

GenGuides | NEWSPAPER RESEARCH

by Genwriters | How to find them, how to use them

INTRODUCTION TO NEWSPAPER RESEARCH

Researching historic newspapers allows us a glimpse into the daily lives and social customs of our ancestors. Reading historic newspapers from the town where my ancestors lived brought fresh new insights into their daily lives. I learned my great-great-grandfather was an avid and well-respected fisherman. Of course, the largest fish always got away! My great-great grandmother was an envied cook whose sumptuous feasts were cherished by all who were privy to an invitation to her table.

Newspapers are probably the most overlooked, yet most useful, resources when researching social history. The search for newspapers from your research era and locale is well worth the effort. There is much more within their pages than the usual birth announcements and obituaries that genealogists typically seek.

Many newspapers have been microfilmed, but few have been indexed. Newspaper research can be tedious and time consuming. But don't let that prevent you from accessing this valuable resource. Known dates can be your entry key into this information-rich world. While you may seek marriage notices and obituaries, don't overlook the notices that may appear for your ancestors' milestone dates. Silver and golden wedding anniversaries are often celebrated with a party, and a notice of that party in the newspaper, complete with a guest list. That

guest list likely contains many relatives and close friends. An aging citizen in the community may be celebrated with an article filled with details of his life. Seek out these information-rich articles. Sometimes, the information found in newspapers can begin to chip away at that brick wall.

Diving into a newspaper for a specific date may yield a "hit." But don't stop there. Take time to search the newspaper page by page. After a few issues, you will learn how the newspaper is organized (i.e., local history on the first and last few pages, national news in the center). You will learn quickly which pages to review carefully and which pages to skip. Taking the time to examine a newspaper thoroughly can yield unexpected benefits and interesting tidbits of your ancestors' lives. You will also learn more about the community in which they lived. Fires, floods, harvesting, winter storms, summer droughts, scandals, political elections, estate sales, and neighborhood gossip all help to define the community in which they lived.

PERIOD NEWSPAPERS
CAN REVEAL VALUABLE
SOCIAL HISTORY

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WHAT SHOULD YOU LOOK FOR IN A NEWSPAPER?

OBITUARIES: In addition to providing information about the time and place of your ancestor's death, obituaries can be filled with much more detail. The obituary usually identifies the spouse and the children. Parents, whether living or deceased, are typically listed as are surviving siblings. Take note of the pallbearers, if listed, as these men are often children, grandchildren, nephews, or cousins of the deceased. Some obituaries provide detailed bios of the deceased.

SOCIETY COLUMNS: Be sure to look in "Personal Mention" or "Society" columns for your ancestors' names. These notices, usually submitted by your ancestors themselves, can provide intimate clues into their daily personal lives. And keep in mind, society columns did not appear only in large city newspapers. These were the gossip columns and were used frequently by the small-town editor as a means of selling more newspapers. In fact, many times, these columns appear on the front page of the newspaper.

WEDDING AND ANNIVERSARY NOTICES: These notices can be treasure troves for the genealogist and can include any of the following information: date of the wedding, maiden name of the bride, parents of both bride and groom, siblings of the couple who may have served as best man or maid of honor, occupations, names of relatives and the place they resided, and the location of the wedding. Anniversary announcements provide details of the married couple's life together, names of their children, and lists of relatives who helped the couple celebrate.

HONOR ROLLS AND SCHOOL ACTIVITIES: Students with perfect attendance and those who made the honor roll are often listed. The early summer issues may list graduates from area schools. Notices of school holiday programs may include lists of participants as well as a summary or review of the performance.

ANNOUNCEMENTS OF PUBLIC SALES: Many farmers sold livestock, farm equipment, and personal property at public sales. These sales were often advertised several weeks in advance in small classified advertisements. A large sale might receive a more prominent mention. Some public sales were estate sales and might help pinpoint an ancestor's death date.

TRANSFERS OF REAL ESTATE: Everyone wanted to know who was coming to town and who was leaving. Neighborhood columns did a fine job of keeping residents informed. More recent editions of newspapers list these types of transactions in the classified or notices section.

VISITING FRIENDS AND RELATIVES: Many newspapers had a column for residents to submit society news that might be of interest to others. Visitors usually warranted a mention, particularly if they were past residents of the community, or relatives of current residents.

LISTS OF UNCLAIMED MAIL: These lists, submitted for publication by the town's postmaster, are useful in identifying residents who have moved on, or who might live in remote outlying areas.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: Whether or not your ancestors wrote letters to the editor, these tomes are interesting reading. They provide insight into the issues of the day.

MILITARY NEWS: News of men and women going off to war was a popular addition to many newspapers. Letters from soldiers overseas often found their way into print. These articles are a great slice of life from our country's past.

ADVERTISEMENTS: These are particularly useful if your ancestors owned a business. Look for their advertisements in newspapers to learn more about their livelihood. Even if your ancestors did not own their own business, looking at the advertisements in newspapers can provide details of the food and dress of the day.

LISTS OF SICK IN THE AREA: Often considered the gossipy part of a newspaper, finding your own ancestor reported ill can provide new insight into their health and longevity.

CHURCH ANNOUNCEMENTS: Many churches provided lists of new members, church school classes, names of church officers, and details of church-sponsored outings. You might be lucky to find your ancestor mentioned.

YEARLY REVIEW: A year-end edition might provide a recap of the year's events. Older newspapers often include a necrology report listing residents who have died during the previous year.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN DOING RESEARCH IN NEWSPAPERS

There are a number of things you will want to keep in mind when doing research in newspapers. They can provide a treasure trove of information, but as with all research, you must use judgment and evaluate the pieces of information against other documents and research you have already collected. Pieces of information found in a newspaper can point toward other documents such as vital and land records.

Many small town newspapers are published weekly rather than daily which can affect the publication date for an event you are researching.

Timeliness can be an issue. Be sure to research several issues forward when looking for a particular article. News from outlying areas, in particular, may lag several weeks before being printed.

Reporting can be biased. The editor is going to print the news that sells his paper. The personal column may read like a society "who's who" list. Community status can certainly play a role in which notices have the choice location in the paper, if included at all.

Inaccuracy can be an issue. Names, spelling, dates, or event facts can be misconstrued by the reporter or inaccurately typeset. While there may be inaccuracies with the details of an event, the essence of what happened can be gleaned from the articles.

Check newspapers for news from neighboring towns. Many newspapers carried neighborhood columns from outlying areas. It is not uncommon for small newspapers to carry neighborhood columns for communities ten or fifteen miles away. Many small rural newspapers covered a large geographic area.

WHERE TO FIND NEWSPAPERS

Before searching for newspapers, determine which newspapers existed in the time and place you are researching. Be sure to look across township and county lines. The closest town with a newspaper to a rural hamlet might be in the next county.

You will not likely find newspapers in their original newsprint form. Because of their bulky size and ability to deteriorate rapidly, newspapers are perfect candidates for microfilming. The advantage of microfilm is the ability to borrow them through interlibrary loan. Many newspapers are turning up in digital format on the web. Using some of the search strategies provided below, you should be able to locate a newspaper in or near your research area.

An excellent starting point in your search is the **United States Newspaper Program** (USNP), sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This program is a national effort to locate, catalog, and microfilm newspapers published in the United States over the past three centuries. Under the guidelines of this project, each state has one designated repository that holds the microfilm produced. Search for program participants in your research areas by visiting www.neh.gov/projects/usnp.htm.

While the USNP project is large in scope, it may not be all-inclusive. If you don't find a newspaper listed for your research area, there are other strategies you can employ to locate one.

- Historical and Genealogical societies often have newspaper resources for their immediate area or are able to help you locate newspaper microfilm in their area.

To locate an historical or genealogical society in your research area, visit the state pages at the **U.S. GenWeb Project** which can be found on the web at www.usgenweb.com. Most state pages also include a list of societies with links to their websites.

- The **U. S. Newspaper List**, located on the web at www.usnpl.com, is searchable by state. While not an all-inclusive list, the website provides links to current newspapers for many towns and cities.
- Local libraries, both public and academic, are often depositories for newspapers, both in print and on microfilm. Don't overlook college and university libraries. Many of these academic libraries have Special Collections of local history. Newspapers play a large role in local history and are often a part of those collections.
- Many state archives are depositories for newspaper microfilm in their states. And many of these archives will lend these films through your local public library's interlibrary loan system. The National Archives provides a list of each state's archive on their website at www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/state-archives.html. Each entry provides contact information for each archive as well as a link to that archive's website.
- The **Family History Center** in Salt Lake City holds select newspaper microfilms. Their catalog of holdings is available online at www.familysearch.org. Microfilm can be ordered through your local Family History

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Center. Visit their website to learn more about the availability of microfilm and their lending policy, and to find a Family History Center near you.

- For a fee, the newspaper collections of two websites contain thousands of scanned newspaper images: Ancestry at www.ancestry.com/ and Newspaper Archive at www.newspaperarchive.com/.

Many digitized newspapers are available free on the Internet. How do you find them? Try Google www.google.com/. Type the following phrase, replacing the name of your state for the word "state" in the search string: "state digital historic newspaper." Try it. You might get lucky. The following online digital newspapers were "found" using this strategy:

UTAH DIGITAL NEWSPAPERS

www.lib.utah.edu/digital/unews/

Searchable digitized images of several Utah newspapers dating back to 1873.

COLORADO HISTORIC NEWSPAPER COLLECTION

www.cdpheritage.org/

This site has scanned digital images of Colorado newspapers from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s. Nearly 100 newspapers are represented in the collection from all areas of Colorado. Take a few moments to read the "Genealogy Help" section to aid you in your search.

WISCONSIN LOCAL HISTORY

www.wisconsinhistory.org/wlha/

Hundreds of local Wisconsin newspapers are represented in the collection. There are digitized images of 16,000 articles on 50,000 pages that were published in Wisconsin newspapers between 1860 and 1940. The entire collection is searchable via basic and advanced search functions.

BROOKLYN PUBLIC LIBRARY HISTORIC NEWSPAPER COLLECTION

www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/digital/

The Brooklyn Public Library website provides access to images of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle which was published from 1841 to 1955, then revived for a short time from 1960 to 1963. Visit the "Getting Started" page for important information before searching the collection.

PENNSYLVANIA CIVIL WAR NEWSPAPERS

www.libraries.psu.edu/digital/newspapers/

Penn State University Libraries presents a fully searchable collection of digitized images of twelve historic Pennsylvania newspapers for the years 1847-1868.