

ANCESTORS IN THE NEWS: USING NEWSPAPERS TO DOCUMENT THE LIVES OF REAL PEOPLE

Presented by Carolyn Ford on September 18, 2008
Lee County Genealogical Society, Inc.

One of the best and most underused resources in genealogical research is newspapers. Finding family information in old newspapers is relatively easy--just look into almost any late 19th or 20th century newspaper and you'll find dozens of items containing clues to family relationships. That's the good news. The bad news is that it may not be easy to locate those items that are of interest to you. Sometimes our ancestors made news, but more often they just read the news!

Historical Background

The *Boston News-Letter* which began publication in Boston, Mass in 1704, was the first continuously published U.S. newspaper. Through the years, newspapers played an important role in our ancestors' lives by revealing what was happening in the community, as well as across the country and around the world. Depending on the time period and location, you may find more emphasis on state and world news than on local happenings.

Why are Newspapers Important to Us?

Over the years many records regarding our ancestors were lost or destroyed in fires, floods, and other natural disasters. Newspapers contain a treasure trove of information not found elsewhere, including births, marriages, deaths, court notices, land sales, tax notices, businesses, etc. They also provide us with fascinating details about the lives of our ancestors. We may find a name in a list of letters at the post office, as a member of a local organization, or even performing in a musical at a local church. We can learn a great deal from reading about the past and in turn we have a greater understanding of and appreciation for the hardships and triumphs our ancestors experienced.

How to Find Your Ancestor in an Old Newspaper

Most historical newspapers are now on microfilm in public repositories. To request newspaper microfilm, you'll need two pieces of information: the **area** in which your ancestor lived; and a **specific time frame**. Once you locate a newspaper that served your ancestor's town, make a list of important dates for the ancestors you're interested in, such as deaths or marriages. Try to narrow the time frame because most old newspapers aren't indexed. When you get the microfilm, concentrate on the local news and the columns describing who visited whom. Look at the classified pages for legal notices. When you find items of interest, photocopy them and note the date, day and page of the paper (i.e., Thursday, September 29, 1895, Page 3), along with the exact name of the newspaper as it was, for example, in 1895.

Here are some examples of items in which our ancestors made the news and/or items that will give you a sense of the time in which they lived.

Milestones

Birth announcements - were not always in vogue. Unless the parents were prominent people, birth announcements generally weren't posted on a regular basis until around the mid 1900s.

Engagement/Wedding announcements - often contain a wealth of family information.

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Anniversaries - can reveal family relationships.

Deaths - Remember, obits can be in both the current and former places of residence. Always look at the newspapers on the days before a death, as there may have been a report of a person's illness or accident. Accidental deaths often made front page news. For obituaries, it's wise to check more than one local newspaper.

Local happenings

Ancestors affected by extreme weather conditions
Personals/gossip columns (who visited whom)
Local businesses advertisements
Letters left at the post office
Legal notices
Marine Intelligence/River News
Military news

Where can you find old newspapers?

Many newspapers managed to survive the test of time and now are at public libraries, state libraries and archives on microfilm. Occasionally, repositories have unfiled hard copies available for research, by request. Microfilm can be requested through interlibrary loan for viewing at your local library, or through the Family History Library's rental program. There are well over 100 million pages of newspapers preserved on microfilm in the United States alone. You also have the option of obtaining information by writing to a library or genealogical/historical society in the area where your ancestors lived. Ask them to check their microfilm for a marriage or death notice and be sure to provide a donation and SASE. You must supply the date, month and year of the event to facilitate the search. The sources listed below should help you locate historical newspapers.

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RESOURCES

American Library Directory - Adult Ref 021.0025 American - lists all types of North American libraries.

The Source - Gen Ref 929.1 SZU - See current edition for an extensive bibliography that includes religious, ethnic and specialty newspapers, as well as a guide to indexes and abstracts.

Godfrey Memorial Library - newspaper database available at the Fort Myers Family History Center.

NEHGS - offers "America's Historical Newspapers" to NEHGS members through their web site.

Web Sites

www.familysearch.org - click on "Library", then Library Catalog, then on Place Search. Type a place name. Scroll down to "Newspapers".

www.daddezio.com/society/ - Listing of historical societies by state.

www.sos.state.ga.us/archives/rs/sarl/htm - Georgia page listing 50 state archives.

www.cyndislist.com - click on "Newspapers" to check the resources listed.

www.cyndislist.com/lib-lending.htm#General - Genealogy lending libraries and archives.

www.neh.gov/projects/usnp.html - U.S. Newspaper Program: a guide to U.S. newspaper collections, 18th century to present, in nearly every state.

www.loc.gov/chroniclingamerica/search_directory_advanced.html - Find a newspaper published in a given time and place. (Aids in determining which copies survive on film.)

<http://theoldentimes.com> - Historic newspaper articles from countries including England, Scotland, Ireland, Australia and most of the United States.

<http://eagle.brooklynpubliclibrary.org> - Brooklyn Daily Eagle Online (1841-1902)

www.gendisasters.com - Newspaper articles about disasters in the U.S. and Canada (starting in 19th century).

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