

About the Marriage Certificates

The original marriage certificates 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 1831 through 1929. Marriage records from 1930 to the present are stored at the Berrien County Courthouse in St. Joseph.

Territorial laws required Michigan counties, as they were organized, to keep records of marriages. Berrien County was established (its boundaries laid out) in 1829, but not organized (its own political system created) until 1831. From 1829 to mid-1831, Berrien County was attached to Cass County for governmental purposes, so records for those first two years remain at the Cass County Courthouse in Cassopolis. Berrien County's marriage records originate in 1831 and continue to the present time.

Early marriage records were usually handwritten on any scrap of paper the clergyman or justice of the peace had available. Information included names of the bride and groom, their ages and places of residence, the date and place of the marriage, the names of at least two witnesses, and the signature of the official who performed the ceremony. The official prepared two copies; he gave one to the bride and groom, and mailed the other to the county clerk, who transcribed it for the official county record. The certificates indexed on this disk, and which you will receive upon ordering, are the *original* certificates completed by the official.

The county clerk began numbering the certificates in 1868, which helps locate the documents in the files. In 1888, the county began requiring that the bride and groom file an application for a marriage license. The applications usually include the same information as the marriage certificate itself, but on occasion they will provide a little more data.

In the indexes on these disks, marriages are grouped according to the original filing order created by the county clerk at the time he received the certificates from the officials. A marriage performed in 1846, for example, might be filed that same year if the official was punctual about sending in the certificate. It might not be filed until the next year, however, or even five or ten years later, if he procrastinated. A few certificates are filed a year or two *prior* to the marriage date, apparently because the county clerk had not yet closed the file from the previous year.

The handwriting of these officials often left something to be desired, and names are sometimes obviously misspelled: "Barbary" for Barbara, "Phebe" for Pheobe, and the like. Others, especially men's names, are abbreviated: "Wm." for William, "Thos." for Thomas, and so on. The names are reproduced in this index as closely as possible, without any attempted improvements on the original spelling. Surnames are especially difficult, and many errors probably still exist.