

An Easier Way to Obtain New York State Vital Records

By Marian S. Henry

Obtaining vital record information in upstate New York is difficult. There is no kinder way to state it. You will not find them published in books to be found on shelves of public libraries and they are not available on the Internet. Using form DOH-1562 one may submit a request to the vital records section of New York State Department of Health (Corning Tower Bldg/ESP, Albany, N.Y. 12237-0023, Ph: [518] 474-3077) for an uncertified copy of a birth, marriage, or death record. You can download this form from their [website](#). If an exact date for the event is not known, a search may be performed, but the researcher could pay dearly for this service. The minimum fee of \$11 covers a search of one to three years. The maximum fee listed is \$81 to search sixty-one to seventy years. The fee is retained whether or not the record is found. In Albany, a single person processes all requests for certificates. I am told that this person is currently about two years behind. Until recently, the index to the vital records of upstate New York was only available at the New York State Archives in Albany and the National Archives Northeast Region in New York City. However, the job just got easier. A third copy of the index became available to the public in October 2000 at the main public library in Rochester, N.Y. While the information remains the same, the setting is much different. The index in Rochester is administered by friendly people dedicated to helping genealogists.

The index, which consists of thousands of microfiche, contains entries of births, marriages, and deaths for the entire state outside New York City or Brooklyn. It includes information from towns in Kings County before annexation by Brooklyn, and also portions of the counties of Westchester, Richmond, and Queens before they were annexed by New York City. It does not include births and deaths in Albany, Buffalo, and Yonkers before 1914 or marriages before 1908. These earlier records may be available through the local registrar of each county. While adopted babies are not included in the birth index, there is information about babies born in state facilities. New York State Archives information [leaflet #2](#) contains more complete information. Statewide registration of vital records began in 1880-81. Marriage and death records are restricted after 1950; birth records after 1925. These restrictions can be waived for direct descendents, but the index entries are not available after these dates. Data on living persons is restricted regardless.

The index is arranged by year. Within each year entries are arranged by surname or, in later years, by Soundex code. Each index entry contains name, date, place, and certificate number (an identifier assigned by the State Department of Health). For example, the first entry in the index of birth records reads:

1881, Abbott, Georgianna, 22 Sept., Unionville, #4045

This serves as an official statement by the State of New York that this event took place. Finding the entry in the index assures the researcher that the certificate exists, decreasing the probability of a "false negative." Searching for a record that is not found costs just as much as a copy of the certificate.

The information available for marriages varies with the time frame, as the following example shows. The first marriage entry listed for the year 1881 is for Julia D. Abbey. The entry contains the date and place, but no information about the groom. Without the groom's surname, there is no way to move from here to a death record, or the birth records of children. Clearly the information on the original certificate is required. There is an alternative to waiting for two years for a reply from Albany, however. Help comes in the form of a gazetteer/directory combination. This index entry lists Arkwright as the location where Julia Abbey's marriage was recorded. The gazetteer places Arkwright in Chautauqua County. The directory gives the address and phone number of the current Registrar of Vital Statistics in the town of Arkwright. It is likely that this person will be able to process a request significantly faster than that poor, overworked soul in Albany.

Later marriage records can yield more information, since there is a link to the spouse. These records also use the Soundex system, so the research methodology is slightly different. My example is the last marriage record publicly available - the last entry under "Z" in 1951. The entry reads:

624, Zerkle, Joan M., Buffalo, Stee, 6 30, 24778

The three-digit number represents the Soundex code for the surname Zerkle (6-R, 2-K, 4-L). The location, Buffalo, is where the license was issued, but not necessarily where the marriage was performed. The next entry, Stee, is the first four letters of the spouse's surname, and following that is the month and day on which the marriage occurred. The final entry is the certificate number. With this information it is possible to find the groom. The first four letters give a partial Soundex number of S3xx, but we do not know what other consonants might be in the full surname. The index is arranged by year, and then by Soundex code, so we start with the S300 entries for 1951 and search for "Zerk" in the spouse column. The image quality is good; the information is typewritten. This is not difficult. Here he is on the second fiche I try.

"340, Steele, Richard E, Buffalo, Zerk, 6 30, 24778"

Place, date and, most importantly, certificate number match. Joan Zerkle became Mrs. Richard Steele.