

A Death Record: 1860

Summary

In 1860 life expectancy was much lower than it is today. By studying death schedules from the 1800s it is quite obvious that people often died from causes that rarely cause death today.

Time Frame

2 class periods of 45 minutes each

Group Size

Small Groups

Materials

If possible, have students obtain copies of death schedules from various decades from local government offices. Check with your county clerk for local death records. The state archives is another possible source for death records. The Federal Census Records for the years 1950-1970 each contains death records as part of the census.

Background for Teachers

Death records are records of those who died with a given year. They are government records and may be found in different locations. The United States Census records for the years 1850-1870 include death records. By studying death records you can analyze the impact of death upon a family.

Intended Learning Outcomes

The students will be able to:

- a. Find and research death schedules.
- b. Contrast causes of death in the past with those of today.
- c. Identify diseases that no longer exist.
- d. Compare the average age of death of men and women in the 1800s.

Instructional Procedures

Have students list their ideas of diseases or illnesses that caused death in pioneer times that are not fatal today. The United States Census for the years 1850-1870 contain the mortality schedule for each town in the United States. This activity is an analysis based upon actual census records. To obtain copies of death schedules, check with your local county clerk. Request death records for years from 1850-1870. College libraries will have copies of the US Census for the years 1850-1870. The names you see here are fictitious but the other statistics are taken from actual death schedules.

Explanation of Terms:

consumption=tuberculosis

dropsy=edema,filling with liquids

dyspepsia=stomach ailments

teething=practice of cutting swollen gums with a knife sometimes caused infection.

child bed=death of a mother while bearing a child

Steps 3 through 7 make up a list of 35 names from a death record census in the year 1860. Each step is a list of individuals within a particular category who died in 1860. Each step is one part of the total census death record. Of 35 names listed for the year four females age 21 or older died. First names and causes of death are listed:

Tamarah 93 old age

Casmhine 101 old age

Ann 77 consumption

Eliza 28 child bed

Compare this with other census records/with the death of men in step 3. Of the 35 names listed seven were males ages 20 and older. The first names, ages, and causes of death are as follows:

Stephen 35 spasms

Charles 20 rhumatism

Simon 54 heart disease

Sam 90 old age

James 38 consumption

Charles 32 consumption

John 70 dyspepsia

Of the 35 names listed two were teenagers. Their names, ages, and causes of death are listed below:

Cornelius 19 consumption

Charles 16 consumption

Of the 35 names listed on the death schedule four were ages 5-12 years of age. Their names, ages, and cause of death are listed here.

Alice 5 sore throat

Alfred 5 sore throat

Elizabeth 8 drowned

Louisa 5 sore throat

Of the 35 names listed on the death records eighteen were under the age of 5. Their names, ages, and causes of death are listed here.

Leslie 1 mo spasms

John 10 mo inflammation of lungs

Robert 1 yr scalded

William 11 mo sore throat

Fanny 2 yrs. inflammation on brain

Herbert 2 mo inflammation of lungs

Mary 11 mo congestion of brain

Mary 2 yrs. scarlet fever

Cora 1 yr scarlet fever

George 11 mo fit

Jane 2 mo congestion of lungs

James 11 mo consumption

Carrie 1 yr scarlet fever

Walter 6 mo sore throat

George 1 mo teething

Clara 8 mo dropsy

Mannie 3 mo sore throat

Francis 2 yrs. sore throat

Extensions

Have students collect obituaries in the same categories and compare the causes of death.

Discuss how crossing the plains might change the cause of death in various age groups.

Research medical practices in the 19th Century.

Place names of those on death list in a container and have students draw for their character. Write obituaries, family letters, poems, or doctor reports.

Visit a graveyard with your class and do similar activities. Some may find ancestors. A family history

activity might be a good follow up.

Create a blank journal with each of these statements placed on the top portion of a blank sheet of paper. You might add your own talent kick off statement:

Write a poem about the death of the very young.

Sketch a tombstone and place vital statistics, and a message.

Write a conversation between a doctor in 1850 and a modern doctor.

Make up a list of cures for diseases of the nineteenth century that really would not work.(Look at list of causes of death)

Write about a family cure that modern families use that wouldn't be recommended by your doctor.

Make a list of modern diseases or illnesses that would not have been a problem in the nineteenth century.

Write a 19th-century newspaper editorial condemning the dangers of vaccinating children to ward off disease.

Assessment Plan

Assessment will likely be based upon projects that come out of the information provided here.

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