

Tips for Researching Historical Newspapers Online



By



Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Contents..... | 2 |
| Introduction | 3 |
| How to Mentally Prepare | 4 |
| What Should You Know?..... | 5 |
| Why Search Newspapers in the First Place?..... | 6 |
| Where to Search | 9 |
| How to Choose a Subscription Site | 10 |
| How to Search..... | 12 |
| How to Outsmart OCR and Other Tricks | 13 |
| Change Letters and Deliberately Misspell | 13 |
| Take Advantage of Hyphens | 14 |
| Mr. and Mrs..... | 16 |
| Browse and Jump | 16 |
| Search Using Abbreviations | 16 |
| Include Key Words in Your Search Criteria | 16 |
| Things to Remember - Mistakes to Avoid..... | 17 |
| Saving Newspaper Images | 19 |
| Summary | 20 |

Introduction

I have been researching old historic newspapers for a very long time. I will say that it has by far been the most satisfying and fun genealogy and family history research.

Where else would I have found out about murder attempts and state fair awards?
Where else would I have found out about a track star or president of a synagogue?
Where else would I have found sisters and brothers that were never mentioned in a census record, but were named in an obituary?

You see, my relatives either didn't know these stories or did not share them. So the stories of my ancestors were not dead, just waiting to be found ... in newspapers.

For those of you who are just starting to use online historic newspapers as a research tool, the most important thing to do is:

Read, get smart, and then start your research.

It is far too easy to go to Chronicling America or another rich database of old newspapers and start typing in surnames in a search box. You may get some good results, but I **guarantee** you that you will miss lots of articles and in your haste to get started you may not remember to go back and check all the sites that you were in a hurry to try. Therefore you will miss interesting stories and articles about your ancestors that are critical to your family history research. That is a **fact**.

This guide is all about how to optimize your results. Please read and enjoy.

How to Mentally Prepare

Let's discuss a couple of things that if you take the time to read them, will enhance your online search experience:

- All online newspaper websites are not created equal. Some are easy to use and others are not so easy. You will get frustrated at some and enjoy others more. Be aware of this ahead of time.
- There will be lots of instances where you swear that an article should exist but it doesn't and you can't find it.
- It is important to know the dates of newspapers that are available in an online database before you start searching. If you are looking for articles in the Sacramento Bee for the year 1892 and the database that you are searching has newspaper pages available from 1895 through 1922, you are wasting your time if 1892 and only 1892 is your target. It seems simple but it is easy to forget to check dates first.
- Plan your research and research your plan. I am a believer in stream of consciousness type research or ad hoc researching, but it should not be the main course of your research "meal." Think about what you are searching for before you start. And a written plan is not a bad idea.

So your attitude must be in the right place. This is rewarding research if you mentally prepare, have a plan and believe in having fun.

What Should You Know?

A very important thing to know is about scanning and Optical Character Recognition (OCR). Newspapers are printed on paper (and not very high quality paper). Paper does not hold up well over time and can yellow, get brittle etc. If the online database scans directly from paper it can be an issue because of aging and condition. Also ink spots, folds and creases do appear and they can disrupt the accuracy of the digitization and recognition process.

Many newspapers have been scanned in the past to microfilm. Great! When the online database tries to digitize the microfilm, a scan of the microfilm has to be performed. But then again, maybe the microfilm is a copy of a previous microfilm reel or a copy of a copy. Now we are dealing with at least second and often third or fourth generation copies when the OCR process is applied.

The OCR process is simply a way to convert the text on the newspaper to digital form. So if your ancestors' name is "Washington", and the article includes that word, one would hope that the OCR process will convert all those dots that make up the letters of the word "Washington" to the same letters in the digitized database. And therein lies the challenge. The resulting database content depends on the quality of the scanned image that is "fed" to the OCR software, as well as the capability of the software itself. I guarantee you that the intended word "Washington" will show up in the database in some instances as "Washingtom" or Wa5h1ngt0n" or maybe even "W&)*^q#om*". The last example is no joke.

This is what you are faced with. You will need to have patience.

Why Search Newspapers in the First Place?

Good question! Here is a simple list of the kind of information about your ancestors that can be found in articles in newspapers:

- **Advertisements** - many residents were quoted as having been cured by a variety of "interesting" remedies (my great grandfather was one).
- **Anniversary celebrations** - 25 and 50 year anniversaries were often rewarded with an article announcing the accomplishment, as well as a recounting of the celebration party and the attendees.
- **Birth announcements** - although the child is rarely named - his or her parents are and that can be helpful, especially if a child only lived a few years and you have the death announcement; the child may be one of many children in the family, and you are trying to sort out which dates belong to whom.
- **Church articles** - welcome articles naming new church members or invitations to special services or events.
- **City and county government meetings** - minutes of these meetings are published and names are mentioned of the officers as well as those who have conducted business during the meeting. If your ancestor had a claim due from the government entity for work performed, these lists are also available.
- **Classified ads** - often you can find your ancestors names in the "want ads" as either selling something or if they were a business owner - trying to hire a new employee.
- **Death notices and obituaries** - obvious help to researchers to name children, siblings, "native of" information, etc.
- **Divorce proceedings** - lists of couples who were in the various stages of divorce are often listed in the Vital Statistics section.
- **Engagement announcements** - often an announcement of an upcoming wedding would be found in the society page and many times a photo of the bride-to-be.
- **Land applications and sales** - generally found in the legal section, these might include notices from the Department of Interior.

- **Legal Notices** - did your ancestors get divorced or sell or transfer a business? These are often found in legal notices, including bankruptcy notifications or other legal matters, and wills and estates.
- **Letters to the editor** - was your ancestor outspoken? Did they often write a letter to the editor of the paper that was published?
- **Local crime** - in addition to articles about the more serious or "colorful" crimes, there often are listings of more petty crimes, such as burglaries or home/business break-ins.
- **Lodges and clubs** - announcements of new members, or officer lists as well as upcoming meeting schedules are often published.
- **Mail** - list of unclaimed mail can often be found in smaller town newspapers. Useful to determine if your ancestor had moved away.
- **Marriage licenses and announcements** - when a license is issued, usually the names and addresses of the couple are mentioned. Also when the wedding occurs, often the event is listed as well, but not always. And of course there may be a detailed article about the wedding with a citing of many of the attendees.
- **Military articles** - did your ancestor join the military and go to war? Often there are articles about them, as well as where they were stationed and promotions they may have received.
- **Missing persons** - since in the 19th century telephones were certainly not abundant, stories about missing persons were often written.
- **Out of area travelers** - many older newspapers welcomed temporary residents with their names in the paper, listing the hotels they were staying in, their permanent residence (city), as well as the families they were visiting.
- **Parties** - in smaller towns and even larger cities, the society pages listed attendees at parties of all kinds.
- **Personal notices** - illnesses, visitors, and celebrations of all kinds are often mentioned in the Society section.
- **Political cartoons** - in the 19th century, photographs were rarely included in newspapers - so drawings of the likenesses of people were included, especially for politicians. I have several of these for one of my ancestors who was a State Senator.
- **Politics** - in older newspapers, precinct captains and precinct workers were named; several of my own ancestors participated in helping people vote.

- **Professional directory** - was your ancestor a doctor, lawyer, nurse, contractor, or embalmer? They might be found in these directories which are frequently published.
- **Real estate transactions and transfers** - did your ancestor transfer real estate to another family member or buy/sell a property?
- **School graduations** - lists of graduates are often listed for as early as elementary school through high school and college.
- **School news** - lists of honor roll members and other school events.
- **Sports** - if an ancestor was an athlete of any kind - possibly he would be cited in a baseball box score for college, high school or a local semi-pro team; or in an article regarding many other sports.
- **State or county fair winners** - did your ancestor enter food, livestock, plants or crafts at the fair? Lists of winners and their submittals and awards are listed.
- **Taxes owed** - often lists of taxes owed to the city or county are listed. It is surprising to find an ancestor owing 3 dollars to the county for taxes.
- **Theater and television** - lists of actors and actresses in vaudeville, and other theater as well as early television are often mentioned in articles
- **Union activities** - lists of trade union officers are often mentioned as well as their activities and scheduled meetings.
- **Vacations** - before the advent of air conditioning in warmer climates, folks would travel to resorts, springs, and other spots and the names of the travelers were often listed.

And there are much more than these types of articles.

Where to Search

You literally have hundreds of choices as to where to search online. This document will not list all the sites, as the minute this is published, the URLs will change or additional newspapers will magically become available on a new site. Thus any published list is out of date quickly.

But what criteria should you use?

There are three types of online sites - free, subscription, and library/archive. The first two are obvious. The third requires that you have a library card at a library that has subscriptions available that they have paid for. Some offer remote access and others require that you physically be at the library or archive.

Once you have determined the type of site - how do you decide if the site might bear fruit for you? Here are some criteria to use:

- Select a site that has a collection for where your target ancestor resided. Then do your search. There are hundreds of county, state and province based collections that may provide with you with newspapers that are not in the big collections. If you don't know which newspapers are available for your desired location, you can always use this [Library of Congress](#) database for American newspapers. It also shows where offline newspapers might be located in archives, libraries and other institutions.
- Check the dates of the newspapers that are available in their collection. Don't bother searching if the location is right but the dates don't fit and vice versa.
- There are specialty collections as well. For example African-American newspapers, Jewish newspapers, student newspapers, union newspapers, and even farming newspapers.

How to Choose a Subscription Site

There are a few subscription historic newspaper sites, such as Newspapers.com, Newspaper Archive, Genealogy Bank and British News Archive. How do you choose which ones to subscribe to? A lot of articles can be found in free collections, but their content is different than what is available from the pay sites. Here are a few criteria to consider:

- **Collections Available** - just as in Real Estate where the motto is "Location, location, location" - the motto for subscription newspaper research sites is "Database, database, database." I get asked all the time if someone should purchase a subscription to site A. I always ask them first - for the states, cities or areas that they are researching, as well as the dates that their ancestors lived there, does the site have a collection of newspapers available? All sites have a list of what newspapers and dates are in their collections. Check those out before you buy.
- **Price and Billing Practices** - some of the aforementioned sites are 4 times as expensive as others. Some have a monthly plan, some only bill annually. Some auto-renew and some do not. If you purchase a subscription it is incumbent on you to read the terms of the subscription as well as the fine print. As always with any purchase online - it is buyer-be AWARE.
- **Scan and OCR Quality** - the index that the site has created is only as good as the quality of the original scan and the OCR software that they use to build the index. Were the newspapers scanned from originals or from microfilm, or from copies of microfilm? Some of the collections that I have seen have an extremely poor quality image displayed after selecting a search result. This indicates to me that the original image that they applied the OCR process to was degraded and hence the index certainly will suffer. In other words - your ancestor is mentioned but the scan was so lousy that the OCR process could not build an acceptable index entry with the correct spelling of the name.

- **User Interface and Searching Features** - sites have different user interfaces; some are simple and easy to use; and, some have richer capabilities and features. I always like to try the "Advanced Search" features because that generally indicates the total breadth of capability. And one *must* read the Help documentation for each of these sites. Generally they will explain which type of search criteria can be entered, for example Boolean and proximity searches. Quite honestly I have heard many subscribers complain about not finding anything when they haven't even tried to learn all the search capabilities available to them.

Subscription collections can be a gold mine and if you are strapped financially, many of them have a short term free trial or other methods to access their collections inexpensively.

How to Search

The most obvious search criteria are the name of the ancestor or just the surname if you are looking for more than one from the family. Most sites have a simple search and an advanced search capability.

I always advise that you use the **Advanced Search** capability of these sites. This will allow you to hone in on a person's full name or the specific locations where they might have lived. Some of the Advanced Search features allow you to search for *any* of the words, *all* of the words, an **exact phrase**, or even a proximity search, which searches for Word A within say 5 words of Word B in the text. You can also narrow the results to a specific date range.

Some alternative search ideas are:

- **Search for an address** - if you know the address of an ancestor, search for it. A lot of times newspapers would include the residence of someone, so that may be a good place to try.
- **Search for a business name** - if your ancestor owned a business, you might be able to retrieve interesting articles by searching for that name.
- **Search for a lodge or club** - if your ancestor belonged to or was an officer in a club or lodge or other group - search for that name.
- **Search for an occupation** - if your ancestor had a unique occupation, try searching for that.
- **Search for the name of a sports team or school** - often your ancestor may show up in a box score or in a list of graduates.
- **Search for the name of a military unit** - if they were in the military, often the complete unit name is included in an article.
- **Search for a hobby or avocation** - did Aunt Mary win ribbons at the state fair? Or did Uncle Joe collect coins?

How to Outsmart OCR and Other Tricks

You are dependent on the quality of the scan and the OCR process - there is no way around that. As I have mentioned previously, the results will sometimes be great, good or lousy. Here are some examples why:

- **Quality of the original material** - was the newspaper old and brittle when scanned? Was it yellowed? Did it have dirt on it or lots of ink spots?
- **Quality of the scan** - Was the scan performed to create the digital image and the index from the original paper, or from a microfilm of the paper, or worse a copy of the microfilm? Every additional copy or scan degrades the resulting image and when the OCR process is applied the index suffers.
- **Quality of the OCR software** - some are better than others
- **Quality of the writing in the original newspaper** - did the author get your ancestor's name spelled correctly?
- **Quality of the typesetter** - did the typesetter get every word from the author set up correctly?

But you can use a number of methods to find more articles about your ancestors. Try some of these:

Change Letters and Deliberately Misspell

An example - if the surname you are searching for is "Wilson" and the letter "n" is often picked up as the letter "m" why not search for "Wilsom"?

I guarantee that changing your search criteria will lead to an improvement of at least 5 to 10% in search results. I heard from one reader that changing word pairs got them a 20% improvement.

So what word pairs are often confused?

- rn and m (ar n and em)
- h and b
- Capital D and O
- i, l, 1, /, !, and I are all often interchanged
- 0 and O

- c and e
- r and n
- [,] and l (el)
- nl and m (en el and em)
- Capital R and B
- n and ri (en and ar eye)
- v and y
- Capital S and 8
- Capital S and 5
- Capital Z and 2
- Capital G and 6
- Capital B and 8
- Capital K and |<

Remember that the writer of the article or the typesetter may have misspelled the name or other words in the article that you may wish to search for. This may be especially true for surnames that have several alternate spellings - such as Peterson and Petersen. Thus it is a good idea to search for different variations of words.

Take Advantage of Hyphens

Another "feature" of older newspapers is the use of the hyphen. Hyphenated words were often used because of fixed width type as well as the experience and capability of the typesetter. Hyphens are less utilized today but were heavily used years ago.

The bottom line is that if you search for a portion of your ancestor's surname, rather than the entire word, you may get additional results. For example, if your ancestor's name was "Jorgenson" try searching for "Jorgen." The typesetter may have split the word so that at the end of one line are the letters "Jorgen-" with the hyphen, and the next line may start with "son".

This creates some additional challenges, just like "Williamson" may be split up as "William" and "son". The first set of letters ends up being a very common set of letters so your results may be too numerous to be of much help.

Here are a few examples that show the different uses of the hyphen. And always consider that the "break" may not always be in the most logical place in the word.

An unidentified man stepped in front of a moving car at the corner of East First and Los Angeles streets yesterday afternoon, and was knocked to the ground, sustaining a deep three-inch laceration of the scalp, with possibly a fracture of the skull.

The man was under the influence of liquor at the time, say witnesses to the accident, who reported that he left a saloon a moment before he was struck by the car and attempted to cross the tracks, unmindful of the approaching car. Inmates of the saloon say that his name is believed to be William Patterson, but no one who knew him could be found.

A call was sent to the receiving hos-

In this case you could search for "Patter" when your target name was "Patterson"

At Hotel Hollywood Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Letts gave a large dinner party last evening. Christmas bells and red satin ribbon were arranged in canopy effect over the table and holly and ferns decorated the table. Covers were laid for Mr. and Mrs. Harry Philp, Mr. and Mrs. C. B. Weaver, Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Aldritt, Rev. and Mrs. A. Hardie, Mrs. Richard Letts, Misses Ethel Hardie, Ada, Edna and Gladys Letts, Lila and Dorothy Weaver, Dr. W. S. Philp, Masters Harland Weaver, Cyril Aldrit and Arthur Letts, jr.

Even a short word like "Hardie" is split up in this example, so you would search for "Har". This may lead to too many results but is worth a try.

WASHINGTON, Dec. 25.—Because of the prisoner's previous good military record the president has issued a pardon in the case of Paul H. McDonald, formerly first lieutenant of the Tenth infantry. He was convicted about a year ago on the charge of obtaining money under false pretenses and sentenced to be dismissed from the army and to serve two years in the military prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kas.

Be open-minded about where the split may occur. In this case I wouldn't think that the name would be split this way, but searching for "McDon" may lead to many more results.

Don't give up! Hyphens may give you additional opportunities and additional searches. You will indeed find more articles this way.

Mr. and Mrs.

This one is not really about scanning, but is more of a cultural challenge. Until the last few decades, women were not referred to by their maiden or given name in newspaper publications. For example, a woman, after she was married, would be cited in newspaper articles as Mrs. Joseph B. Doe, or Mrs. J. B. Doe, not Mildred Doe. So, looking for "Mildred Doe" with the exception of her obituary - likely would have led to zero results.

Browse and Jump

When browsing, Jump to specific pages in the same newspaper title. For example, if obituaries are usually published on Page 15 and you know a person's death date, jump to page 15 for that date and several days following. Often the index may not produce the result that you want so intelligent browsing will produce results.

Search Using Abbreviations

Try abbreviations for names, such as "Wm" for William, or "Jno" for John, or "Jos" for Joseph, and "Robt" for Robert, just to name a few. Here is a link for a terrific list from [Genealogy In Time](#).

Include Key Words in Your Search Criteria

Looking for an obituary? Try adding the word "beloved" or "dear" to your search criteria in addition to the name. Those words are in many if not most obituaries. Or the word "brother" or "sister" or "wife" or husband."

Looking for a birth announcement? Try adding the words "Born to" or "Born to the wife of" to the surname of the father in your search box.

Things to Remember - Mistakes to Avoid

When researching old newspapers, there are many things that you need to know and many mistakes that can be made when drawing conclusions about the articles you find, or downloading images, etc. Here are many that you need to keep in mind:

- Always write down the title of the newspaper, the date of publication and the page number where you found the article - **when** you find the article. You don't want to have to do another search in the future to find out where you found it.
- Sometimes the final resting place is not accurate in the obituary. Maybe the family changed their minds or maybe the cemetery closed and all the graves were moved to another cemetery.
- If the online site you are using gives you the opportunity to correct scanning and OCR errors - please do so if you find an error (and there are many!) Pay it forward.
- Divorces Filed and Interlocutory Decrees are **not** Divorces. Only Divorces Granted count.
- Issuance of a license is **not** a marriage. Maybe the wedding didn't take place or wasn't recorded. But the "Marriage Licenses Issued" section in the Vital Statistics part of the paper is not proof that a wedding occurred.
- Thought must go into saving the articles that you find online. Is the image large enough? Is it readable later? Are there options with the online site to download the image in different formats? Think ahead so you don't have to do the search again at a later date.
- I would not limit your search for newspaper titles to just the city of residence. Span out a bit and include the newspaper for the county seat. There is likely to be different types of information published in the newspapers for that likely larger populated area.

- If your target lived near the state border, check out neighboring state newspapers. For example, if they lived in Council Bluffs, Iowa, check out the Omaha, Nebraska papers. Or if they lived in Camden, New Jersey, try the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania newspapers.
- Unique human interest articles were copied all over the country and world. One of my ancestors was given Geronimo's knife in the 1880's in California and the article was published in papers in Pennsylvania, Virginia, Indiana and London, England as a human interest story. So take that into consideration.
- Don't just search for articles for the dates that the ancestor was alive. Often, newspapers had a column that featured stories from 10 years ago, 25 years ago, etc. and your ancestor might be mentioned in that column. Furthermore, if your ancestor was well known in the community, he or she might be referred to in an article a few years after his death. This is tricky if your ancestor has a common name and date ranges are important to narrowing the number of search results.
- When searching for obituaries, include a couple of weeks after the death of the ancestor. Many times the obituary publication was delayed, but more importantly, some obituaries were changed after their original publication because of errors, modifications, or additions. So, don't just stop searching after you have found the first one.
- Regarding obituaries, don't just limit your search to the location of the ancestor's death. Many times the obituary is copied (and possibly altered) in newspapers in the area where your ancestor had lived previously.

Saving Newspaper Images

When you find an interesting article, chances are that you will want to save it somewhere, most likely on your computer. However there are several considerations that you need to keep in mind:

- First and foremost - is it allowed? Is it under copyright? Does the collection "own" the image" and restrict its use? You need to review the terms of use for every collection. Most will allow you to download for your personal use, but some restrict even that. If you want to post the clipping on a blog there may be further restrictions.
- If the software allows, you can download a pdf of the page that contains your desired article. I always find this to be the safest, because I can clip or manipulate the article later (and the heading on most newspaper pages has the title, date and page number for source citing).
- If the software allows, you can download a .jpg of the page that contains your desired article.
- You can use a software snipping tool such as the Windows "Snipping Tool" or some commercial offerings, such as SnagIt, Shutter, Jing, etc. There are many of these tools available.
- The newspaper library software will snip the article for you and present it as a "whole" article.
- The newspaper library software will snip the article for you and present it in several pieces that comprise the entire article, such as the headline, and each paragraph as an independent .jpg file

The concern with all of these methods is "How do you end up with a complete article that is large enough to read or is zoomable?"

So think about what you are doing at the time you are saving so that you don't have to go back later and perform another search just to see the article again.

Summary

Searching old newspapers for ancestor articles can be great fun and incredibly rewarding. It is easier searching online, but of course all newspapers are not available online. Keep that in mind as you do your research.

You can succeed at this, especially if you prepare yourself, learn a few tricks and search SMART.

Please visit [The Ancestor Hunt](#), my website dedicated to sharing tips and techniques for finding one's family history and ancestor stories. And, oh by the way, it has a page that lists free links to online historical newspaper collection sites for the U.S. and Canada - and the current number of sites listed exceeds 33,000!