



# Read All About It! Using Newspapers in Genealogy Research

by Caron Primas Brennan

## What Is A Newspaper?

- “Serial publication designed to be a primary source of written information on current events connected with public affairs”
- Intended for general public
- Published at regular intervals (not one time)
  - Daily
  - Weekly
  - Monthly

## A Bit of History

- From the second half of the 1800s through the end of World War II, newspapers were the number one source of information for most Americans.
- How things changed with cheap newsprint paper
  - Reporting of events
  - “death notices” to “Obituary”
- Most newspapers made it their business to expand their news coverage to include the minutiae of the community’s everyday life. They were the social media of their time.
- In the 2000s, with coming of the internet and rising paper prices, the focus changed, newspapers began to fail
- Started to recognize historical value of newspapers and started to preserve them.
  - Lots of microfilm
  - Cataloging and preserving efforts
    - National Endowment for the Humanities
    - Library of Congress

## Caveats

- “Historic” means famous or important in history
- “Historical” means of past events
- Need to remember that things were not always as they are now (“presentism”)
  - Hospitalizations listed in newspaper
  - Hospital births listings
- Newspapers make mistakes too
  - Use as hints or clues, not gospel

## Why Should I Use Newspapers?

- As a substitute for vital or unavailable records
- Fill in the “blanks” of your tree
- Give “color” to family members lives
- “The rest of the story” = Add to, confirm or refute family stories/lore



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- Get broader context for people's
  - Trends/fads
  - Social norms
  - Historical realities
  - Cultural priorities

## Where Can I Find Newspapers?

- Libraries
- Archives
- Historical Societies
- On-line
- Personal scrapbooks and files

## What Can I Find In Them?

- News of the day
- Business news, advertisements
- Public health crisis
- Editorials
- Classified and legal notices; real estate transactions
- Crime
- Politics
- War coverage and casualties
- Society columns
- Naturalizations and immigration stories

## Vital Records and Substitutes

- Births
  - Hospital listings
  - Birth announcements
- Marriages, marriage banns and engagements
- Divorces
  - 19<sup>th</sup> century and pre-1945 divorces were unusual and newsworthy
  - Trials covered in the news, especially high-profile ones
- Deaths
- Milestones and transitions
- Graduations
- Significant birthdays
- Anniversaries
- Awards
- Church events
- Performances



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## Evolution of the Obituary

- Colonial period – “mentions of death”
  - Only prominent people or “newsworthy death”
- 1800s – death notices
- Late 1800s to early 1900s
  - More local news, more deaths mentioned
  - Offered paid death notices
- 1900s to 1970s
  - “Great Age of Obituaries”
  - Reporters hired to write obituaries
- 1970s to 1990s
  - Style sheets to limit content
- 2000s to present
  - Paid Obituaries
  - On-line only obituaries begin

## Obituaries

- Only as good as the informant
- May have typos and Incorrect information
- Don't stop looking after finding one!
- May not find obituary but will find news item about death
- Clue – “please copy”

## Obituary/Death sources

- Legacy.com and Obitfinder [www.obitfinder.com](http://www.obitfinder.com) for more recent obituaries
- ObitsArchive [www.Obitsarchive.com](http://www.Obitsarchive.com)
- Newspaper Obituaries [www.newspaperobituaries.net](http://www.newspaperobituaries.net) Pointer site
- ProQuest [www.proquest.com](http://www.proquest.com)

## Newspaper Aggregators

- Elephind [www.elephind.com](http://www.elephind.com)
- Wikipedia “List of Online Newspaper Archives”  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List\\_of\\_online\\_newspaper\\_archives](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:List_of_online_newspaper_archives)
- Small Town Newspapers [www.smalltownnewspapers.com](http://www.smalltownnewspapers.com)

## Locating Newspapers

- *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers* includes a directory of newspapers that have been located in libraries across the nation.  
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>
- *Chronicling America: Guide for Researchers* <https://guides.loc.gov/chronicling-america/>



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- How To Get the Most From Chronicling America  
<https://theancestorhunt.com/blog/how-to-get-the-most-from-chronicling-america/>
- Cyndi's List <https://www.cyndislist.com/newspapers/>
- WorldCat <https://www.worldcat.org/>
- Newspapers.com [www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com)
- GenealogyBank [www.genealogybank.com](http://www.genealogybank.com)
- NewspapersArchive <https://www.newspaperarchive.com/>

## Local Newspapers

- University Of Illinois Digital Newspapers  
<https://guides.library.illinois.edu/newspapers/>
- Illinois Digital Newspaper Collections <http://idnc.library.illinois.edu/>
- Chicago Newspapers (CPL) <https://www.chipublib.org/chicago-newspapers-on-microfilm/>
- Local Historical Society
- Your Local Library
  - ProQuest
  - Chicago Tribune Archives
  - NewsBank

## Other Sites

- The Ancestor Hunt  
<http://www.theancestorhunt.com/newspapers.html#.Wy2n46dKiUk>
- 21 Online Newspaper Research Do's and Don'ts  
<https://theancestorhunt.com/blog/21-online-newspaper-research-dos-and-donts/>
- Old Fulton [www.fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html](http://www.fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html)

## Citing Sources

- Elizabeth Shown Mills in her book *Evidence Explained* shows author's name, section, page, column.
  - *Example:* Black, Jack, "An Order to Suppress Gaming", Louisiana Herald (Alexandria), 27 May 1820, p. 3, cols. 2-3.
  - *Example:* Ringle, Ken, "Up Through Slavery," *The Washington Post*, 12 May 2002, on-line archives, (URL): accessed 29 January 2009.
- "Name of deceased," obituary, *Newspaper Name (Location)*, date obituary published.
  - *Example:* "Mary Jane Adams," obituary, *Los Angeles (California) Times*, 15 Mar 2015.



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### Helpful Terms

- Related to time and dates
  - *Instant (inst.)* = in the present or current month
    - Death date reported as “the 8th instant” is current month; notice published on 22 February 1802, this means died on 8 February 1802
  - *Proximo (prox.)* = in the future or next month
    - Ship to sail ‘20th proximo’ will sail next month on the 20th
  - *Ultimo (ult.)* = last month
    - Death date reported as “the 6th ult” is the 6th of last month
- Related to relationships
  - *Consort* = partner, usually a female who leaves a surviving spouse
    - “Died, Mrs. Eleanor Harris, consort of Thomas Harris...”
  - *Relict (relictus)* = female survivor of a marriage union, a widow
    - “Mrs. Prudence Hale, relict of late Marshall Hale...”

### Reminders

- It is not all on the internet, you may have to visit actual places like libraries!
- All newspapers are not found in one place; you will have to dig.
- Lots of effort but worth the time spent (usually).
- OCR is not perfect; reproduction can be fuzzy.
- You will find interesting stuff along the way that may not be related to you at all!

### Your Cousin Caron - Caron Primas Brennan

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