

Newspapers: Ancestors in the News

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- I. History of Newspapers
 - a. Newspaper format began in the 17th Century (1600s)
 - b. Newspapers were used for passing along political ideology
 - c. The revolutionary efforts in the United States heavily used newspapers to gain support for the revolution against the British government resulting in the Freedom of the Press being part of the first amendment and Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution
 - d. In the 1830s, newspapers expanded into rural areas of the United States. These papers started catering to their potential subscribers by reporting about local events and people. This period is when newspapers become helpful for genealogical research.
- II. Biasness Awareness – Newspapers are a business and their business is to sell news to their subscribers.
 - a. Dramatization - The reporting of the news can be dramatized to make it more interesting to the readers. This needs to be taken into account when using newspaper articles.
 - b. Political Twists – Through the history of the newspapers, newspaper companies usually had a political side. Many newspapers included their political biasness in their title, such as the New Orleans Daily Democrat and the New Orleans Republican. If you know the political party of an ancestor, there is a greater chance that the newspaper leaning toward that political party would have articles including your ancestor. It is also good to read about a specific event in various newspapers to obtain the view of the event that took place through various perspectives.
 - c. First to Report the Story – Especially for major news events, newspapers will try to be the first to get the story out to their readers. This may result in inaccurate information being reported. It is best to compare the news report to other reports given after the event as more facts became known.
- III. Newspapers for Genealogy – As newspapers evolved into tailoring to the local subscribers by providing local news, newspapers can be used to find information about your ancestors.
 - a. Deaths
 - i. Obituaries – Newspapers are searched most often for obituaries which is a tribute written about the life of the deceased person upon their death. Obituaries became popular in the 1930s and are usually written by the company or person organizing the funeral with information provided by the family. The obituary usually contains information that covers the life and family of the deceased person. Especially in areas that have a weekly newspaper, it is good to also check the newspaper two to three weeks after

the death of the person. A brief obituary may be published in the newspaper right after the death occurred to let people know about visitations, funerals, and other rites taking place. The family may publish a more extensive obituary in a later issue.

- ii. News Reports – Even though obituaries did not become a common practice until about the 1930's, a person's death may still have been reported in the newspaper as a news article written by a reporter. Local newspaper published news reports of events that would be of interest to local readers and a death of someone in the community would be one of those local events that they would be interested in reading. These reports may just give information about the events resulting in the death or may also give information about their life within the community.
- iii. Death Notice – these are legal notices published in the paper to let people know of the death of the person so that claims to the estate by possible heirs or those holding a debt owed by the deceased.

b. Marriages

- i. Marriage Banns – Early on marriages were announced in the newspaper as a legal notice that the marriage is taking place. These are usually extremely brief just giving the groom's and bride's name stating that they have received a bond, banns, or license to get married. While these announcements usually meant the couple married, there are occasions that the marriage was called off after the notice and never took place. It is best to check other sources as well such as the county marriage returns to find the actual date of the marriage. Just as the appearance of notice does not mean the marriage took place, the lack of a marriage return does not mean that the marriage given in the notice did not take place. There are times that the person that performed the marriage did not return the marriage notice resulting in the completed marriage not getting recorded in the official government record.
 - ii. Marriage Announcements – Much like obituaries, newspapers began publishing engagements in the newspaper. This may include a photo of the bride, possibly with the groom, and provide information about the upcoming marriage. It may also give details about the families of the bride and groom.
 - iii. Marriage Reports – A marriage of someone in the community is also of interest to local readers. These reports can give details about the wedding, who served in the wedding party, what was worn at the wedding, and who attended the wedding.
- c. Births – Birth announcements at times were given in the papers. It usually announced that the parents had a daughter or son born to them. It may give an address of the family but is most commonly very brief.
- d. Local News – Beyond the vital events of a person, information about the everyday life of your ancestor may be available in the newspaper. Through the social news

articles, you can learn about the interests and activities that you ancestor was involved in doing. You may even find out when relatives and friends were visiting your ancestors and where they were living. With full text searching capabilities of digitized papers, these articles are easier to find.

IV. Locating Newspapers

- a. State Historic Newspaper Projects – Within the United States each state has a State Historic Newspaper Project. Either a state agency, such as the State Library or State Archives, or an university organizes this project. The purpose is to preserve, digitize, and make accessible newspapers from within the state. The organization may have their own website available for accessing these records or they may have them available through the Library of Congress's Chronicling America website. Some states provide more resources and funding than others toward the historic newspapers project resulting in differences of what is available in each state. To locate information about the state's newspaper project, do a search through a search engine, such as Google or Bing, with the state's name and Historic Newspaper Project (i.e., Louisiana Historic Newspaper Project).
- b. Library of Congress, Chronicling America (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>) This is a national newspaper project for the United States. The website is provided by the Library of Congress and is free to use. Over 21 million pages of newspapers are available. Since newspapers are protected by Copyright Laws, every from 1930 to the present may still be under copyright and owned by a newspaper company. While there are some newspapers later than 1930 on Chronicling America, most are in the 1920s and earlier. The Chronicling America website is in the process of getting a new website that will take place sometime in 2025.
- c. Local Libraries
 - i. Subscription Newspaper Databases – Local public libraries and university/college libraries may have access to newspaper subscription databases. Check with your local libraries to see what databases you may have access to research through. As a patron of the library, the library pays for the subscription cost and you can search the databases at no extra cost. Some of the databases can be searched away from the library such as at your home. Some examples of the subscription databases that may be available are NewsBank, Newspaper Archive, Newspapers.com, and Lexis/Nexis. You may need to obtain a library card for the library.
 - ii. Digitized Local Papers – The library or a local organization may have digitized the local paper and made them available through the library's website.
 - iii. Paper Copies of Newspapers – The library may also have collected paper copies of the newspaper that you can look through at the library.
 - iv. Microfilm of Newspapers – Some libraries have copies of local newspapers available through microfilm that can be used onsite.

- d. FamilySearch Centers – FamilySearch Centers provide access to some subscription databases that can be searched for free while at a local FamilySearch Center, such as 19th Century British Papers and Newspaper Archives. These databases are not provided by FamilySearch to FamilySearch Affiliate Libraries though, so make sure that you are checking with a FamilySearch Center.
- e. Personal Newspaper Subscription Databases – You can also pay for your own subscription to newspaper databases. Some of these are:
 - i. GenealogyBank (from NewsBank) – <https://www.genealogybank.com/>
 - ii. Newspaper Archive – <https://newspaperarchive.com/>
 - iii. Newspapers.com (from Ancestry.com) – <https://www.newspapers.com/>
 - iv. OldNews.com (from MyHeritage) – <https://www.oldnews.com/>

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