



# United States and Canada Newspaper Resources and Strategies

Thomas MacEntee, Abundant Genealogy

<https://abundantgenealogy.com>

Why are genealogists and family historians so attracted to historical newspapers? Often, in the absence of official governmental documents such as vital records, newspapers can help establish and prove basic birth, marriage and death information about our ancestors. In addition, a newspaper listing, such as an obituary, can be a starting point for further research and assist in generating research “to-do” list ideas.

## Best US and Canada Newspaper Resources

There are many websites available online to access United States and Canadian historical newspapers. While many sites are free, you’ll only get so far in your research if you are not willing to spend some money! This means traveling to an archive or repository to work with microfilm OR signing up for one of the subscription websites.

To get started, consult the Resource List at the end of this handout and focus on the General resources. The [Online Historical Newspapers Website](#) and [The Ancestor Hunt](#) make good starting points.

## Newspaper Sections for Genealogical Research

Here is a partial list of the newspaper sections most relevant for genealogy research:

- **Advertisements** list not only sale items, but provide store names and locations.
- **Death Notices** are often short and “to the point” listing the name of the decedent, the date and informaton on the funeral or burial.
- **Estate Sales** may appear under Legal Notices and can also appear in their own section. Listings includes items for sale, name of decedent and executor/executrix as well as date, time and location of sale.
- **Events Listings** included meetings for fraternal organizations, dates and times for religious services, town and governmental meetings and more.
- **Hospital Listings** were also commonplace with the names of those who were admitted and discharged.
- **Hotel Arrivals** were commonly listed in smaller towns and listed those expected to check in at specific hotels and boarding houses.
- **Letters Waiting at the Post Office** section was popular prior to the use of telephones and Rural Free Delivery.



- **Legal Notices** encompass more than just information on pending court cases. Local newspapers often posted lists of those called to jury duty or those appointed to a grand jury. In addition, any notice of repossession would appear under legal notices.
- **Local News** is the most valuable section for most genealogists since these articles list names, dates, events and even illnesses. While today they seem more like “gossip columns,” this was the news of interest to local citizens.
- **Marital Discord Ads** were usually placed by a husband whose wife had left as part of a separation.
- **Memorials** were often printed on a death anniversary date.
- **Obituaries** are usually more substantial than Death Notices and are often composed of narrative text rich with information. Besides the standard information, you can sometimes find a cause of death, a woman’s maiden name, religion, occupation, information on migration, names of children and locations, and more. One downside: it is usually not clear who composed the obituary or who informed the newspaper of the death.
- **Personals** were not viewed as they are in today’s society; they were meant as a “miscellaneous” category for various types of announcements.
- **School News** sections included names of students in each grade as well as honor role students and awards.
- **Shipping News** listed the expected date and arrival time for various ships including passenger ships.
- **Society Columns** took the place of the Local News section in larger cities; listings usually only included well-known personages and those with “means.”

## Search Strategies

For online databases featuring historical newspaper images, you may need to employ special search strategies to locate specific information.

- **Search broad, then narrow.** Your first search should involve a surname and an event name such as *Smithson birth* or *Smithson born*. Then narrow results with phrases in quotation marks or use Boolean operators to add or exclude words.
- **Look for OCR patterns and mistakes.** The Optical Character Recognition (also known as OCR) process used to digitize the newspaper may not distinguish between similar letters such as a an o. Look at a sample section and then employ alternate spellings in your search criteria.
- **Use fuzzy search if available.** Also known as “approximate string matching” or “fuzzy string search,” fuzzy search looks for pattern matching. You will have more results to search through, but you will have results missed due to OCR errors.



- **Hyphenated words can be a problem.** With OCR, often the hyphens found in text are actual characters that can cause a word like *blacksmith* to become *black-smith*. Search for words stems along with additional criteria.
- **Be careful with diacritic characters.** This means accents over letters and letters such as ø or ü. Try using the plain letter and always review any help pages or FAQs relevant to each website and database on search methods.
- **Use date ranges and other filters.** Narrow down search results by specifying a date range or a location, but be careful! If a family story tells you a couple was married in 1915, expand the search to several years before and after.

## Capturing Newspaper Images and Information

With most historical newspaper websites, you can save both the newspaper image as well as the text. Some sites, specifically **Google Newspapers**, make it more difficult and require special techniques and tools. Here are some ways to grab the content you need as part of your genealogical research.

- **Right-click and Save Image As.** Where permitted, save the page image in its native file format and export or convert to another format once saved.
- **PrtScn usually won't work.** For most sites, if you try to do a screen capture, the image won't be large enough to read the text. Use the Zoom feature on your browser before taking a screen capture of a section of the newspaper image.
- **Google Newspapers is different.** Using **PrtScrn** is actually one of the only ways to save an image using Google Newspapers. Also, Windows users should try to use the **Snipping Tool**.
- **Get creative – Pinterest and Evernote to the rescue.** Especially for Google Newspapers, Evernote's Web Clipper can save images. Right click over the image and select **Evernote Web Clipper, Full Page** (this assumes you have the Evernote desktop version installed on your computer). **Pinterest** can be used to pin an image to a secret board; then go to Pinterest and save the image.
- **Remember to save the entire page before clipping!** Always save the entire newspaper page image as a TIFF or BMP file, if possible; these file types offer a higher image resolution. Then, create a second copy of the file as a JPG and clip out the information you need. Make sure you have a way to remember the original source of the clipped image: annotate the image with source citation text or use metadata to digitally add source citation information to the digital file.



## Extracting Information and Looking for Clues

For the most part, data and evidence gathered from historical newspapers will not be as reliable as other documents such as vital records; however newspaper articles can provide enough information to begin searching for those records needed. Here is a list of data points to extract from each type of article or section.

- **Advertisements:** Owner/proprietor name and address; list of items for sale.
- **Death Notices:** Birth date, age, death date, and location of decedent; names of survivors; funeral and burial information.
- **Estate Sales:** Name of decedent; name of attorney(s) and/or executor/executrix; location of property; and location of auction.
- **Events Listings:** Names of attendees; and location of event.
- **Hospital Listings:** Names of those admitted to and/or released from the hospital; location of hospital.
- **Hotel Arrivals:** Name and hometown of those expected to stay at hotel.
- **Letters Waiting at the Post Office:** Name and location of those with letters or parcel held at the post office.
- **Legal Notices:** Names of parties in legal matter; names of others for whom notice is being given; attorneys names; court appearance date(s); required action for one or more parties; jury duty lists; voting lists; notice of local governmental meetings; and location and/or description of property and estate.
- **Local News:** Names of event attendees; location of event; names of those sick or ailing; names of people visiting from out of town, including hometown; and descriptions of accidents and mishaps.
- **Marital Discord Ads:** Name of husband; name of wife; location; date of separation; reason for separation; and sometimes a responding ad from wife with explanation for leaving and where she is living.
- **Memorials:** Name of decedent; death date and location; names of survivors.
- **Obituaries:** Name of decedent; death date and location; cause of death; names of survivors; date and location of funeral and burial; additional information on occupations, hobbies; religious affiliations; memberships; volunteer work, etc.
- **Personals:** Name person placing ad; and date and time of events.
- **School News:** Names of students and teachers; date and location of events; names of those winning awards including academic and sports; information on college attendance or occupations after school is completed.
- **Shipping News:** Names of ships and expected arrivals dates/locations; names and point of origin or hometown of passengers.



## Newspaper Research: Tips and Tricks

- **“Back search” news clippings.** How many times have you encountered an obituary or news clipping mounted on an index card . . . with no date or newspaper name? Take a phrase from the text and enter it into **Google** or another search engine. You may find that the newspaper has been digitized.
- **Don’t rely on OCR and indexing.** Keep in mind that the OCR process used to convert scanned images to searchable text is not foolproof. In fact there can be a 20% margin of error! Make sure you browse the images and use a variety of name variations and search strategies.
- **Look for “\_\_\_\_ Years Ago” listings.** While you may not locate a birth or wedding anniversary announcement, that event may be summarized on an anniversary date. Weddings are often mentioned in a “25 Years Ago This Week” section or similar listing. The same for births and other important local events.
- **Cycle on and off subscription sites.** If it is not economically feasible for you to purchase a one-year subscription to one of the pay sites for historical newspapers, then purchase a short term subscription. Make sure you’ve disabled the auto-renew feature AND read the site’s Terms of Service page to understand how you can avoid being billed beyond the desired term.
- **Understand the “historical vocabulary.”** This means know how modern-day terms were described in the period in which you are searching. A medical term such a *tuberculosis* might appear as *consumption*. Prior to World War II there was no *World War I* . . . it was often called *The Great War*. A name might be abbreviated . . . *Chas.* for *Charles*.
- **Not all newspapers are on-line.** Local libraries and historical societies may have bound volumes available for historical newspapers. In addition, many newspapers are still available only on microfilm or microfiche.
- **Take name changes into account.** Towns and cities did change their names from time to time. Street names were also changed. In addition, some towns and cities had their grid “renumbered” so that a modern day street address might be very different than that same address in 1910 or another year.
- **Understand a newspaper’s “layout formula.”** Especially when working with microfilm or bound volumes, browsing and visually searching can seem like a difficult task. When starting, look at a typical issue and you’ll realize that Local News usually appears on Page \_\_\_\_\_. The same goes for Classified Ads and Legal Notices. Once you understand the layout, finding what you need is easier.
- **Don’t forget “point of origin” newspapers.** When ancestors migrated to a new location, very often they wrote a letter to the local newspaper updating residents as to their journey and progress.