



ABUNDANT GENEALOGY

It Is Well With My Soul: Finding Ancestors Amid the Rubble of Disaster and Misfortune

Thomas MacEntee, of Abundant Genealogy

<http://abundantgenealogy.com>

abundantgenealogy@gmail.com

Our Ancestors Persevered

Horatio Spafford, author of the hymn *It Is Well With My Soul*, overcame immense tragedy, misfortune and disaster (the death of his only son, the Great Chicago Fire, a shipwreck which killed his four remaining daughters) to not only stay true to his values but to help others and still keep a positive outlook on life. How did our ancestors persevere and survive in the face of disaster - natural, manmade and financial - so that we could be here today to tell their stories? Learn how to not only locate your ancestors amidst the rubble, but give voice to their stories.

A Variety of Misfortunes and Disasters

Typically, a disaster is an unexpected event usually of the natural kind such as a hurricane, tornado, earthquake and the like. However, there are many different types of disasters that have struck our ancestors and impacted the lives of those left behind.

Realize that it is not all cut and dried when trying to sort out types of disasters. Many times a health related disaster such as a flu pandemic could have technological and political factors involved.

- **Death: It's Only Natural**

Natural disasters include those that are weather related such as hurricanes, typhoons, tornadoes, blizzards and the like. Use historical weather websites and books to learn more about specific incidents. Other natural disasters such as avalanches, massive fires, and earthquakes are not weather-related, but might still have a technological, economic or political factor involved (see below). While an earthquake is not necessarily caused by economic factors, for example, poor building codes and shortcuts to save money can and do kill and maim.

- **Technology Can Kill**

Can you imagine if your ancestor was the first person killed in a car accident? What about a train derailment? Technology has brought us many, many advances and improvements to our lives. But keep in mind that as some of these technologies were introduced there were unintended consequences especially in the way in which a large loss of life could occur accidentally or intentionally.

The largest sub-group of technology disasters is related to transportation. Our ancestors witnessed many advances in the field of moving large groups of people from point A to point B, not all of them being safe or sane methods.



- **Unhealthy Living: Epidemics and Pandemics**

The Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918 is the most prominent pandemic that affected many of our ancestors but the history of health-related disasters goes back to the Black Plague and beyond.

- **Politics and Disasters**

War, genocide and even famine were events that affected our ancestors. In fact, many of these events were the impetus for their arrival in America. One of the difficulties involved with these types of disasters is that “history is written by the winner.” In some cases evidence and records related to victims and participants have been destroyed or are deliberately made difficult to locate.

- **Filthy Deadly Money**

As the world progressed, much of the progression was propelled by economics and a market economy. Where money is involved there is certain to be opportunists and others who swindle and cheat victims. While economic disaster does not often result in death or physical injury, its effects on a family can be long-lasting.

Dead Men (and Women) Do Tell Tales

After a brief education on the different types of disasters, their causes and factors, now we come to the task of determining whether or not our ancestors were involved with or made victims of such disasters.

Before getting started on the search, it helps if you have as much information as possible about your ancestor. Seems silly to have to say this, right? But here are some issues to consider:

- **Details matter.** Cause of death might be listed but realize that there were secondary causes of death from disasters. And not all victims died instantly or within days of a disaster.
- **Cluster search.** Using census and other records, look for a spike in deaths in certain locations or on certain dates. Don't limit yourself to just your ancestor's immediate family.
- **Migration patterns.** Our ancestors left home or picked up and moved in with relatives due to misfortune.
- **Collateral search.** Make sure you look at records for those who married into a family as well as unrelated persons living in the household.



Tales of Disaster and How to Find Them

- **Newspapers.** Use historical newspaper websites as well as actual newspapers or microfilmed images located at archives and repositories. Not every disaster was headline news – you may need to read small town “gossip” or “goings on” columns to find more information. Also, keep in mind that certain misfortunes might not be specifically mentioned so as to not embarrass a family or for other reasons. Very often it will be called just that – a “misfortune.” You may need to read between the lines and connect the dots like any good mystery.
- **Diaries and Letters.** Our ancestors were good about letter writing and diary keeping. Again, just as with newspaper accounts of incidents, you may need to do some sleuthing and decipher “coded” words about an unfortunate accident.
- **Websites.** A variety of websites and blogs devoted to specific types of disasters abound on the Internet. As with any web-based source, make sure you understand the original source of the information before accepting it as the true account of an event.

Locating Your Ancestors Among The Aftermath

- **Necrologies.** A necrology – a list of those who had died over a given period of time – was usually printed in local newspapers at the end of the year. These lists make it very easy to do cluster searches and correlate deaths to specific incidents.
- **Victims List.** Some newspapers and websites will list victims of a disaster and sometimes also link to their obituaries.
- **Census Records.** Use census records to determine not only when a cluster of people died, but look for those family members left behind. Some households will be populated with a new configuration of relations such as cousins, aunts and uncles after a disaster. Also trace migrations to new locations, new occupations.
- **Mortality Schedules.** For the United States Federal Census of 1850, 1860, 1870, and 1880 the enumerators were asked to gather information on those who had died in the 12 month period prior to the census. These records are rich in information – and again, look for clusters to determine the casualties in a disaster.
- **Court Records.** Many disasters resulted in lawsuits and court records. One example would be a lawsuit against a building owner for violating local fire codes which resulted in a major fire such as the [Iroquois Theater Fire](#) in Chicago in 1903. Also check probate and estate records for victims.
- **Classified Ads.** When disaster struck, many small town newspapers would see an increase in advertisements for estate auctions, missing persons, etc.



Giving Voice to the Silent

Once you've located your ancestor as having been affected by a disaster, you can decide how you want to tell the story of their demise and the event.

- **GenDisasters**

Not only can you utilize the **GenDisasters** website to locate victims of disasters and more information on a specific event, but if you create a login (for free), you can actually enter your own family's story to share with others. Some stories that have been submitted involved minor events such as a traffic accident while others are monumental like the sinking of the Titanic. If your ancestor was involved in a historic disaster, here is your chance to contribute to the collaborative history of such an event using your research.

- **Family Interviews - Disasters Becoming Personal**

While the victims most likely left no information as to what occurred or how they suffered, almost always there were family members who may have witnessed the event, were maimed or injured, or recall the impact of the event on the family.

If you have elderly relatives who can put a disaster in context, take the time to interview them now. This can be done over the telephone, via mail or email or even in-person using audio and video. It is important to capture these memories to add to the history of the event.

- **Disastrous Writing**

If you've determined that a small-scale disaster occurred which has not been fully depicted via news accounts or other records, this is your chance to leave an impact and write up the story. Not just the story of your ancestor and the family impacted, but add other aspects such as images, timelines, records and more.

It is not unusual for a genealogist or family historian to encounter a disaster and then work to research other victims involved. Not only will you be providing vital information for other researchers, but you'll be telling the story of those victims unable to do so.



ABUNDANT GENEALOGY

Resource List

Ancestry.com – Disaster Message Board

<https://boards.ancestry.com/topics/disasters/mb.ashx>

Burned Counties Research - FamilySearch Wiki

https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Burned_Counties_Research

Cyndi's List: Diseases & Medical Terms

<https://www.cyndislist.com/medical.htm#Diseases>

Eastland Disaster, Chicago, Illinois - July 24, 1915

<https://www.eastlanddisaster.org>

GenDisasters

<https://gendisasters.com/>

Google Newspaper Archive

<https://news.google.com/newspapers>

Holes in History: The 1890 Census Fire – Family Tree Magazine

<https://www.familytreemagazine.com/premium/holes-history-1890-census-fire/>

National Transportation Safety Board Accident Reports

<https://www.nts.gov/investigations/AccidentReports/Pages/AccidentReports.aspx>

Online Historical Newspapers

<https://sites.google.com/site/onlinenewspapersite/Home>

Sam Fink Index – Cook County, Illinois Marriages and Deaths

<https://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=2433>

The Cleveland Necrology File

<https://cpl.org/newsindex/>

University of Pittsburgh Coroner Case File Wiki – Allegheny County

<http://coronercasefile.pbworks.com/w/page/16512016/FrontPage>

US Census Mortality Schedules

<http://www.mortalityschedules.com/>

Weather For You

<https://www.weatherforyou.com>

Weather Underground Historical Weather

<https://www.wunderground.com/history/>

Wikipedia: List of Epidemics

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_epidemics

Wikipedia: List of Natural Disasters

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_natural_disasters