

Chapter Five

FREE INVESTIGATIVE RESEARCH RESOURCES: TO LOCATE AND BACKGROUND PEOPLE

Public Records and "Publicly Available" Information

Public records refer to records filed with a governmental agency. They often offer the best way to find and investigate people and companies. "Publicly available" information refers to information that is not filed with a government agency but is public nevertheless. For example, your phone number is "publicly available" if you allowed the telephone company to list it. An association that you belong to may also list your contact information on its Web site.

Public records may be free on the Web, but this varies greatly from state to state. Also varying greatly from state to state is the definition of what is and what is not considered "public." Even if the information is public, some states still may not provide free Web access to the information, forcing you to resort either to using a pay database or "snail mail." Some states, such as Florida, not only have a plethora of free public record information on the Web (such as UCCs, liens, judgments, trademark owner names, corporate records, and annual reports), they also provide the actual images of the full public record (<http://ccfcorp.dos.state.fl.us/corpweb/inquiry/search.html>).

Public Records and "Sensitive" Information

Some public records contain "sensitive" information (such as a divorce decree that includes children's names or a bankruptcy record that includes bank names and account numbers). This information is often redacted, thus portions of public records can become private.

Private Records

Some records filed with government agencies are considered private, such as tax returns and drivers license information. These records can be accessed if the subject of the record consents or if there are laws providing for exceptions.

Finding or Investigating a Person Begins with Ascertaining Whether They're Alive: The Social Security Death Index

Before spending the time and money to find or investigate someone, first make sure they are still alive. A good place to check is the **Social Security Death Index (SSDI)** located at **Rootsweb.com** (<http://ssdi.genealogy.rootsweb.com/cgi-bin/ssdi.cgi>). If a death (since 1962 only) has been reported to the Social Security Administration, the death record will be found in the **SSDI**.

Do not enter your information into the first search screen shown.

SOCIAL SECURITY DEATH INDEX AT ROOTSWEB.COM

Instead, click on *Advanced Search* to reach the advanced search page shown in the next screenshot.

SOCIAL SECURITY DEATH INDEX "ADVANCED SEARCH"

On the Social Security Death Index's *Advanced Search* page, you can enter significantly more search criteria (e.g. *ZIP code, state, county and/or city of last residence*) to help narrow your search down to the particular individual for whom you are looking. Unfortunately, not all of the records in the Death Index contain all of this data. So, if you have a last known address at which your individual may have died, including it in your search might not return the right individual, even if they are dead and their information is contained in the database. See pages 119-121 for information on state and local death records.

Gravesites

Looking for a relative's will, but can't find a death record through the Social Security Death Index? You're also unsure of where they died or were buried, but you are sure they are dead. You may be able to glean this information by finding their gravesite. **Findagrave** (<http://www.findagrave.com>) can be searched to locate the gravesite locations of nearly 10 million people. Obituaries are another good tool to verify deaths.

Obituaries

Obituary Daily Times (<http://www.rootsweb.com/~obituary/>) provides a searchable index of obituaries published in newspapers around the United States and Canada. The site does not link to the actual obituary online, but rather shows in which newspaper the obituary was published. To learn which newspapers are included in this index see <http://www.rootsweb.com/~obituary/publications.html>. The **National Obituary Archive** (<http://www.arrangeonline.com/>), with almost 58 millions obituaries online, is another site to search for an obituary.