

Mining the Treasures in Newspapers

Rhonda R. McClure, Senior Genealogist, rmcclure@nehgs.org

Newspapers record the fine print of our lives. They offer us a look at history without the hindsight that historians have when writing about an event or period.

What Can You Find?

You are limited only by your research when it comes to newspapers. The newspaper offers you information on all aspects of the life of your ancestor including:

- Births, marriages, deaths
- Anniversaries, obituaries, memorials
- Legal notices, court notices, police blotter
- Gossip, society news, social events
- Biographical and historical pieces
- Church, fraternal, ethnic group news
- ANYTHING!

Vital Record Alternative

Newspapers may supply you with news of births, marriages, and deaths when vital records were not recorded. Wedding anniversaries, obituaries, memorials, and funeral notices may give you more about an individual and other family members.

Marriage information may appear in multiple places, but some of them are of an impending marriage and cannot be used to say that a marriage actually took place:

- Marriage announcements
- Marriage license applications
- Engagements
- Wedding anniversaries – 25th and 50th often list children, their spouses, and where they live

In the case of death records, there are a number of different news items that may identify the death of an ancestor:

- Obituaries – usually include name, date of death, age, and possible biography of deceased, family information, and where they were residing at time of death
- Funeral notices – brief in nature, name, date of death, funeral home, and burial information
- Traditional death notices – one sentence of a death
- Lists of deceased



- Health reports

Types of Newspapers

While we often think of the newspaper we get delivered by the paperboy or purchase at the store, there are a wide variety of newspapers that have been published over the years.

- Dailies, weeklies, monthlies
- Ethnic newspapers – usually in the mother tongue
- Religious newspapers – report the news with a religious slant
- Trade newspapers – occupation, trade unions, company association

Searching

Effective searching of newspapers usually means thinking outside the standard vital record entries. You must do more than peruse the newspaper. You are not reading it like you would the newspaper of today. Instead, you are seeking to find information about your ancestors. Understanding the layout of the newspaper—where certain items are most likely to appear—and what information the newspaper shared will go a long way in your research.

Remember that some towns had more than one newspaper. Larger cities may have published news about smaller communities. Knowing the township where your ancestor resided will help you with those newspapers that published news by the township, suburb, or community. These larger cities may also have published both a *morning* and *evening* edition of the paper if the city was large enough.

Don't forget to check out the special anniversary issues. And reprints of articles 10, 20, 25, and 50 years after the event may be an alternative if you discover that articles written at the time can't be found.

Notices of ship arrivals, passengers and naturalization, hotel guests, unclaimed letters at the post office, and more may offer that piece that puts your ancestor in a given place at a given time. For people arriving in the United States before 1820, when passenger manifests began, these early newspaper arrival announcements are all that will exist to document an ancestor's travels.

Letters to the editor and classified ads may have been used to seek information on missing relatives and friends or tell about former residents.

Identifying Newspapers

Knowing what repository has the newspaper that you need is the first step to using newspapers. There are many finding aids including union lists, bibliographies, special preservation programs and the Internet that will help you in your search.

- *Union Lists* – Publications such as Clarence S. Brigham's *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820* and Winifred Gregory's *American Newspapers 1821-1936, A Union List of*

Files Available in the United States and Canada offer information about the publication history and locality of newspapers of the past.

- *Newspapers in Microform* – Gives researchers information about what repositories have which newspapers in microform versions. There are two editions: United States 1948-1983 (actual coverage of newspapers is 1704-1972) and Foreign Countries 1948-1983 (actual coverage of newspapers is 1655-1972).

Finding Newspapers

Newspapers are often overlooked as a resource because many researchers think they are too difficult to locate and use. There are many places where you will find newspapers preserved and many aids to help you in locating those newspapers.

- Libraries: public and academic
- State archives and libraries
- State or local historical societies
- Newspaper morgues
- Online
- Printed sources

Published indexes or online searchable databases assist with locating people in certain newspapers. One valuable project is the *Early American Newspaper Project* begun by the Readex Corporation to make all newspapers mentioned in Brigham's *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820* available on microfilm. Some libraries have this collection still in this format. The *Early American Newspapers* though is now available online through Newsbank.com and is marketed to institutions for memberships. As such, you may have access to some or all of this through your local public library.

Digitized Newspapers

In this age of the Internet, this is often one of the best places to turn for possible newspapers. Understand that those that were published before 1950 and after 1997 tend to be more available in a digital format at the present. The earlier ones are digitized to preserve them and the latter ones because they were already in a digital format. This is not true of all newspapers of course.

Some useful sites for either locating digitized newspapers or searching them:

- Ancestry.com
- Cyndi's List www.cyndislist.com/newspapers
- GenealogyBank.com
- Google News news.google.com/newspapers
- NewspaperArchive.com

- Newspapers.com

There are a few useful published volumes that can also assist you with finding online newspaper avenues:

- Claudia C. Breland's *Searching for Your Ancestors in Historic Newspapers*
- Ernest Thode's *Historic German Newspapers Online*

Effective Online Searching

It is important to keep in mind that few of these newspapers have been indexed. And if they have, they have likely been indexed using *optical character recognition* (OCR) which does not always read the letters correctly.

Once a newspaper has been identified, if you have the day of an event, it is sometimes a more production approach to go page by page through the paper looking for the notice of your ancestor. Just a single extra smudge of ink could make searching a name in the OCR'd index unfindable and suggest that your ancestor isn't in the paper when in fact they were.

Tip: Remember when filling in search engines that Less is best.

A Few Final Thoughts

Newspapers are a window to the past. The newspapers are seldom politically correct, using terms that could be considered racist, rude, or otherwise objectionable by present standards. Today they are available in many different formats including original pages, microform, and digitized images. While they are seldom indexed, they can answer many questions when other records haven't survived. Your perseverance with them will pay off.

