

About the Returns of Deaths

The original death returns indexed on this set of computer disks belong to the County of Berrien and are stored at the Berrien County Historical Association in Berrien Springs, Michigan. The records date from 1867 through 1929. Death records from 1930 to the present are stored at the Berrien County Courthouse in St. Joseph.

Beginning in 1867, Michigan's state government required county clerks to record the deaths that occurred in their county each year. Each township, village and city clerk would record the deaths in his township on preprinted forms, then submit the completed forms to the county clerk after the end of the year. The county clerk used these forms to create the official county death records.

The original forms, entitled "Returns of Deaths," included: the name of the deceased; date and place of death; age, race, sex and marital status; cause of death; occupation; birthplace; parents' names; and parent's place of residence. In many cases, especially for older individuals, the parents' names were unknown; the recording clerk then left that space blank, or wrote "unknown."

The first name of some individuals is given as "unnamed" or "_____." In almost all cases, these are either stillborn children or children under the age of five years.

Indexes in this computer disk are for the original Returns of Deaths as submitted by the township, village and city clerks. Because the official county death records sometimes contain errors in transcription (understandable in view of the wretched handwriting of some local clerks), the Returns of Deaths are generally a more accurate source.

In Berrien County, a single death is recorded for 1855: that of Philander B. Pierson of Coloma. Why the Coloma clerk recorded this single death remains a mystery.