Using Newspapers in Genealogical Research

Therese A. Fisher
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Therese Fisher, AG®

As we work on locating ancestors and try to put a face and personality to the bare bones details of our research, a wonderful source of stories and facts is in the pages of newspapers.

Scanning a newspaper today will give you an idea of what can be located in the earlier papers, published at the time of significant events in our ancestors’ lives.

Obituaries are an incredible source of information about family relationships and the social relationships that were significant to the deceased. While earlier obituaries vary somewhat from those of today, they still provide a window into the past.

The earliest obituaries were minimal for the information they supplied on the deceased as well as his/her family. Unless the person was noteworthy, it often consists of the person’s name, date, and place of death. While that is not much by today’s standards, in the years before death certificates that can be a jackpot. Victorian era obituaries tend to be more verbose and elaborate on either the details of the deceased’s life or personality. That carried over, to a degree, into the early twentieth century. An important fact to keep in mind while searching for an ancestor’s obituary is that not everyone had an obituary in the paper. A person more likely to have an obituary was either prominent in the community, had money, died in an unusual manner, or a person/family that resided in the community for several generations. Poor or average people were not likely to be in earlier obituaries unless they met a violent end. In those cases, it is more likely that they would be in a newspaper story as opposed to an obituary. Even today, usually in larger cities, families pay to have an obituary put into the newspaper.

Death notices are slightly different from obituaries. A death notice resembles the very earliest obituaries in that it usually gives just the name and death date of the deceased and the funeral home who was handling the arrangements.

Marriage announcements made newspapers as early as the late 1700’s. The typical marriage notice was short and stated such things as the names of the parties getting married, the minister’s name, and date of the marriage and, sometimes, the parent of the bride or groom. As with obituaries, not every marriage received the paper's attention, although there were more marriage notices for the average person than obituaries.

Advertisements are an often overlooked but enriching source of details of our ancestors. Hat makers, doctors, booksellers, music teachers and dry goods merchants are just a sample of who might place an advertisement in the newspaper. You can also find ads for runaway slaves and apprentices, houses for sale or rent, property foreclosures and some very entertaining ads for cures. A reader could become so entertained in reading the advertisements that the reader could forget what they were actually searching for (this is from personal experience).

Classified ads eventually included some of the advertisements mentioned above as well as requests for job applicants, notices of non-responsibility for debts and household goods for sale.

News stories, the heart of a newspaper, include stories about the people who lived and worked in the area as well as stories of national interest. A wonderful way to learn how the people in a community felt about a war, a new law or an event of local interest, is to read the local coverage of the event and observe the tone of the article as well as related articles in later issues. While a newspaper will not reflect 100 percent of the views of the local people, it should reflect a general attitude that can help put the event into the perspective of time and place.

The Dead Letter files from local newspapers are a wonderful way to zero in on a death date or a date of immigration. A letter was an important link to family. Unless the recipient was unable to pick it up, owners asserted claims. Scanning the lists of dead
letters can often give clues about when an ancestor left the area either in a wagon or in a coffin.

Personal ads were also a part of 19th century newspapers. The better-known ads in the Boston newspapers of Irish family and friends trying to locate either new immigrants or family members in the area are not the only personal ads in newspapers. Some of the best ones, however, are in ethnic newspapers, such as German community newspapers. Unfortunately, those newspapers are frequently in the native tongue of its readers.

As you can see, a trip to the Library of Congress, state archives or historical society, or a good local college library can be well worth the time spent in locating fascinating details and information about our ancestors. Many newspapers have been microfilmed and are available through interlibrary loan.