

A Nose for News: Sniffing Out Stories in Newspapers

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Newspaper research can help to further genealogy research in many ways. Existence of a name in a newspaper can pinpoint a location for an ancestor at a particular time. Mentions in the legal notices, property records or shipping notices can provide clues for additional research avenues such as court records, deeds and passenger manifests. Here are my top tips for getting the most out of newspaper research.

1. READ THE ENTIRE PAPER

Don't just look for an ancestor's obituary and consider your work complete when it's been found. Read the rest of the newspaper at least a few days before and after. You may find a more complete account of someone's death, particularly if it involved an accident or other unusual circumstances.

2. PICK A DATE AND ADD 18 OR 25 OR 50

If you have a birthdate or anniversary for your ancestor, be sure to look for something in the newspaper around the same month and day at significant intervals, such as a 21st birthday or a 25th or 40th or 50th anniversary.

3. NOBODY CAN READ JUST ONE

If you find an article from one newspaper, check other newspapers in the same town, adjacent towns and perhaps the local large city to see if one of them might also have covered the story. You may find additional details or an alternate spelling of a name.

4. LET YOUR FINGERS DO THE TAPPING

Transcribe the articles you find. The act of typing it up will slow you down, focusing your mind on all the details in the article, not just the highlights. That kinesthetic learning will cement those details in your brain.

5. ALL OCR IS NOT CREATED EQUAL

Due to time and technological advances, any given issue of a newspaper may have been scanned and digitized more than once. If you find your newspaper in multiple sources on the web, be sure to search them all. The name you're searching for might appear in one list of OCR results but not the other. And if newspaper website allows user to correct text, your ancestor's name might have been corrected in one newspaper project but not the other.

6. BE A GIVER, NOT JUST A TAKER

If the newspaper site allows users to correct text, do so. You might just be helping a cousin sometime down the road. And if you've made the effort to transcribe an article put it out there on a surname or locality message board somewhere. A far-away researcher may see your post and contact you with more information. Even if no one finds you, it's nice to be nice and genealogy karma is indeed "a thing."

7. IT AIN'T ALL ONLINE

Don't forget to search in newspapers that haven't been digitized and put online. Make a visit to a library or archive that holds paper or microfilm copies of newspapers from your research areas. If you can't make the trip, try to borrow the newspaper via interlibrary loan.

8. DON'T ASSUME ANYTHING ABOUT THE ISSUES ON A MICROFILM REEL

Just because you see a series of consecutive dates for a given year on a microfilm reel, it doesn't mean those are the only issues for that year. There may be another batch of issues from that year on a different place on the microfilm reel.

9. MORE THAN JUST BMD

Newspapers report more than just birth, marriages and deaths. Look for visiting relatives, hospital admissions, real estate transfers, shipping news, hotel arrivals, and adoption or court mentions. In addition to providing timeline data points, some of these notices may lead to further research in deed or court records.

10. MORE THAN JUST NAMES

Search for your ancestor's address as well. "1234 Walnut st" is easier to get right than the name Krotozyner. Addresses will give you a whole new set of newspaper hits. Try also Key Word (i.e. "funeral".)

11. SEARCH BY CITY – If you research subjects moved away from home, search in the "old" town paper for the name of the new location and search in the new location for the name of the old home town. You may find people traveling back and forth, and possibly get some idea of who drew your ancestor to their new location.

12. HALF A WORD AWAY

Old newspapers tended to hyphenate words more frequently to split them between lines than we are used to seeing today. Think about the way your ancestor's name might have been split and search for those "half words" like Kir cher.

13. COLOR IN THE DETAILS

When you're reading the paper look for details like the weather, politics, or local happenings on your ancestor "important dates." These nuggets provide the family history writer with specifics to flesh out an account of the ancestor's wedding and engage the reader.

14. SPECIAL EDITIONS

Seek out special editions of the newspapers from your ancestor's localities, perhaps ones published even long after they passed away. Celebrations such as a town centennial or the 1976 US Bicentennial often prompt the local paper to reflect and reminisce on the days of yore.

15. FIRE! FIRE!

When you have ancestors in “burned” counties where the actual records were destroyed, you may find marriage notices, deeds, obituaries and more to substitute at least somewhat for those official records destroyed in a courthouse or other fire.

16. JANUARY AND MONTH-END RECAPS

Papers may list in first days of month or a year all births, deaths and/or marriages. Charitable organizations my list donations – memorial contributions could be a clue someone died.

17. ...PAPERS PLEASE COPY

Often funeral notices and obituaries contain words such as “Seattle papers please copy.” This is a clue that the decedent has a connection with another place that you might not have been aware of before you saw those words. Follow up on the connection. Such articles may appear in the referring paper days, weeks or perhaps even months after the original notice.

18. LAYOUT OF THE PAPER

A lot of the old, small-town newspapers are 4 or 8 pages long. They might have come out once a week. When you’re first getting started with a new newspaper study how it’s put together. They might have national features on page 1, political stuff on page 2, and local news on page 3, often divided by local village. If you understand where you’re likely to find the kind of news you’re looking for, you’ll have a better chance of finding it, and save some time to boot.

19. WEAR, OH WHERE?

Newspapers often ran ads for clothes and household products that might give you an idea of how your ancestor lived. You can see what those kinds of things cost. Perhaps there are ads for transportation – train schedules or boat schedules. Also look at the ads for funeral parlors. Map them in relation to where your ancestor lived. That might be an important clue as to who handled their eventual arrangements which you can follow up on.

20. LOOK FOR ONE EXTRA NAME IN OBITUARIES

Always look for the name of the funeral home in an obituary. Most of the families I know seem to use the same funeral home. Sometimes it might be a successor home, but even part of the original name might remain. If you have somebody in the family and you can’t figure out when they died or where they’re buried, try to contact the funeral home that the rest of the family used and you just might hit pay dirt.

21. NEWSPAPER ARTICLES CAN HELP DATE PHOTOS

You may read in a newspaper that so and so is visiting a city or out of state. If you have photos taken in the visitation place, the newspaper details of the trip may help to narrow down the date.

22. READER KNOW THY PAPER

Look for information on what papers existed for your area and what kind of news they carried.

23. CONTEXT FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Read newspapers around dates of ancestral letters and diaries. Events in the newspapers may provide further context about what was going on when the letter or diary was written.

24. UNNAMED, UNDATED, UNPAGINATED CLIPPINGS

For those newspaper “scraps” with no newspaper title, date, or page number, pick a unique phrase of about 5 words from either the front or the back and run it through the various online newspaper databases.

SITES WITH DIGITIZED NEWSPAPERS – FREE:

Library of Congress Chronicling America Historic American Newspapers - <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

California Digital Newspaper Collection – A Freely Accessible Repository of Digitized California Newspapers 1846-present - <http://cdnc.ucr.edu/>

Fulton History – 29+ million historic newspaper pages from US and Canada (predominantly New York) - <http://www.fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>

Be sure to read the FAQ-Help Index. The search format is a little clunky but if you know how to search you can get better results more quickly and more specifically

Another NY newspaper site – NYS Historic Newspapers - <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/> It has some of the same content as Fulton History but has an easier navigation system

Portal to Texas History – Texas Digital Newspaper Program - <https://texashistory.unt.edu/explore/collections/TDNP/>

NebraskAccess – Nebraska newspaper website - <https://nebraskaccess.nebraska.gov/websites/historicalnewspapers.asp>

Wikipedia list of online newspaper archives – world-wide, US section broken down by state. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_online_newspaper_archives

Internet Archive – I often think of Internet Archive (archive.org) as a place to find books, but they also have more than 500,000 newspaper pages, some which I have not found elsewhere. <https://archive.org/details/newspapers>

Trove – Digitized newspapers of Australia - <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/home>

The Ancestor Hunt – This site is a curated collection of newspapers by state and also by ethnic group. I recently solved a problem by looking through links in the special ethnic collections section <https://theancestorhunt.com/newspaper-research-links.html>

Google News Archive – no longer searchable but browsable - <https://news.google.com/newspapers> I suggest you look at Linkpendium (linkpendium.com),

find your state and county, and look at what they have for newspaper links. If they have one that shows Google News Archive, click on the newspaper title and it will take you directly to the digitized paper on Google News Archive

PAY SITES:

Ancestry.com

GenealogyBank.com

Newspapers.com

Fold3.com

NewspaperArchive – this is an expensive pay site (\$140/year) but National Genealogical Society has made it a member benefit. NGS membership is \$75/year! <https://www.ngsgenealogy.org/>

CANADIAN SITES:

British Columbia Historical Newspapers – UBC -

<https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/bcnewspapers>

Early Alberta Newspapers - <https://digitalcollections.ucalgary.ca/asset-management/2R3408223BAP&WS=PackagePres&Flat=Y>

Newmarket Ontario Digital Newspaper Project - <http://news.ourontario.ca/newmarket/search>

INK – Our Digital World Newspaper Collection - <http://ink.scholarsportal.info/>

INK – Our Ontario Community Newspapers - <http://news.ourontario.ca/>

While I realize a Canadian collection might not feel relevant to your research, seeing what kinds of collections are out there might spark your search for newspapers specific to your research localities.

UK and Ireland sites

British Newspaper archive – <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/> Free to search but need to pay to see articles

Ireland Old News - <http://www.irelandoldnews.com/> transcriptions and abstracts. Spotty coverage

LIBRARY CARD at home:

Your library card(s) may have access to one or more newspaper database, at home, for free.

These may be “lite” versions of the pay sites such as America’s “GenealogyBank,” “Newspaper Archive” and “19th Century US Newspapers”

All links current as of 11 January 2024