

# A FRESH LIGHT ON OLD NEWSPAPERS

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Genealogists should consider newspapers to be an essential part of their research strategy. Newspapers provide information available in no other source. They might provide the context to help you place your ancestors within the history of a region or of an era, and could hold the details that will help you gain a better understanding of your ancestors.

And that's just a start. Consider that genealogical research is much like journalism: We collect information from a variety of sources, then put it into a format so it all makes sense to others. Every pitfall in journalism – missing the point, leaping to assumptions, failing to tell a story objectively – can also apply to genealogical work.

Digitization projects have made old newspapers more accessible than ever before. We do not have to go to a library and look at microfilmed newspapers, searching every column for items of interest. We can simply use the search functions on newspaper websites.

A newspaper might contain information about births, deaths and marriages in your family. It could have references to land transactions, business openings and new jobs. It could include stories on school graduations and university degrees, as well as news from local churches. It might have lists of people compiled for a wide variety of reasons, including school graduations and charity fundraising. All of these things are key to genealogical research, and that leads to a simple fact:

**No source more closely matches the goals of a genealogist than the local newspaper.**

Let's try to ensure that their work contains the five Ws:

- **Who.** Who were your ancestors? Give details of their lives. Who did they deal with? Which non-relatives had an influence on your family? A newspaper can help you to find out.

- **What.** What did they do? What were the factors you should consider as you do research? Check the newspaper for trends, major developments in the community, and so on.

- **When.** You should determine the key dates in your family history, and that includes noting which events were important in the day-to-day lives of your ancestors. The newspaper will help you track which events might have had the greatest impact on your ancestors.

- **Where.** Geography is vital to genealogical research. It can be difficult today to understand the interaction of communities a few generations ago – but newspapers published at the time might have answers for you. They might include references to the development of roads, railroads and shipping routes, as examples.

• **Why.** Try to determine the reasons why your family members did what they did. (Be careful that you do not make too many assumptions here – and also, do not be discouraged if you have trouble answering the “why” questions. Newspapers often miss those answers, too.

Newspapers offer a huge amount of information to genealogists – and there is much more beyond the basics of births, deaths and marriages. Newspapers could fill in gaps or correct errors in official records, confirm details, provide information available from no other source, or simply add color and personality to family histories.

For example, a newspaper account might provide information about a person’s relatives, or their birthplace. A newspaper might indicate why someone does not appear in the census for that year – for example, the social page might say that he or she is out of town. A newspaper might provide a census equivalent in a non-census year. It’s even possible to determine if two people in the same town might have known each other; were they mentioned in the same story?

If you are trying to determine why a family left one community for another, check the newspapers to find out about major economic changes. If one town is in decline and another is booming, a move would have made sense.

Newspapers can help you fill in gaps in other records, confirm other records, and complement other records. They might help you get past brick walls, because when other sources lack crucial details, a curious newspaper reporter might have thought to ask the question.

### **How to find newspapers:**

No, one website will not fill all of your needs! Different sites have different newspapers, so the first thing to do is determine your areas of interest, and the time frame. Then, look for the names of the newspapers published in that community. Are they on any of the major websites? If not, have they been digitized in local projects? If they are not on the internet, you might need to look for microfilmed copies, or even bound volumes in a library.

*Key newspaper sites include:*

[Newspapers.com](http://Newspapers.com)

[Newspaperarchive.com](http://Newspaperarchive.com)

[Genealogybank.com](http://Genealogybank.com)

[Elephind.com](http://Elephind.com)

[ChroniclingAmerica.loc.gov](http://ChroniclingAmerica.loc.gov) (check the newspaper directory as well)

[Fultonsearch.org](http://Fultonsearch.org) (47 million pages from New York State, courtesy Tom Tryniski)

[Trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/](http://Trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/) (Australian newspapers)

[Britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk](http://Britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk)

Check local universities and colleges for digitized newspapers not otherwise available

*To find titles:*

[Theancestorhunt.com/newspapers.html](http://Theancestorhunt.com/newspapers.html) (courtesy Kenneth Marks)

[Cangenealogy.com](http://Cangenealogy.com) (for Canadian titles)

Most newspapers have websites with recent material. These might help you keep track of developments in the local historical community, deaths of distant relatives, and so on. However, do not expect newspaper offices to be of much help. Their business is to produce the next day's newspaper, not to provide access to their files from a century ago. An ad in the local newspaper, however, might help to put you in touch with relatives still in the area.

If you have to use microfilm, watch for the regular positioning of features. Newspapers often had local news on the same pages every day. Obituaries might always be on page two, or at the start of the classifieds. Once you see a pattern you will probably be able to save time as you scroll through the pages.

Also, check with a local library or archives to find out if the newspaper has been indexed. That could save you many hours. Many genealogical societies have indexed vital events. Some newspapers have not been placed online, and have not been microfilmed. To see those newspapers, you will need to find original copies – often in bound volumes in local libraries.

No matter which source you use, when you copy material from a newspaper, note the page number, publication name, place of publication, and date. It is always important to make note of your sources!

### **About digitization:**

Digitization projects have put many more old newspapers within our reach. Many of these newspapers are fully searchable, which means you can zero in on text in a matter of seconds. Once it would have taken days to find a dozen references; now you can find many more within just a few minutes.

But wait! Digitization is not the last word. Optical character recognition is not perfect. Consider that a document in 12-point Times New Roman – the body text on this page – and printed in black letters on a white page using a laser printer, and then scanned and OCR'd, will have an accuracy rate of about 98 per cent. Two out of every 100 characters will be misread.

If you try searching the OCR text file, you might not find what you are looking for. Also, the longer your search term, the more likely you will not find what you are looking for, since you are increasing the odds of capturing an error.

Now consider a database that was built on OCR'd text from an old microfilmed newspaper. The quality of the raw material will not be as good as you would get from a modern printer, so the error rate will be much higher. You might get what you are looking for with a single search, but you should try searching for different terms. You should attack the database in a variety of ways.

This is not to discourage the use of digitized newspapers. We should certainly use them, because they have made available information that would otherwise be forgotten. We just need to take care in our research.

### **A sample bit of text from britishcolonist.ca:**

he . "ftt in opposition. He did not contest the scat in 1882, but In 1886 was again elected and in 1887 on the death of the Hon. Mr. Smytho he accepted the portfolio of lands and works in the govtjjrnment of the Hon. A. E. B. Davie. .In 1830. he was again returned by hla constituents and was jslvi^n the portfolio of lands and works In the government of the Hon. John Robson. He continued to hold this office under the leadership of the Hon. Theodore DftVle until 1894. From the latter year until ! 1899 he resided In London as Agent General for the province. On relln-aulshng that post, having also retired from political life, he disposed of his large holdings in the interior and settled down In, Vict<)tla Jnvesting largely in real estate both hero and on the mainland.

So, which search terms would work?

### **Some points to remember:**

- Small weekly newspapers are more likely to have information on individual families in the community. Large dailies will have more national and international news, but are less likely to note that a local person went to visit his mother in Ireland.

- Newspapers did not cover everything – and that is bad news for genealogical researchers today. Men were given more prominence than women, and white English-speakers were more likely to have made the newspaper. You'll have more luck if your ancestors were active in business or local politics – or in crime, for that matter.

- Always watch for lists of people. In late June or early July, for example, look for a list of school students who have been promoted to the next grade. This can help you guess ages and compile possible family groupings.

### **For more information and ideas:**

The Family Tree Historical Newspapers Guide: How to Find Your Ancestors in Archived Newspapers, by James M. Beidler.

Historical Research Using British Newspapers, by Denise Bates.

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