

# NEWSPAPER RESEARCH: Finding the Sources, Finding the Facts

Copyright 2007

Gary R. Toms

Genealogy Reference Assistant, Midwest Genealogy Center

Independence, Missouri

[www.midwestgenealogycenter.org](http://www.midwestgenealogycenter.org)

## Introduction

- Newspapers... generally considered a passing medium, a throwaway
- Generally viewed as only having current use or value.
- Those that survive can be invaluable in our research.

## What can you expect to find in newspapers?

- Obituaries
- Birth, death and funeral notices
- Announcements of other life events (graduations, engagements, etc.)
- Social news
- Old Settlers articles/lists
- Activities of clubs and organizations
- Legal notices, such as those from court cases
- Lists (unclaimed letters, delinquent taxes, county fair premiums, etc.)
- Advertisements and business notices
- Major local events, such as fires and floods, or a new courthouse
- The weather, etc.

## How does this help you?

Some examples:

- Life events data, such as birth, marriage and death notices: obvious, since these are facts we search for as framework for the family history
- Local news can provide much detail, especially about relationships and residence of various family members . . . valuable clues. This sometimes picks up lost trails for branches of a family which have moved away, and come back to visit. May also account for a child who was born and died between census enumerations.
- County weekly newspapers are particularly good source for this.
- Old settlers' lists and obituaries can provide clues to points of origin.

Much is buried in the advertisements and legal notices

- Marriages, death notices and other short items
- Announcements of new business ventures, trade cards for ongoing businesses

- Notices of dissolutions of partnership, sale of land, etc., which may give clues to changing financial status of your ancestors, or help establish a date when they left area
- Extracts or transcriptions of much of this data can be found published in books and articles.

### **How do you find and use this material?**

- Need to determine what newspapers are available
- Must find where copies are located
- Need to find out how you can access it

First, consider how to read newspaper for genealogy. What is missing?

- There is no index, a feature researchers rely upon
- Method used to read a newspaper in research mode can partially make up for this lack
- Some newer, large newspapers have contents list, a form of index
- As papers are digitized, indices are created

The method to read a newspaper for genealogy

- Look for indexes (contents lists)
- Learn the layout
- Observe position of regular features; editors took shortcuts and often placed regular items in roughly the same order in each issue
- Learn frequency of regular items, so you know when to expect them

Once you have the method

- Scan entire paper, paying special attention to where you expect certain things to be
- Also, read with new eyes, with a fresh viewpoint, to glean every kernel of information of value to your research
- Consider what each item tells you

### **Accessing the material**

The old process of access: the first steps

- Determine the identity of the newspaper needed
- Consult general published directory or bibliography at local library
- Some specialized bibliographies also available; i.e., by locality, religious denomination or ethnic group/nationality

Once the newspaper was identified, searcher then had three choices:

- Go where copy of the paper still exists
- Try to obtain on interlibrary loan
- Write to request a search and copy

This process still works, but now there are other options.

In recent years, three factors have had great impact on this area.

- U.S. Newspaper Program
- National Digital Newspaper Program
- The Internet

### **The U.S. Newspaper Program**

Federally funded project, started in 1982, a great benefit for researchers. Its purpose is to locate, catalog and preserve on microfilm newspapers published in the United States from the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

U.S. Newspaper Program: <http://www.neh.gov/projects/usnp.html>

At this site you will find links to many state projects, some with websites. Others may offer bibliographies or other finding aids.

As an example of a state-level site which you can find via the U.S. Newspaper Program site, consider: <http://shs.umssystem.edu/newspaper/>

At this site you can find much helpful information, including:

- Missouri Newspaper Index Database
- Link to St. Louis obituary index
- Complete listing of every newspaper on microfilm at the state historical society, over 41 million pages
- Online catalog, an alternative to the above, which includes those not yet microfilmed or digitized
- Information on interlibrary loan
- General guide to “Using Newspapers for Genealogical and Biographical Research,” as well as seven additional guides for specific types of newspapers
- Newspaper research request form
- Link to the newspaper section of the Missouri Digital Heritage site, <http://www.sos.mo.gov/mdh/browse.asp?id=22> It includes thirteen newspapers from various parts of the state, with issues as early as 1835 and as recent as 1975.

### **National Digital Newspaper Program**

Also Federally funded, started in 2004, picks up where USNP ends. It is working to create an online digital archive of historically significant U.S. newspapers, and to make available bibliographic records and holdings information.

The program currently provides access to more than 1 million newspapers pages, from 17 states and the District of Columbia, published between 1880 and 1922, selected by libraries to represent their state’s history in the national collection.

<http://www.neh.gov/projects/ndnp.html>

Chronicling America is the site to access many of the resulting digital files:

<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

## **The Power of the Internet**

Here, as in so many other areas, the Internet has had great impact. The links just cited are excellent examples. It makes it much easier to find and access a great deal of material pertinent to newspaper research.

The Internet makes it easier to find:

- Home pages of current newspapers, with electronic editions, obituary archives, and contact info
- Bibliographic listings of collections, to locate newspapers you seek
- Library hours and locations, in case you have to visit to search
- Indexing of some content
- Scanned copies of actual newspapers or articles, some with full indexing

## **Indexing of Newspaper Content**

Scanned newspapers online: this takes care of lack of indexing for some areas, as most digitized newspapers are indexed as part of the scanning process, and it makes much material accessible to a wider audience than before.

- Several sites, literally millions of pages of historic newspapers
- Many are subscription-based, but some are free
- Examples of fee-based (available through libraries): Access NewspaperArchive, Newspaper Archive Elite, Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers, Black Newspapers (part of ProQuest Newspaper Premier), ProQuest Historical Newspapers
- Also, growing collections of obituary files and obituary indexes online
- Check newspaper section and obituary section of Cyndi's List for links
- Also check libraries for published transcriptions and extracts; these can substitute for indices. Use them to guide you to original articles.
- Use online database sites; some include a newspaper component or obituary database, such as America's Genealogy Bank (Historical U.S. Newspapers, 1690–1977 is one component, and America's Obituaries and Death Notices is another). Ancestry.com, as another example, includes the United States Obituary Collection and also has a significant collection of newspapers in its databases.

Good news: Many databases are available through the MCPL site.

Even better news: most are accessible from home if you have a library card!

If you work from a different library, check their site for newspaper and obituary databases available to you.

## **Obituary Searches**

One of the principal uses of newspapers by genealogists

If the individual you seek is not in one of the larger online databases mentioned previously, then you must take another approach.

- First, determine date and place for the event
- Use cemetery transcriptions, local histories, lodge accounts, etc.

- For problems with place name, refine with atlases, gazetteers, postal directories or maps.
- Online sources can help, also; USGS Place Name Server is good.  
<http://geonames.usgs.gov/pls/gnispublic/f?p=127:1:2183000997456766>
- Finally, identify the newspaper needed and repository which has copy.

Once you have completed these preliminary steps, you have the same old three choices we mentioned before:

Either go there, or write, or order it in on interlibrary loan.

Pointers when searching for obituaries

- Remember not all had them in earlier time periods
- More random in earlier years, generally for those who were prominent, or died tragically, or at an early or advanced age. Think in terms of what the editor may have considered newsworthy. Obituaries were not necessarily published as a public service.
- Early ones can be in various locations in the paper. May appear as a news item, even on front page, or can be near back of the issue by advertisements, if in form of a brief notice (death or funeral notice, rather than full obituary)
- It is not until later, generally in the 1920 or 1930s, that many papers began routinely placing these together in one location in the issue, and covering the majority of the deaths.

### **Adventure Awaits**

- You have found a newspaper of interest in digital files online, or ordered a microfilm.
- May or may not be indexed
- An adventure awaits you.
- Remember how to read a newspaper for genealogy.
- Search thoroughly; glean every bit of pertinent information.

### **Published Extracts Can Help**

- Published extracts and transcriptions are also helpful in the search are. Use as an index, but still try to see the original. Details of interest to you in the full article may have been left out of the extract.
- Many volumes of these are in libraries. Search catalogs for the locality of interest.
- Search WorldCat to identify others <http://www.worldcat.org/>
- Search the Family History Library catalog on at  
[http://www.familysearch.org/eng/Library/FHLC/frameset\\_fhlc.asp](http://www.familysearch.org/eng/Library/FHLC/frameset_fhlc.asp)

Published Extracts – The Next Step

- If none found in catalog searches, then check PerSI (Periodical Source Index) on Heritage Quest. <http://www.heritagequestonline.com/hqoweb/library/do/index> or via your public library site

- Search the locality, with category of newspapers or obituaries or vital records. I have newspaper content under all three.
- If you locate a possible source, follow up in MCPL listings to see if we have the periodical.
- If not available at MCPL (or your local library, or Family History Library), request copies from Allen County-Ft. Wayne Public Library or the publisher or another library which holds the desired title.

#### Published Helps – Indices

*Newspaper Indexes: A Location and Subject Guide for Researchers*, by Anita Cheek Milner (three volumes; Scarecrow Press, 1977+); an older publication, it still contains viable information

Other published bibliographies and guides are available

Additional indices online, through some of the sites previously mentioned

#### **Broaden Your Search**

- No luck on the immediate vicinity? Broaden search to next level out. Some material has been compiled on regional or state-wide basis.
- In the case of religious denomination newspapers, some compilations are national in scope.
- Also be alert to newspapers published for/by certain nationalities or ethnic groups, if it applies in your research.

#### **Final Advice . . .**

Be persistent, be thorough, and be hopeful. Good material is out there, and you are likely to find something of use in your genealogy. Keep your eyes open, and read the news. You may not find exactly what you are looking for, but you could stumble across something far better.