

GenGuides | OBITUARIES

by Genwriters | Treasure Troves of Information

Obituaries can provide the genealogist with a wealth of information. They can provide clues for new research paths. They can provide answers to brick-wall questions. They can provide details into the culture in which your ancestors lived and a glimpse into their lives. Obituaries are a valuable tool for the genealogist and should not be overlooked.

While obituaries have appeared in newspapers as early as the 18th century, they didn't become commonplace until the mid-1800s. Many early obituaries were very brief, merely mentioning that "Michael Brown died as his home on Saturday last." Others resemble mini-biographies. The details included in obituaries vary greatly across the years and across geographic locations. The prominence of a person within a community may also dictate the amount of space and detail included in an obituary.

Keep in mind that information gleaned from an obituary should be verified by other sources. There is the potential for mis-information—accuracy is always an issue. We can never be sure who provided the information to the newspaper editor for the obituary; therefore, an obituary is considered a secondary source. But, the valuable information included in many obituaries cannot be discounted. Most obituaries will point the way to primary sources ripe for further research.



WHERE WILL YOU FIND OBITUARIES?

Not all obituaries can be found online. While there are websites devoted to posting obituaries (either scans of the original or transcriptions), these websites represent just a small percentage of the obituaries that have been published in the United States. If you want to search online as a first step, the following websites might be of help:

www.deathindexes.com/obituaries.html
www.obitcentral.com

Most obituaries are published in newspapers, so you will want to identify the newspapers that covered the town or region where your ancestor lived. 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 when looking for

newspapers. 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 obtain them through interlibrary loan. Many newspapers are turning up in digital format on the web.

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WHERE WILL YOU FIND OBITUARIES?

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Using some of the search strategies provided below, you should be able to locate a newspaper in 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 <http://www.neh.gov/projects/usnp.html>.

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** (<http://www.usgenweb.com/>). Most state pages also include a list of societies with links to their webpages.
- ✓ The **U. S. Newspaper List**, located on the web at <http://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. The newspaper office may know if and where historical newspapers are archived.
- ✓ 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 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 <http://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. If you haven't checked out the holdings of your state's archives, you might be missing a treasure trove in information.
- ✓ The **Family History Center** in Salt Lake City holds select newspaper microfilms. Their catalog is available online at <http://www.familysearch.org/>. Microfilm can be ordered through your local Family History 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.



WHAT'S NEXT?

After you find an obituary for your ancestor, are you done? Perhaps not. In addition to the obituary, there may be a death notice (typically a few lines written for the newspaper by the funeral director). The death notice may not be in the same issue as the obituary. While the death notice will probably appear in an edition of the newspaper fairly soon after a person's death, an obituary might not appear immediately. Be sure to check several subsequent editions of the newspaper to locate both of these notices. If the obituary mentions that your ancestor had been ill prior to his or her death, you might want to check issues leading up to the death date for articles about the illness. After the death of men, particularly in the 1800s and early 1900s, there often was an estate sale. Notices for the sale will appear in the newspaper; some will list all the personal items that will be sold. These lists can be valuable to help you learn more about your ancestor. On some occasions, there are notices about the probate process for the deceased's will, including names of heirs. The final word: don't stop with the obituary. Keep researching the newspaper for other clues and notices about your ancestor that will come into play immediately before or after his or her death.

AN OBITUARY MAY INCLUDE ANY OF THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION:

- spouse
- children and their spouses
- grandchildren
- next of kin
- current and prior residences
- education and schools attended
- occupation, and if retired, prior occupation
- surviving siblings and their residences
- place of birth
- place and date of marriage
- date of spouse's death
- names of parents
- military duty
- membership in organizations
- church affiliation
- health condition prior to death
- cause of death
- cemetery where buried
- officiating pastor at the funeral
- pallbearers - family or friends?
- funeral director/undertaker

BEWARE!

An obituary is not a primary source document. The information in an obituary is only as reliable as the informant providing the information and the typesetter at the newspaper office. Just who was the informant for an obituary? It might have been a family member, the funeral director, a family friend, or even the newspaper editor. How can you determine who the informant was? Unless it is explicitly stated, you won't know the source of the information. Therefore, use obituaries as a compass to point toward other primary sources.



A SAMPLE OBITUARY TO CONSIDER

This short, five sentence obituary is filled with clues for further research.

1. We have a date of death. The newspaper this obituary was published in went to print each Wednesday; therefore, Mrs. Herbert Bunn died on 17 January 1927. We can now search for a death certificate.
2. We have a current place of residence—Rosedale. We can locate this hamlet on a map and locate land records for her husband, Herbert Bunn.
3. Mrs. Herbert Bunn had been ill for several months. Are there articles in previous issues of the newspaper that speak to this?
4. Esther's husband survived her. We will want to search the 1930 census to locate him.
5. Mrs. Bunn's maiden name was Esther Rogers. With that information, we can search for census records in 1900, 1910, and 1920 using Ancestry's every-name index. This search may lead to her parents' names.
6. The obituary gives the names of two siblings: Mrs. Benjamin Dyer and William Rogers. We happen to know from prior research that Esther had three siblings: Susie, Howard, and William. Mrs. Benjamin Dyer would likely be Esther's sister Susie; this could be verified with census research. Her brother Howard is not mentioned and likely predeceased her. We also have a place of residence for her brother, William—Pennington Road.
7. Esther is survived by a daughter. We happen to know from prior research that there is no child enumerated with the

Mrs. Herbert Bunn died Monday morning at 4 o'clock at her home in Rosedale after an illness of several months. Mrs. Bunn, before her marriage, was Esther Rogers. She is survived by her husband and daughter, Dorothy; a sister, Mrs. Benjamin Dyer, and a brother William Rogers, of the Pennington Road. The funeral will be held from the Rosedale chapel Thursday afternoon at 2:00 o'clock. Interment in the Pennington cemetery. [19 January 1927]

- Bunns in the 1920 census, and when Herbert is enumerated in the 1930 census, daughter Dorothy is not living with him. This obituary has been the only clue that the couple had a child. The next step is to search for a birth record.
8. There is no mention of Esther's parents. Perhaps her parents predeceased her. From the obituary we do not know who her parents were; however, census research in 1900 and 1910 should find Esther living with her parents.
9. Census records can give an approximate date of birth (in this case, 1883). With this clue, we can search for a birth record. Vital records in this state began in 1848.
10. Analyzing census records will narrow down a marriage date for Herbert and Esther. In fact, Esther is living with her parents in 1910 and is married in 1920; therefore, we have narrowed the search for a marriage record to those ten intervening years.
11. Esther is buried in the Pennington cemetery. At that time, there was just one cemetery in the town of Pennington. We are now able to search the cemetery records and visit the cemetery to view the tombstone.