified copy. But if there were no birth certificates issued at the time of the person's birth, they could have a "delayed birth certificate" issued by that state or county.

In order to obtain a delayed certificate, they had to provide several pieces of evidence of their age. If these are considered satisfactory, the government would issue the

certificate and it would be accepted as legal proof of birth by all U.S. government agencies.

Originally people turned to the census for proof of age. But eventually the Social Security Administration began to ask for birth certificates. For folks like my great grandmother who was born at a time and place where birth certificates were not issued, that meant they had to locate documents that could prove their age and allow them to obtain a delayed birth certificate. Delayed just meaning it was issued after the time of the birth.

Delayed birth certificates are not primary sources. (Remember we talked about **Primary Sources** in [Episode 2](#), available at <http://lisalouisecooke.com/?p=3576>.) Since the delayed certificate was based on other documents, and not issued at the time of the event by an authority, such as the attending physician, then it is not a primary source. This means that while it's great background information, it is more prone to error. In order to do the most accurate genealogical research you would want to try to find a primary source if possible. Chances are your ancestor used another primary source, such as an entry in the family bible, to obtain the delayed birth certificate.

The process for ordering a delayed birth certificate is likely going to be the same as ordering a regular birth certificate. You would start with the checking with the county courthouse, and then the Department of health for the state you're looking in. Let them know that the birth record is a delayed birth certificate. Also the Family History Library card catalogue would be a place to look as many were microfilmed. Go to www.familysearch.org and search for delayed birth records by clicking on Search from the home page. Then click Catalog and do the keyword search just as the episode instructs, using "delayed birth" as your keyword. (Within that search, you can also add parameters for the place name.)

So the lesson here is that even though your ancestor may have been born at a time or in a location where births were not officially recorded by the state, they may very well have a delayed birth certificate on file.

Ordering Death Certificates

The Social Security Death Index is just one resource for getting death information. But in the end you're going to want the primary source for your ancestor's death, and that's the death certificate. While many of your ancestor's born in the 1800s may not have a birth certificate, there is a much better chance that they have a death certificate since they may have died in the 20th century. Each state in the U.S. began mandating death certificates at a different time, so you have to find out the laws in the state, and probably the county, since death certificates were filed at the county level.

As I said before, the death certificate is going to be able to provide you with a wealth of information. Of course you'll find the name, date of death and place of death, and possibly their age at death and the cause and exact time of death, place of burial,

funeral home, name of physician or medical examiner and any witnesses who were present. The certificate is a primary source for this information.

You may also find information such as their date and place of birth, current residence, occupation, parent's names and birthplaces, spouse's name, and marriage status. But because this information is provided by someone other than the ancestor themselves it is really hearsay, and the certificate is considered a secondary source for that information.

And lastly you may find a name in the box that says Informant. This is the person who reported the death to officials. Informants are often spouses, children, and sometimes, depending on the person's circumstances, just a friend or neighbor. But the informant is almost always someone that you want to investigate further because they obviously were close to your ancestor.

Once you think you know the location where your ancestor died, and the approximate if not exact death date, you're ready to order a certificate. If the person died in the last 50 years you'll probably have really good luck at the county courthouse Department of Vital Records. The older the record, the more likely it may have been shipped off by the county records department to the state Department of Health. Look for helpful links to death records at Cyndi's List Death Records at <http://www.cyndislist.com/death/>.

Here are some tips that will ensure that you don't get bogged down in bureaucratic red tape:

1. Get the appropriate request form – this is usually available online.
2. Print neatly and clearly – if they can't read it, they will send it back to be redone.
3. Provide as much information as you have.
4. Provide a self addressed stamped envelope.
5. Make one request per envelope.
6. Include a photocopy of your driver's license to prove your identity.
7. Be sure to include your check for the exact amount required.
8. Make a copy of the request form for your records and follow up.
9. Lastly, keep in mind that county offices have limited personnel and are often swamped with paper work. So my best advice is that the more courteous and thorough you are the more success you'll have.

Online Death Indexes

In the case of very old death certificates, as well as birth certificates, some state agencies have opted to hand them over to state Archives and Historical Societies, or at least make them available for digitizing.

And there you have it, lots of different avenues for tracking down your ancestor's death records providing you with key information for climbing your family tree.