

New York City Research Guide, Part One: Vital Records, Property Records, and Estate Records

By Leslie Corn, MA, FGBS

You've probably heard. New York City is the "black hole of genealogy."

As a Manhattan native and professional genealogist in New York City, I want to say that my hometown isn't *really* the black hole of genealogy. But it is a complicated and vast storehouse of documents, made even more complex by the fact that depending on the part of present-day New York City and the time period you want to research, it is a conglomeration of different systems of record keeping and documents kept in various repositories.

In these columns, my goal is to show you how to mine those repositories and find what you're looking for, whether you research here in New York City or from a distance, via mail, microfilm, or online, no matter what your level of expertise, no matter what your ancestry. I'll describe some ins and outs of New York City research. I'll tell you about lesser-known record groups that might hold the answers you're looking for when the obvious sources lead nowhere, and where to access documents that substitute for records not yet in the public domain.

Today, New York City is made up of five counties and five boroughs: New York County/Borough of Manhattan, Bronx County/Borough of the Bronx, Kings County/Borough of Brooklyn, Queens County/Borough of Queens, and Richmond County/Borough of Staten Island. But it wasn't always that way. Depending on the time period of interest, you'll need an understanding of the geography of New York City and surrounding areas to know where to look for records and what types of records exist. For an excellent description of how New York City was formed, see the article by Harry Macy, Jr., "[Before the Five-Borough City: The Old Cities, Towns and Villages That Came Together to Form 'Greater New York.'](#)"

Records were created by and are kept at various government levels: federal, state/county, and municipal. To make matters more challenging, the same type of record can be found at different levels, such as military records and naturalizations. Among the major challenges of New York City research is to know what can be found where. We'll be discussing that in this column.

Some record groups are the responsibility of the federal government and are kept in federal repositories, such as federal censuses and federal naturalizations. Other records are state holdings and are housed in county repositories, such as estate and guardianship files and state censuses. Still other record groups are the responsibility of the borough, town, or village and are kept in municipal repositories, such as vital records, the 1890 "Police Census" of Manhattan and the Western Bronx, and voter registrations.

There are a couple of reference books I'd like to recommend at the outset:

Guide to Genealogical and Biographical Sources for New York City (Manhattan), 1783-1898, by Rosalie Fellows Bailey, AB, FASG. The book, originally published in the *Register*, (vols. 106-8, 1952-54), was reprinted in 1998 by the Genealogical Publishing Co. This packed little volume of 96 pages, in spite of being outdated here and there, is an invaluable resource.

The other book that no New York City researcher should be without is the newly updated [Genealogical Resources in New York](#), edited by Estelle M. Guzik and published by the Jewish Genealogical Society, Inc., P.O. Box 286398, New York, NY 10128. Although the book's focus is on late nineteenth- and twentieth-century research, there is much for any genealogist interested in any period of New York City.

My first three columns will feature the New York City Research Guide and an overview of some major nineteenth- and twentieth-century record groups—civil vital records, property records, estate files, naturalization records (federal and state), immigration records, court records (case files, business records, name change petitions, divorce files), records of religious institutions, city directories, censuses (federal and state censuses, juror censuses, tax lists), cemetery records, military records, and newspapers—on microfilm, on paper, and online. A contact list for the major New York City libraries completes the New York City Research Guide. Later columns will feature more in-depth descriptions of those

resources and others from these and earlier time periods, with explanations of how to search for them.

Addresses and phone numbers are given for every repository mentioned. If a repository has a website, you can click the hyperlink for more information and order forms, if available, to send for documents. If you're traveling here, be sure to check into repository hours and closings before you visit. For instance, certain repositories are closed on local election days, and you don't want to show up and be unpleasantly surprised.

Fees and methods of payment (cash, check, money order) are also subject to change. Currently, cash is accepted at all of the repositories noted below, with the exception of the Office of the City Clerk, where only money orders are accepted. Personal checks can be used at the New York City Municipal Archives and the National Archives Northeast-Region (NYC). Be sure to come equipped with change for photocopying. Most repositories do not have change machines, and few of the copiers accept bills.

When researching in New York City in this post-9/11 world, bring a photo I.D. You will need it to gain entrance to every government building. You will also have to walk through a metal detector and pass your bags and outerwear through a scanner. If your cellular phone has a built-in camera, be prepared to have it taken away for the duration of your stay in a New York City courthouse, where cameras are not permitted.

Look for more in-depth descriptions of records and repositories and how-to guides in later columns. The following is an overview of the main New York City resources of interest to genealogists. It is not meant to be, nor could it be, an all-inclusive compilation. New York City research being what it is, such an effort would require several volumes. Because of space limitations, most of the records discussed will be those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Many, but by no means all, of the indexes and records of New York City repositories can be ordered through the [Family History Library](#) and delivered to your local [Family History Center](#).

CIVIL VITAL RECORDS

There are three major repositories for civil birth, marriage, and death records, all in Manhattan. Depending on the locality of the vital event, the [New York City Municipal Archives](#) stores birth records from 1847 to 1908, marriage records from 1829 to 1937, and death records from 1795 through 1948. (Records from the earliest years are extremely rare.) Later birth and death records, all with restricted access, are housed at the New York City Department of Health. Marriage records from 1930 to the present—with restrictions on records less than fifty years old—can be obtained at the Office of the City Clerk of the City of New York.

The most complete indexes to vital records can be found at the archives noted below and also at the [New York Public Library](#) and the [New York Genealogical and Biographical Society](#), which also has all early vital records in register format and 1866 death certificates. Some indexes are also available at the [New York Historical Society](#). Many indexes and records can also be obtained on microfilm through your local Family History Center.

Published sources can lead you to vital records. Such sources include newspaper abstracts of marriage and death notices, such as Gertrude Barber's *Deaths Taken from the Brooklyn Eagle, 1841-1880*; *Marriages Taken from the Brooklyn Eagle, 1841-1880*; *New York Evening Post: Deaths, 1801-1890* ([searchable](#) on [NewEnglandAncestors.org](#)); and *New York Evening Post: Marriages, 1801-1890* ([searchable](#) on [NewEnglandAncestors.org](#)).

Divorce files are sealed in New York State for one hundred years. Indexes for all years and divorce records one hundred years old and older are open to the public at the county clerk's office in the county where the divorce took place. There is no city-wide divorce index. One index to divorces, legal separations, and annulments in New York City (Manhattan/Bronx), *Index to Matrimonial Actions, 1784-1910*, is available in the original volumes at the New York County Clerk's Office/Division of Old Records and on microfilm at the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, New York Public Library, and through Family History Centers.

Following are the government repositories for birth, marriage, and death records in New York City. Fees and years of holdings are subject to change. For more information and mail-order forms, visit their websites.

[New York City Department of Records and Information Services, Municipal Archives](#)

31 Chambers Street, Room 103

New York, NY 10007
212-788-8580

Vital record holdings

- Birth records: 1909 and earlier
- Marriage records:
 - Dept. of Health certificates, 1937 and earlier
 - Office of the City Clerk's licenses, 1908-29/30 (Indexes from 1908-51/52-4)
- Death records: 1948 and earlier

All indexes and vital records in the possession of the Municipal Archives are open to the public. Their website provides a [detailed list of vital record holdings by locality](#) .

Mail-order forms and instructions for [birth](#), [marriage](#), and [death](#) records are also available online.

Most of the Municipal Archives' vital record holdings, with the exception of City Clerk's license indexes and records, have been microfilmed and are available through Family History Centers.

Fee-based *Ancestry.com* currently offers some [indexes to births from 1891 to 1902](#) and [deaths from 1892 to 1902](#) in Manhattan and Brooklyn.

The Italian Genealogical Group has transcribed indexes to deaths in New York City, 1891-1911, and is in the process of transcribing the Brooklyn Brides' Index, 1871-1937 (many gaps, including from 1910-29). Both databases will be available free for searching on their [website](#).

City Clerk's Office, Marriage License Bureau

Municipal Building
1 Centre Street, Room 252
New York, NY 10007
212-669-8898

Holdings:

- Office of the City Clerk's marriage licenses, 1930-present, all boroughs (Marriage records less than fifty years old are restricted.)

Only marriage records from 1930 are accessible here. City Clerk's marriage records from 1908 to 1929 must be obtained at the New York City Municipal Archives across the street (see above).

From 1908 to 1937, City Clerk's licenses and Department of Health marriage certificates (stored at the Municipal Archives) were issued for the same event, but licenses have more information. (See my article, "[City Clerk's Marriage Licenses, 1908-37: One of 20th-Century Genealogy's Best Primary Sources](#).")

Currently, no City Clerk indexes or records are available on microfilm through the Family History Library.

New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Office of Vital Records

125 Worth Street, CN-4, Room 133
New York, NY 10013-4090
212-NEW YORK

Vital record holdings:

- Birth records: 1910-present
- Death records: 1949-present
- Indexes for all years

This repository has birth and death records only. Marriage records are available at the NYC Municipal Archives and the Office of the City Clerk, as described above. Every record at the NYC Department of Health is under restricted

access, so proper identification and authorization are required. It is almost impossible to obtain a birth certificate, unless it is yours or you have a court order. See the website for details.

Mail-order forms and instructions are available on the web pages:

- Birth records
 - [Order form](#) (pdf)
 - [Instructions](#)
- Death records
 - [Order form](#)
 - [Instructions](#)

Some of the indexes, but none of the certificates, have been microfilmed and are available through Family History Centers, the New York Public Library, and the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society.

PROPERTY RECORDS

The caretaker of deeds, mortgages, and other types of property records is the [New York City Department of Finance](#). Records are kept in City Register's offices in four of the five boroughs: Manhattan, Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens. Richmond (Staten Island) property records are kept at the County Clerk's Office.

Research must be done in person. No mail order research service is available, although, if you have the citation for a property record (date, borough, liber—called “deed books” elsewhere—and page number, etc.), you can order the record from the appropriate office.

Many indexes and some of the records—availability varies by locality and year—can be ordered through Family History Centers. The New York Genealogical and Biographical Society in New York City also has many of these microfilms in its collection, including copies of deeds through 1850 and indexes from as early as 1630 to as late as 1973 (with gaps).

There are some published grantor/grantee indexes of New York City property owners, such as the multi-volume set compiled circa 1857-64, *Index of Conveyances Recorded in the Office of Register [sic] of the City and County of New York*.

City Register's Office, Manhattan

66 John St., 13th Floor
New York NY 10038
212-361-7550

City Register's Office, Bronx

1932 Arthur Avenue
Bronx, NY 10457
718-579-6821

City Register's Office, Brooklyn

Municipal Building, Room 2
210 Joralemon Street
Brooklyn, NY 11201
718-802-3590

City Register's Office, Queens

144-06 94th Avenue, 1st Floor
Jamaica, NY 11435
718-298-7200

City Register's Office at the County Clerk's Office State Supreme Court, Richmond County

130 Stuyvesant Place, 2nd Floor
Staten Island, NY 10301
718-390-5386

ESTATE RECORDS

Probate files (estate files where the decedent died testate, with a will) and administration files (estate files where the decedent died intestate, without a will) are the property of Surrogate's Courts in New York City. Guardianship records can also be found in Surrogate's Courts, as can such types of files as Orders to Open Safe Deposit Box (SDB), Transfer Tax (TT), and others. Orders to Open Safe Deposit Box and Transfer Tax files, while not the stuff of genealogists' dreams, can, if probate and administration files are not available, be useful in denoting next-of-kin, date and place of death of the decedent, and address. Search for an estate file in the county where the person resided, not where he or she died.

The earliest date original files are available varies from one Surrogate's Court to another. Indexes are available for all years, and, depending on the years and office, can be found on cards, in books (libers), and, for later years, on computer.

Mail order requests are fulfilled at the cost of \$30 for a search for files less than twenty-five years old and \$90 for older files. Copies of the documents are \$6 per page via mail order.

To do the research yourself at a distance, order the "Indexes to Wills" or "Indexes to Administrations" for the appropriate county from your local Family History Center. The years available vary per county. With the file number and/or date of execution of the estate (be sure to specify if the file is an administration or probate), you can then order a copy of the file at the per-page rate, without having to pay the search fee.

Various published volumes of will and administration indexes and abstracts are available. Among them are the seventeen volumes of the New York Historical Society's *Abstracts of Wills on File in the Surrogate's Office, City of New York*, covering wills from 1665 to January 14, 1801 (also available on [CD-ROM](#) and online at [Genealogy.com](#) and [Ancestry.com](#)), and Gertrude Barber's *Index of Wills Probated in Kings County, New York, from January 1, 1850 to December 31, 1890*.

Surrogate's Court, New York County

31 Chambers Street, Room 402
New York, NY 10007
212-374-8287
Record Room 402
Liber Room 405

Surrogate's Court, Bronx County

851 Grand Concourse, Room 317
Bronx, NY 10451
718-590-3616

Surrogate's Court, Kings County

2 Johnson Street, Supreme Court Building, Room 109
Brooklyn, NY 11201
718-643-8016

Surrogate's Court, Queens County

Supreme Court Building, Room 700
88-11 Sutphin Boulevard
Jamaica, NY 11435
718-520-3128

Surrogate's Court, Richmond County

County Court House
18 Richmond Terrace, Room 201
Staten Island, NY 10301
718-390-5400

The next New York City research column will feature the second segment of the three-part New York City research guide, which will cover naturalization records, immigration records, court records, religious records, and city directories.