

Return of Deaths within the City of Charleston, 1819–1926

*The Charleston Archive, Charleston County Public Library
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From the creation of its Board of Health in 1815 to 1926, the City of Charleston, South Carolina, collected data relating to deaths and interments within the city limits. During this time the city's health officer compiled weekly lists or "returns" of deaths from individual certificates collected from physicians and cemetery custodians. The records of the "Returns of Deaths" for the earliest years are not extant, but those from 28 January 1821 through 31 December 1926 do survive. These records, which comprise 42 bound volumes, were donated by that office to the Charleston County Public Library after 1957. They are now housed in the library's Special Collections Department, and are available on microfilm in the library's South Carolina Room. For more information about the history and context of these materials, refer to James Hagy's article "The Death Records of Charleston," published in *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, volume 91 (1990), pages 33–44.

Two earlier volumes of death records for the city of Charleston, covering the period 4 July 1819 through 27 January 1822, were recorded by the Medical Society of South Carolina. These two volumes were microfilmed in 1999 and are available separately in the South Carolina Room.

The volumes of death records were recorded chronologically, a fact that complicates the search for specific names. Between 1850 and 1906, however, the city Board of Health also produced several volumes of name indices that facilitate the search for specific surnames during this time period. During the late 1930s, a W.P.A. project completed an alphabetical surname index to the entire collection of death records, 1821–1926. Each entry from the "Return of Deaths" volumes was transcribed onto a 3" by 5" index card, and the cards were filed in alphabetical order in drawers. This card file is now available at the South Carolina Room, but the accuracy and completeness of this file is not always reliable. A new transcription project, inaugurated in the late 1990s, places each death entry in a computerized table that can be sorted by name, cause of death, and place of interment. Bound volumes of these tables covering the years 1821 through 1868 are currently available in the South Carolina Room, and subsequent transcription volumes will continue the series through 1926.

The data fields included in the "Return of Deaths" vary slightly from volume to volume, but several fields remain consistent throughout the series. Each entry usually includes the subject's name, age, cause of death, place of residence, place of interment, and the name of the attending physician (who signed the death certificate), although some of these fields are occasionally left blank. Researchers should note that the ages of deceased newborns are occasionally given in fractions of a day. The age of an infant surviving for only one hour, for example, might be notated as 1/24th of a day. Other fields for such data as the subject's place of nativity, marital condition, time of residence in Charleston, and occupation appear inconsistently among the records, and when present the information to complete such fields is not always supplied. The recording of each subject's gender ("M" for male and "F" for female) is consistent and requires no explanation, but the same cannot be said for the subject's race and condition. In these

records the subject's race is designated as being white ("W"), black ("B"), or colored ("C"). We must remember that Native Americans, mulattos, mestizos, and other variations of racial mixing were commonly identified as "colored" in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Charleston, though the distinction between black and colored was made with less consistency after the Civil War. Prior to the end of the Civil War, furthermore, these death records include a column to designate the subject's

"Condition": whether they were free ("F") or enslaved ("S"). The final entry to use this column was recorded on 25 February 1865.

The deaths of slaves are regularly included in these records, though it is impossible to verify how accurately these records reflect the actual numbers of slave mortality in antebellum Charleston. Researchers should note that entries for deceased slaves include the subject's given name and the surname of his/her owner. Thus the death of a slave named Sam, belonging to Mrs. Smith, is recorded as "Sam Mrs. Smith." Similarly, unnamed newborn children of slaves are commonly identified only by the surname of their mother's master, such as "no name Mrs. Smith."

A separate series of death records, titled "Record of Interments of Black and Colored Persons in the Public Cemetery of Charleston, S.C.," is also in the possession of the Charleston County Public Library. These records, which fill two bound volumes, cover the period 1 January 1889 through 22 September 1927. Besides black and colored persons, these volumes occasionally include the names of indigent white persons who were buried in the city's public cemetery. The contents of these two volumes appear to overlap with those recorded in the main "Return of Deaths," but the "Record of Interments of Black and Colored Persons" occasionally contains data that is omitted in the main series.