NEWSPAPER RESEARCH

ALLEN COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY
Genealogy Department
USING NEWSPAPERS FOR GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH

The newspapers of a community chronicle the successes, failures, and everyday lives of the people who live there. To the family historian, newspapers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries can be especially helpful because of their abundance of personal news and social items. Besides descriptions of occurrences within the community, they also include local angles to national, regional, and state events.

The objectivity sought by modern newspapers was not necessarily a goal of their predecessors. Editors felt free to express their opinions on any given subject, and to describe local scandals in detail. This provides a gold mine of information for the family historian.

TYPES OF ARTICLES

Articles of genealogical importance that can be found through newspaper research include much more than brief birth, marriage, and death notices, such as "The wife of John Brown died Tuesday the 1st inst." Other items may include:

- Detailed obituaries and marriage notices that provide a great deal of family information and sometimes migration background.
- Memorials published on the anniversary of an individual's death. These generally provide the individual's death date and the names of the people placing the notice - usually family members.
- Social items, such as notices of visitors from out of town; visits of local people to other places; birthday parties and their attendees; illnesses; community events, contests, and holiday celebrations and their participants; notices of residents who have moved to other locations; etc.
- Legal articles, including probate notices, divorce cases, dissolutions of business partnerships, delinquent tax lists, and advertisements of sheriff's sales.
- News stories in which ancestors played a role, such as automobile or buggy accidents; explosions, fires, tornadoes or other disasters; crimes; proceedings of meetings of local governing bodies; listings of candidates for upcoming elections; etc.
- Advertisements. These often include the name of the proprietor of a shop, and provide present-day readers with a flavor of what business life was like at the time the ancestor lived.

IDENTIFYING & LOCATING

Bibliographies have been published for many states, describing the newspapers that have been published, and where original and microfilmed copies of extant papers can be located. To locate these bibliographies or other books described in this guide, researchers should check the online catalog at www.ACPL.Lib.in.us, using the state, county, or community as a subject heading. When no newspaper bibliography exists for a state, one should check guides to resources for the particular state for information on newspaper collections. Checking the websites of state libraries is another good strategy for identifying newspaper lists and bibliographies. Some national as well as ethnic newspaper bibliographies and union lists also have been published. Examples of national and state newspaper bibliographies include:

Bibliography of Iowa Newspapers. Iowa City, IA: Iowa State Historical Society. 1979. /Gc 016.071 109b/


Louisiana Newspapers, 1794-1940. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University, 1941. /Gc 016.071 H62l/


Michigan Newspapers on Microfilm Lansing, MI: Library of Michigan, 1986. /Gc 011.35 L61m/

Miller, John W. Indiana Newspaper Bibliography. Indianapolis, IN: Indiana Historical Society. 1982. /Gc 977.2 M613i/

Missouri Newspapers on Microfilm at the State Historical Society of Missouri. Columbia. MO: State Historical Society of Missouri, n.d. /Gc 016.071 St2m/


ETHNIC NEWSPAPERS

Genealogists researching immigrant families who settled in areas of ethnic concentration should consult ethnic research guides for sections on newspapers. Ethnic newspapers can be a valuable source of information, not only about what was happening in the ancestors’ new home in America, but for tidbits about life in the “old country.” Friends and neighbors from the immigrants’ places of origin occasionally sent news, and relatives sent advertisements when they were looking for family members with whom they had lost contact. Examples of sources listing ethnic newspapers are:


ACCESSING NEWSPAPERS

The Historical Genealogy Department does not actively collect newspapers on microfilm. However, the department owns microfilms of a dozen newspapers from the Colonial period for Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland. Check the microtext catalog under the headings Miscellaneous and Newspapers for these titles. Once identified, other newspapers can be found at:

- State libraries, archives, and historical societies, which often have the responsibility of tracking and collecting newspapers published in a particular state. Microfilmed copies of newspapers are sometimes available from these institutions through interlibrary loan to local libraries.

- County seat libraries, which may have original or microfilmed copies of newspapers published within the county boundaries, and often from neighboring counties.

- Community libraries, which may have original or microfilmed copies of newspapers published in that town.

- Newspaper offices, which generally have microfilmed copies of their newspapers on file, but may or may not allow the public to use them. Researchers should remember that newspaper offices are businesses and not public institutions. They are not obligated to provide access to their libraries.

- Newspapers online. Full text articles or article indices for some newspapers are available via computer network at libraries, although this usually applies to fairly recent papers published in large cities.

ABSTRACTS, EXCERPTS, AND INDICES

Societies and individuals in some areas have indexed or transcribed items from local newspapers and published them in book format. Examples of these types of sources include:
PERIODICALS

Genealogy and local history periodicals often are excellent sources of newspaper excerpts from their locales. The Historical Genealogical Department has the largest collection of these publications in North America. Some have everyname indices that are published at the end of each issue, year, or volume. Others are unindexed.

The PERiodical Source Index, published by the Allen County Public Library Foundation, is an article index to genealogy and local history periodicals. Check under the name of the state and county to find citations for articles of newspaper excerpts that have been published.

USE OF NEWSPAPERS

Following are some tips on using newspapers for genealogical research:

- Generally, the smaller the area covered by the newspaper, the more effective it will be for genealogical research. Use a village or town newspaper if it exists for the time period needed.
- If no town newspaper exists, use the newspaper published in the county seat, but look for a column devoted to the town or township where the ancestor lived.
- If more than one newspaper survives for the time period, look at each. They may have very different coverage because of political affiliations or other reasons.
- Do not be afraid to jump political boundaries if the area where the ancestor lived was closer to a town in the neighboring county or state.
- When beginning to look at a newspaper, get to know its design for a more efficient use of time when searching. Local news often appeared on the same page in each issue.
- Note the local "brevities" or social news briefs. In these are recorded births, marriages, deaths, sickness, new jobs, moves, visits, and more.
- Watch for abbreviations used in dating events announced in newspapers. Married on the 30th “ult.” (Latin for “ultimo” or last) refers to a date last month. Died on the 2nd “inst.” (meaning “instant”) refers to a date this month.

For more information on the general methodology of using newspapers for genealogical research, check the section on newspapers in a general genealogy how-to book, such as:
GENEALOGICAL COLUMNS

Many newspapers publish genealogical columns with methodology articles and/or queries. These help individuals researching the same lines get in contact with one another. To locate columns, consult:


Some newspapers and other periodicals have attempted to publish genealogical query columns on a national or nearly-national scale. They include:

Genealogical Column of the *Boston Transcript*, 1906-1941 (Indexed). /Microfiche/

Genealogical Queries Appearing in the *Hartford Times* Newspapers from Feb. 1934 thru May 1967 (Indexed). /Microfiche/

USING NEWSPAPERS OF THE PRESENT

Present-day newspapers can be used to connect with people who are working on the same family lines. The following suggestions are most effective when applied to a newspaper covering a small town. In metropolitan areas, a neighborhood or ethnic newspaper may be more helpful than a large daily newspaper. Some suggestions for using current newspapers include:

- Write a letter to the editor of the newspaper in the area where the family lived, briefly explaining the research being done and asking anyone who knows more information to contact you.

- If the newspaper in the area where the family lived does not publish letters to the editor of this type, buy a classified or display advertisement asking for information.

- Read the genealogy column in the newspaper where the family lived, if one is published. Submit a query to the column or, if no column exists, submit a query to the column in the newspaper published in the state capital.

- Locate obituaries of recently-deceased descendants of your ancestor. These usually include survivors who can be contacted for more information.