

# 3 Underutilized Records to Locate Next-of-Kin

Social Security Applications (Form SS-5),  
Military Draft Records, and Birth Indices



If you have ever had to locate unknown next-of-kin for a legal matter, you may appreciate how difficult it can be. Often, out-of-the-box thinking is required to piece together the disparate information needed to accurately reconstruct a family. Sometimes, records useful for achieving the research goal are overlooked because they are not the easiest documents to obtain or may not be widely known. In this paper, we call attention to three types of records that can be useful for discovering next-of-kin: Social Security Applications (Form SS-5), military draft records, and birth indices.

# Social Security Application Form SS-5

One of the most valuable records used to determine next-of-kin is the Social Security Application, otherwise known as Form SS-5. Since the original implementation of the Social Security system in 1936, this form was required to be completed by persons wanting to work and/or claim Social Security benefits in the event of death, disability, or similar circumstances. Although U.S. citizens today are typically assigned a Social Security number at birth or after becoming a U.S. citizen, Social Security numbers were not required in the past, and many people only applied for a Social Security number as adults.

The Social Security Application form contains information including the applicant’s full name, address, birthplace, race, signature, and parents’ names. Depending on when the application was completed, a researcher may also discover the applicant’s employer, the employer’s address, and other useful information. An exact birthdate is also included in this record, which is especially important in two difficult research scenarios: (1) for applicants who were born before the start of official birth recording in their state or foreign country, or (2) as an official record to substitute for a birth record that is otherwise unobtainable, due to privacy laws or other obstacles.

The SS-5 is a preferred document to obtain, as it is considered a primary record. In genealogy, primary documents are defined as records the applicants complete themselves, supplying firsthand information. The form was most often completed by the applicant, but in some instances it may have been filled out by another person if the applicant was illiterate or had a disability preventing completion of the form by hand. Regardless, users of this record can be reasonably confident that they are getting the most accurate information about the applicant’s knowledge of his or her own birth and parentage.



In the example below, the Form SS-5 for John Farkas is particularly informative because it includes an alias of Sebestyen Farkas on the first line. Knowledge of the alternate name assists a researcher in searching for additional records recorded under the alias. The SS-5 also includes John's exact town of birth in Hungary. Discovering one's village of origin is exceptionally helpful because not many other genealogical documents created in the U.S. require that degree of specificity. This information, coupled with John's parents' names and exact birthdates, can enable additional research leading to records of John's next-of-kin living in Hungary.

Form SS-5  
TREASURY DEPARTMENT  
INTERNAL REVENUE SERVICE

U. S. SOCIAL SECURITY ACT  
APPLICATION FOR ACCOUNT NUMBER **276-03-5574**

PRINT NAME **Sebestyen Farkas**  
(EMPLOYEE'S FIRST NAME) **John** (MIDDLE NAME) **FARKAS** (LAST NAME) **Farkas**

**1925 E. 30th St** (STREET AND NUMBER) **Lorain** (POST OFFICE) **Ohio** (STATE)

**NATIONAL TUBE COMPANY** (BUSINESS NAME OF PRESENT EMPLOYER) **25TH ST & PEARL AVE., LORAIN, O.** (BUSINESS ADDRESS OF PRESENT EMPLOYER)

**59** (AGE AT LAST BIRTHDAY) **7** (MONTH) **1** (DAY) **20** (YEAR) **1877** (DATE OF BIRTH) **Kiss Barzsony Hungary** (PLACE OF BIRTH)

**John Farkas** (FATHER'S FULL NAME) **Barboly Varsanyi** (MOTHER'S FULL BIRTH NAME)

SEX: MALE  FEMALE  (CHECK (1) WHICH)  
12. COLOR: WHITE  NEGRO  OTHER (SPECIFY)

IF REGISTERED WITH THE U. S. EMPLOYMENT SERVICE, GIVE NUMBER OF REGISTRATION CARD

IF YOU HAVE PREVIOUSLY FILLED OUT A CARD LIKE THIS, STATE **Nov. 25th 1936** (DATE)

**John Farkas** (EMPLOYEE'S SIGNATURE, AS USUALLY WRITTEN)

DETACH ALONG THIS LINE

United States, Treasury Department, Social Security Administration, Form SS-5, "Application for Social Security Account Number," John Farkas, Social Security Number 276-03-5574; Social Security Administration, Woodlawn, Maryland.

# Obtaining the Form SS-5

To address privacy concerns, current governmental regulations restrict when a copy of this record can be released. For genealogical research, the applicant must be deceased for the SS-5 to be released. Additionally, the applicant's parents may be redacted from the record unless they have also been proven to be deceased or evidence has been submitted demonstrating that they would be over 120 years old (presumed deceased). The requestor must prove the death of both the applicant and the applicant's parents to receive an unredacted record. The types of records that could be submitted as acceptable proof of death vary.

Form SS-5 can be ordered for a fee by mail using [Form SSA-711](#) or online via [FOIAonline](#), along with the required supporting evidence. Because of the lengthy documentation requirements, many are put off by the ordering process. However, when seeking to find missing or unknown next-of-kin, few documents are more valuable than these primary records. The Form SS-5, in particular, offers useful information and clues that may help overcome a genealogical brick wall.

# Military Draft Records

Draft registrations are invaluable tools for genealogists because they provide documentary evidence for men of at least the age of 18 who were eligible for military service. The earliest legislation passed by the United States Congress to draft men occurred in 1863 during the Civil War. Since that time, Congress passed four more Selective Service Acts—in 1917, 1940, 1948, and 1967—each preceding a major wartime



period during the twentieth century between World War I and the Vietnam War. Women were not included in the draft but did participate by either volunteering for military service or working in war-related factories on the home front.

Records created as a result of each act provide detailed information on registrants based on their ages at the time the act was in effect. In 1917, during World War I, all men between ages 18 and 45 were required to register, irrespective of their citizenship status. This act organized three separate registration periods, including a supplemental registration in which more than 24 million men living in the United States filled out a draft card. In 1940, in preparation for the U.S. entry into World War II, all men between ages 21 and 45 again were required to register for the draft. This act doubled the number of registrants to more than 50 million men, separated into seven registration periods.

Following the end of World War II, the government reorganized the military and created a separate United States Air Force in 1947, before the U.S. became involved in the Korean War. The passage of another act in 1948 required all men between ages 18 and 26 to register for the draft, limiting their period of service to 21 months of active duty followed by five years of reserve duty. In 1967, during the Vietnam War, Congress passed the last act, which expanded the draft age range to include all men between the ages of 18 and 35; this act allowed student deferments to end once the registrant completed college or reached the age of 24. This final act was altered with the instituting of a draft lottery system beginning in 1969; it ended in 1975, the same year the draft was discontinued.

In all the distinct registration periods, each registrant's name, address, birthdate, and other pertinent detailed genealogical information is provided. Additionally, birthplaces, employment, and occupations are found on some registration cards, along with the next-of-kin or closest family member who would always know the registrant's information.

# Obtaining Military Draft Records

The original draft records covering World War I are located onsite at the National Archives branch in Morrow, Georgia. Draft records for World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars are located onsite at the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, Missouri. No access restrictions are in place for viewing these draft records onsite, and copies of the records can be ordered for a fee from the custodial government agencies. Online access is available for a fee at [Ancestry®](https://www.ancestry.com) and [Fold3](https://www.fold3.com) for World War I (all records available) and World War II (records partially available).

Using draft registration cards for any of these named wartime periods can add details for families being researched that might not otherwise be available in any other public government record.

*3/13/41 - 777 Lebanon St.*

SERIAL NUMBER	1. NAME (Print)			ORDER NUMBER
323	Richard	Ellis	Keller	1243
2. ADDRESS (Print)				
455 E. Cumberland St. Lebanon Lebanon Pa.				
3. TELEPHONE				
None				
4. AGE IN YEARS		5. PLACE OF BIRTH		6. COUNTRY OF CITIZENSHIP
25		Lebanon Pa.		U.S.A.
DATE OF BIRTH				
June 17, 1915				
7. NAME OF PERSON WHO WILL ALWAYS KNOW YOUR ADDRESS				
Mr. Ellis Le Roy Keller Father				
8. RELATIONSHIP OF THAT PERSON				
Father				
9. ADDRESS OF THAT PERSON				
533 Canal St. Lebanon Lebanon Pa.				
10. EMPLOYER'S NAME				
G. R. Kreider - Lebanon Paper Box Co.				
11. PLACE OF EMPLOYMENT OR BUSINESS				
124 1/2 Cumberland St. Lebanon Lebanon Pa.				
I AFFIRM THAT I HAVE VERIFIED ABOVE ANSWERS AND THAT THEY ARE TRUE.				
REGISTRATION CARD				16-17105
D. S. S. Form 1				(over)
				Richard Ellis Keller

  

REGISTRAR'S REPORT			
DESCRIPTION OF REGISTRANT			
HEIGHT (Approx.)	WEIGHT (Approx.)	COMPLEXION	
5'7"	142	Sallow	
EYES	HAIR	Light	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Blue	Blonde	Ruddy	
Gray	Red	Dark	
Hazel	Brown	Freckled	
Brown	Black	Light brown	
Black	Gray	Dark brown	
	Bald	Black	
Other obvious physical characteristics that will aid in identification.			
I certify that my answers are true; that the person registered has read or has had read to him his own answers; that I have witnessed his signature or mark and that all of his answers of which I have knowledge are true, except as follows:			
Registrar for: <i>D. K. Brock</i> Date of registration: <i>Oct. 16, 1940</i> Local Board No. 1 NATIONAL GUARD ARMORY (STAMP OF LOCAL BOARD) (The date of the Local Board having jurisdiction of the registrant shall be placed in the above space.)			

United States, Selective Service System, Selective Service Registration Cards, World War II: First Registration, Pennsylvania, Lebanon, Local Board 1, Serial Number 323, Richard Ellis Keller, born 17 June 1915; digital image, "U.S., World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942," Ancestry (<http://www.ancestry.com>).



# Birth Indices

When genealogists must document next-of-kin for a legal matter, they often seek birth, marriage, and death records that establish the identities of those being researched and the relationships among different individuals in a family. Birth records can lead to the discovery of other records, but challenges often arise in locating and obtaining birth records, mainly related to privacy and accessibility.

No nationwide federal birth index exists, so researchers must search at the state or local levels. Many states have published public birth indices, but the coverage of these indices varies widely. Most states have a closure on the public availability of more recent birth records, ranging from birthdates 75 to 100 years ago, with some states being more or less stringent. As a result, the available birth indices may only extend through the 1910s or 1940s in these jurisdictions.

Not all states have a comprehensive statewide birth index due to staffing and agency funding required to create the indices. Sometimes only the earliest years—starting from when birth recording officially began in that state—have been included in a partial index. In some jurisdictions, only a printed, bound, or microfilmed index can be searched onsite at the agency housing the index (sometimes on an agency computer), which is an impediment for locating records in an area where the distance is infeasible for staff to travel.

The quality of the information provided in a birth index will vary by state and time period. Generally, for

colonial New England and states along the Eastern Seaboard that were settled first, birth indices may be widely available from the town clerks or county recorders. Many of the Midwest, Southern, and Western states did not require official civil birth recording until the twentieth century, with some states beginning as late as the 1920s. Other compiled sources, such as church baptismal records or extracted newspaper announcements, are alternatives for locating early births but do not offer comprehensive coverage of all births statewide.

Indices of delayed birth registrations may be available in some states. At about the time of the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935, many states also passed session laws to facilitate a process for delayed recordings of births. This was partly due to the influx of individuals who needed to establish an official record of their births in conjunction with applying for their Social Security numbers. In places where these delayed birth registrations exist, few access restrictions to obtaining copies of the records typically exist.

A birth index is considered a derivative record because it is a copy of select information extracted from the original birth records. Because indices may include transcription or typographical errors or omissions, it is best to obtain the original birth record, if possible, once the correct record has been located in an index.



# Comparing the Usefulness of Birth Indices in Two States

New York is a notoriously difficult place to conduct genealogical research because only limited information is publicly accessible. To further complicate research, the available birth indices contain different information and years of coverage for the boroughs of New York City compared to the rest of New York state. The usefulness of these indices is reduced because—except for the oldest pre-1910 indices for New York City—they only contain the name of the child, not the names of the parents.

When searching for an individual with a very common name, the index may contain dozens of results that cannot be sufficiently narrowed to the correct individual by name and year(s) alone; thus, additional searching in other historical records is necessary to isolate the correct candidate before attempting to order the birth record. For example, conducting a search for John Martin who was born in Manhattan in 1914 provides at least eight candidates from that borough.

BIRTHS REPORTED IN 1914			
NAME	DATE OF BIRTH	No. of Certificate.	
Martin..... Jake.....	Nov. 16.....	59602	
..... James D.....	Nov. 21.....	59668	
..... Jean A.....	Aug. 8.....	62848	
..... John.....	Feb. 1.....	7359	
..... John.....	Apr. 11.....	19304	
..... John.....	May 6.....	23436	
..... John.....	Dec. 15.....	64437	
..... John J.....	June 24.....	33455	
..... John L.....	Sep. 29.....	51178	
..... John J.....	Nov. 15.....	68844	
..... John W.....	Feb. 7.....	7527	
..... Joseph.....	Feb. 17.....	11684	
..... Joseph.....	July 9.....	38833	
..... Joseph F.....	Mar. 25.....	17983	
..... Josephine.....	June 30.....	34483	
..... Lollie E.....	Mar. 12.....	14457	
..... male.....	Dec. 30,'13.....	633	
..... male.....	Jan. 7,'14.....	8313	
..... male.....	Mar. 31.....	14689	
..... male.....	July 25.....	28585	

Manhattan (New York) New York City Department of Health, Births Reported in 1914, Borough of Manhattan, p. 397, entries for John Martin; "New York, New York, U.S., Birth Index, 1910-1965," Ancestry (<http://www.ancestry.com>).



By contrast, researching birth information in California is much easier. The California Birth Index is accessible online at [Ancestry®](#) for a fee and can be useful for discovering families who migrated westward and had children in the Golden State. An entry for a person of interest typically provides the mother's maiden name. A secondary search can then be conducted with the father's surname and mother's maiden name to determine whether the couple had other children born in California or to locate the marriage record for the couple.

This method was used to learn more about Robert D. Smith, who died in Fresno in 1949. A search of the California Birth Index revealed he was born in 1915 in Tulare County. This enabled a search for other Smith children born to a mother with the maiden name of Brown who are possible sibling candidates to be further investigated as next-of-kin for Robert.

### California Birth Index, 1905 results for Smith

Results 1-3 of 3						
<a href="#">View Record</a>	Name	Birth Date	Gender	Mother's Maiden Name	Birth County	Order Record
<a href="#">View Record</a>	Robert D Smith	19 Jul 1918	Male	Brown	Tulare	
<a href="#">View Record</a>	Donald E Smith	18 Jul 1920	Male	Brown	Los Angeles	
<a href="#">View Record</a>	Charles L Smith	27 Jun 1923	Male	Brown	Orange	

"California Birth Index, 1905-1995," *Ancestry* (<http://www.ancestry.com>).

Where available, birth indices are valuable "finding aids" that can lead to additional records for the individual or family members being researched. Many birth indices are available online at a variety of genealogical websites (some requiring a subscription fee), but coverage is usually limited to historical births.

## Recap

When searching for hard-to-find next-of-kin, it helps to keep in mind the best record sets that are most likely to answer the research question. This universe of records should often include military draft records, birth indices, and the Social Security Application (Form SS-5). The ease of access for obtaining these records varies widely by document type, year, and jurisdiction. Some records are digitized online, while others offer limited access that may require specialized experience to locate or interpret. Regardless, these resources can be invaluable puzzle pieces for reconstructing families and properly accounting for next-of-kin.



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