

# Finding & Using Historic Newspapers in Genealogical Research

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*Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.*

**-Thomas Jefferson, 1787**

Before radio and television, much less the computer and ipod, newspapers were the primary source of communication for our ancestors. They were read (or listened to) from cover to cover sometimes over and over until the next edition arrived.

## **Newspapers in America**

The first newspaper in the American colonies appeared in Boston in 1690, titled *Publick Occurrences*. Published without authority, the publisher was arrested and all copies were destroyed - except for one surviving example that was discovered in the British Library in 1845. The first successful newspaper was the Boston News-Letter, begun by postmaster John Campbell in 1704. Although it was heavily subsidized by the colonial government, the experiment was a near-failure, with very limited circulation.

Philadelphia and New York gained newspapers in the 1720s, and Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* joined the list in 1729. By the time of the American Revolution, articles contained in the colonial newspapers played a significant role in influencing public opinion away from reconciliation with England and toward independence. At the war's end, the 37 newspapers had grown to 43, however most had not been published continuously. The 1850 census revealed 2,526 newspapers and the numbers continued to grow. By 1880 there were 11,414 titles in the US.

## **Importance of Newspapers**

It is not clear when information about people in the community began to dot the pages of local newspapers, but it was certainly a gift for genealogists. Newspapers allow us to glimpse into the daily lives and social customs of our ancestors and give us detailed information about our ancestors and their family relationships. They can help us break through genealogy "brick walls" and can help us find the "stories" of their lives.

Newspapers can serve as a substitute for nonexistent vital and civil records helping fill the void before official records were kept or where the records have been destroyed. They often contain far more information than an "official" record would have because they are limited only by the lines allowed and the imagination of the writer while the official record may be a fill-in-the blank form with limited space for

extras. Reporters and editors were usually scrambling for information while harried clerks just wanted to file the necessary papers.

### **Examples of the Depth of Information Found in Newspapers**

Marriages & Wedding Ceremonies & Anniversaries – We can learn the date and couples names and a few other things from the Courthouse marriage record, but only in the newspaper can we find photos, occupations of the couple, officiant & participants, the ceremony, dress, the attendants, the flowers, the reception and showers and parties, who sang and what they sang, where the couple honeymooned and where they worked, the parents of both bride and groom, who attended the wedding, out of town relatives and where they were from and if they eloped. An anniversary is often covered even if the marriage was not, especially 50th and even 40th or 25th and children and other family members are almost always mentioned.

Obituaries & Death Notices – Usually tell name, date of death, age, details of funeral, place of burial. May tell spouse and children, parents, siblings, occupation/interests, family details, funeral home or undertaker, what is important in the community.

### **What You May Find in a Newspaper**

Engagements/Weddings  
Anniversaries/Eloperments  
Family Reunions  
Deaths/Funerals/Obits/Births  
Thank You Notices  
Accidents & Wrecks  
Lists of hotel guests  
Estate Settlements  
Bankruptcies/Foreclosure  
News Stories  
Legal Notices  
Personal Notices  
Minutes (County officials)  
Socials/Club Meetings  
Organizations/ Reunions  
“Old Settler” meetings  
Community/ school events  
Tax Lists/Delinquent Tax  
Political Events  
Police Blotters  
Ship Arrivals  
Train Schedules

Military Lists  
News from Soldiers  
Letters to Editor  
Advertisements  
Honor & Attendance Rolls  
Graduates/Teachers  
School Board Meetings  
Unclaimed Letters  
Public Sales/Auctions  
Announcements  
Real Estate Transactions  
Jury Lists/Court Dockets  
Church News  
Church New Members  
Slave Runaways  
Indentured servants  
Civil War battles  
War-time volunteers  
Biographical sketches  
Local business news

### **Search Strategies**

Finding the newspapers about your ancestor is much easier with the aid of a computer and the internet. It is wise to look at the links listed on [Cyndislist.com](http://Cyndislist.com) under both “newspapers” and “historic newspapers” but also look under the particular state, then newspapers.

A search using any of the search engines is also a good strategy. Simply typing in the location and newspaper (or historic/historical newspaper) will often bring several to explore. If you know the title of the

newspaper from the area, that can also lead to a successful search. Sometimes typing the surname + the event (obituary or anniversary, etc.) will yield wonderful results, especially if someone has scanned a newspaper clipping and placed it on [Rootsweb.com](http://Rootsweb.com). The leading genealogy search engine, [Google.com](http://Google.com), also has a site devoted to newspapers called Google News Archive < [news.google.com/archivesearch/](http://news.google.com/archivesearch/) > which is definitely worth a look.

Many of the current newspapers of larger cities have been published for a number of years and have placed digitized images of their historic newspapers online. They are fully searchable and a real boost to genealogists. Some are placed online freely while others require a subscription. Check with the local library as many have subscriptions to the local newspapers as well as major US newspapers, sometimes accessible from home to library card holders.

### **Tips for Successful Newspaper Research**

- Check neighboring towns, especially county seat and market towns
- Read the whole paper as articles may be randomly placed to fill spots
- Look for women under husband's name, i.e. Mrs. John Brown rather than Molly Brown
- Check papers around holidays for news of visiting family
- Check papers at the end of the year for necrology reports
- Remember misspellings, initials, abbreviations, middle names
- Remember weekly newspapers may not print a story for several weeks
- Remember editors may be biased and to not believe everything you read in the paper
- Compare stories from nearby papers for more complete details
- Check several days or weeks after a story appears for follow-up, corrections, more details
- When an ancestor disappears, broaden your search as he may have moved

### **Finding Historic Newspapers**

Knowing about the county where your ancestors lived is vital for a great many reasons, including knowing about what newspapers were published at different time periods. County histories often have this information and sometimes county web pages of genealogical or historical societies.

Some state historical societies were begun by newspapermen and will have a large collection of historic newspapers on microfilm. Locate the particular states largest newspaper repository for a listing of what newspapers are available for a certain county or area of the state. Sometimes that newspaper collection will be at the state archives or a university or college. Most will have a web presence with a card catalogue or listing of their microfilmed newspaper holdings, if not digitized copies online.

The Library of Congress <[www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov)> has a growing collection of digitized historic newspapers. There are numerous printed indexes to obituaries or deaths or marriages or whatever that have been undertaken by societies or individuals. Searching card catalogues of a state or local library will usually tell you if these are available.

### **Specialty Newspapers**

In addition to regular general interest newspapers, specialty newspapers are available for a variety of interests and should also be consulted. Many religious denominations have newspapers with information of value to their members and clergy. If the ancestors' religion is known, these should be found and searched as many are filled with details not available elsewhere.

Besides denominational newspapers, other available specialty newspapers include ethnic, foreign language, fraternal orders, occupational, college and university, alumni groups, high schools, clubs, political parties, and many other limited-circulation publications. These may be found at the national or state headquarters of the organizations or may be deposited in the state archives or historical society. Sometimes they will be found at a local museum or library.

## The US Newspaper Program

The United States Newspaper Program is a cooperative national effort among the states and the federal government to locate, catalog, and preserve on microfilm newspapers published in the United States from the eighteenth century to the present. Funding is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Technical assistance is furnished by the Library of Congress. Participating states, libraries, and archives along with their web site URLs can be found on the National Endowment for the Humanities website at <http://www.neh.gov/projects/usnp.html>. All 50 states have participated in this project and the holdings have been catalogued into OCLC WorldCat which is available online in most libraries.

## National Newspaper Repositories and Online Sources

American Antiquarian Society	<a href="http://www.americanantiquarian.org">http://www.americanantiquarian.org</a>
Center for Research Libraries	<a href="http://www.crl.edu/">http://www.crl.edu/</a>
Library of Congress	<a href="http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/">http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/</a>
Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers	<a href="http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/">http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/</a>
New York Public Library	<a href="http://www.nypl.org/">http://www.nypl.org/</a>
Rutgers University	<a href="http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu">http://www.libraries.rutgers.edu</a>
Western Reserve Historical Society	<a href="http://www.wrhs.org/">http://www.wrhs.org/</a>
WiscGodfrey Library (subscription)	<a href="http://godfrey.org">http://godfrey.org</a>
Google News Archives	<a href="http://news.google.com/archivesearch">http://news.google.com/archivesearch</a>
Newspaper Abstracts	<a href="http://newspaperabstracts.com">http://newspaperabstracts.com</a>
Historical Newspapers on the Internet	<a href="http://researchguides.net/newspapers.htm">http://researchguides.net/newspapers.htm</a>
GenealogyBank.com (fee)	<a href="http://www.genealogybank.com">http://www.genealogybank.com</a>
Footnote.com (fee)	<a href="http://www.footnote.com">http://www.footnote.com</a>
Ancestry.com (fee)	<a href="http://www.ancestry.com">http://www.ancestry.com</a>

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Stuart-Warren, Paula. "Newspaper Research: The Dailies, Weeklies, and Beyond." Lecture T221, NGS Family History Conference 2009: Raleigh, NC, 2009. Audio CD-ROM. Arlington, VA: National Genealogical Society, 2009. Program Syllabus, pp.181-184. (lists 35 directories/guides to newspapers)

Eichholz, Alice, editor. *Redbook: American State, County, and Town Sources, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.* Provo, UT: Ancestry, A division of MyFamily.com, Inc., 2004. (A section on state's newspapers, telling where the largest collection of state newspapers is kept.)

United States Newspaper Program National Union List. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Microfiche. Dublin, Ohio: OCLC, 1999.