

# “READ ALL ABOUT IT!” Old Newspapers Online

DAVID A. NORRIS SHOWS THAT YESTERDAY’S NEWS IS TODAY’S GENEALOGY

DEEDS, WILLS, ESTATE inventories and military records give the bare outlines of the lives of our ancestors, but newspapers offer a much richer picture of the worlds they lived in and everyday life. While microfilmed newspapers are a valuable treasure, searching them is a mind-numbing and eye-blurring ordeal. And, you have to travel to a library that has the reels you need.

Thank goodness for the Internet, because now many vintage newspapers are available online, and they’re searchable by word. Although not yet completely foolproof (a search for one of my ancestors named *Henessa* turned up *Kennesaw Mountain*), the text scanning technology of today is remarkable, bringing you search results in seconds that could previously have taken months of combing through microfilm reels.

## EARLY NEWSPAPERS

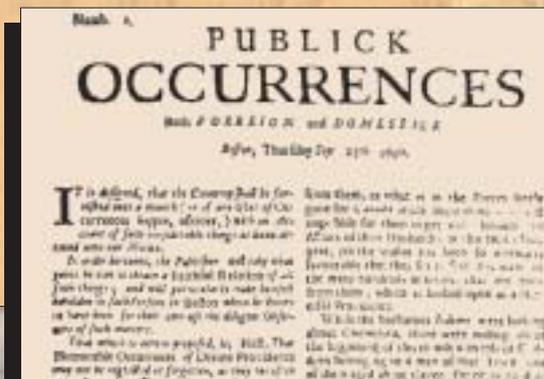
England’s first newspapers were printed in the 1600s. They were heavily restricted by the Crown, lest journalists publish news or opinions critical of the government. The first newspaper published in the US was called *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*. Started without permission from the royal governor, it ran in Boston, Massachusetts for exactly one issue before being shut down in 1690. The next newspaper in the colonies, *The Boston News-Letter*, began in 1704. By 1775, 37 newspapers were published in the Thirteen Colonies, including three in Pennsylvania, printed in German. Many were called the *Gazette*, lending them the

prestige of the *London Gazette*, the official newspaper of the British government. Historian Lawrence C. Wroth counted 1,934 different newspapers that were published in the US between the earliest colonial papers and 1820.

Early American newspapers were, generally speaking, weekly periodicals, printed front and back on a single sheet folded in half to make four pages. Most of the space was filled with paid advertisements and official government

genealogist and historian. Perhaps many a small-town editor figured that if something happened in town, everyone would already know about it.

Pictures could be printed only by laborious woodcut or metal engraving techniques. Illustrations were therefore rare,



**Among the treasures offered by Newsbank's Early American Newspapers is the first US newspaper, Boston's Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick; it ran for just one issue in 1690.**

other than very small decorative flourishes or stock advertising subjects such as ships, houses, and horses.

Average circulation is difficult to determine, but most 18th- and early 19th-century newspapers would probably only print a few hundred copies per issue. Copies were shared among friends and relatives, or in public places like taverns, until they fell apart.

As the 19th century progressed, the newspaper industry exploded with the growth of the US and the increase in literacy rates. In 1861, about 2,500 different newspapers were being published in the US, including 373

announcements. So much of the rest was political diatribe or amateur literary efforts, that there was little room for local news, which is, of course, what interests the genealogist and local historian of today. Most news was copied from newspapers from England, or other colonies, often after weeks or months in transit. Other out-of-town news came from letters written to the editor, or excerpts from personal letters sent to local merchants or others who loaned them to the editor for copying. The lack of local news will frustrate the modern

### Obituaries are rich sources of lost genealogical information.

dailies. Although newspapers were still sharply political, more real “news” found its way into their columns. Larger newspapers, especially those based in New York or other major cities, now employed reporters to write a wider variety of stories. Improved postal service, steam-powered travel and the telegraph carried news more swiftly than in the days of post riders and coaches.

Shortly before the Civil War, pictorial weeklies, such as *The Illustrated London News* and *Harper's Weekly*, developed techniques that made elaborate

woodcut illustrations economical. Printing photographic reproductions became feasible for newspapers and magazines in the 1880s, but did not completely crowd out hand-made woodcuts until after the turn of the century. Well into the 1900s, though, photos, especially pictures of local events and scenes, were rarer in newspapers than they are today.

Now that you have an idea of the limitations of vintage newspapers at different time periods, what might you expect to find? Prominent people, of course, figured more in the news, but just about anyone could get their name in print — particularly in a small town newspaper with lots of column inches to fill. Military service, politics, business ads, real estate sales, letters to the editor, signed petitions, school graduations, holiday celebrations and legal squabbles were among the many things that gave an editor something to write about.

#### ADVERTISEMENTS

Since all papers, especially the earlier ones, are packed with advertisements, use that to your advantage by searching them.

Some online historic newspaper providers offer the option of including or excluding advertisements in your searches. Eliminating ads cuts back on much of the “background noise”, or false hits in your searches, but might also exclude family history.

Besides advertisements that describe hometown shops and businesses, keep an eye out for classified ads. Sellers often provided detailed descrip-

tions of farms, townhouses, ships, fine horses or stores that were being sold. Such ads might provide you with details about your ancestors' property. One also finds many notices of lost or stolen property, especially horses, luggage or bundles of personal papers.

Legal announcements regarding taxes, government contracts, militia musters, political campaigns and town or county officials might also contain family names.

#### OBITUARIES

Obituaries are rich sources of lost genealogical information. Unfortunately, in the 18th century and much of the 19th, obituaries and death notices were fairly rare, and were printed mainly for prominent people. An exception might be a list of deaths caused by epidemics such as cholera or yellow fever. One has a better chance of finding newspaper obituaries in the late 1800s or afterward. (The same holds true for engagement, wedding and birth announcements.) During the Civil War, fallen soldiers, including enlisted men, were remembered by obituaries placed by their grieving comrades, often under the heading “Tribute of Respect”.

#### HOTEL ARRIVAL LISTS

If your ancestors journeyed away from their home town, they might be listed in one of the “hotel arrivals” or “personal intelligence” columns, which were once very common in newspapers ranging from the mighty *New York Times* down to the smallest whistle-stop town weeklies. Guests are listed by hotel. Unfortunately, people sometimes appear only with their surnames, first and middle initials, and home town. Women might be listed as, for example, “Miss White” or “Mrs. Wilson”, instead of their full names.

#### SHIP PASSENGERS

Ship passengers are also often listed in the newspapers of port towns. These were not long rosters of immigrants, but the names of perhaps a few dozen first- or second-class passengers. The ship's departure point or destination, and perhaps the name of the captain, would also be included. Steerage or deck passengers are not normally listed. Passenger listings might be found under “Arrivals from Europe” or the “marine intelligence” column, along with ship arrivals and departures, news

WILLIAM W. PORTER,  
ATTORNEY AT LAW,  
MERCED, CALIFORNIA.  
OFFICE—Upstairs in Green & Garfield's  
brick block, nos. 1615 and L streets.  
(mar-1315-16)

L. F. JONES,  
ATTORNEY AT LAW,  
MARIPOSA, CALIFORNIA.  
WILL PRACTICE in all the Courts of the  
Thirtieth and Fifth Judicial Districts.  
(mar-1315-16)

SILAS W. GEIS,  
ATTORNEY AT LAW  
—AND—  
NOTARY PUBLIC.  
Office—L Street, Merced, California.  
(apr-14-16)

H. H. WHITE,  
DENTIST,  
RESIDENCE: STOCKTON, CAL.  
Has left Merced on a tour through the  
towns of Stanislaus and Tuolumne  
counties, sojourning but a few days at  
each town.  
Those requiring the Dr.'s services had  
better call early, as he will remain but a  
few days. (j-25-16)

P. B. KING,  
ATTORNEY AT LAW,  
MERCED, CALIFORNIA.  
OFFICE—IN ROOM NUMBER 40,  
Farmers' Hotel. (j-25-16)

H. W. LEEKER,  
SADDLE AND  
HARNESS MAKER  
17th Street, opposite Farmers' Hotel,  
MERCED.

Advertisements in old newspapers can be a treasure trove of information, as the ads above show.

of shipwrecks, and so on.

Celebrity-hunting is an entertaining sideline to checking the hotel and ship passenger columns. A check of hotel arrivals in one's home town might reveal quite a list of luminaries such as former Civil War generals, senators and congressmen, famous stage performers and literary figures.

### UNCLAIMED LETTER LISTS

Don't forget the "letters advertised" columns. Before free home delivery began in 1863, everyone in the US had to drop by the post office to pick up their mail. After that date, people who lived outside towns and cities still had to pick up their own mail until rural free delivery began in 1896. Travelers arranged to have mail sent to post offices in towns that they planned to pass through. If letters were not picked up within two weeks or so, postmasters put the names on a list to be printed in local newspapers. "Letters advertised" lists won't necessarily tell you that your ancestor lived near a particular post office, but they would at least indicate that someone thought they lived there, or would be passing through town.

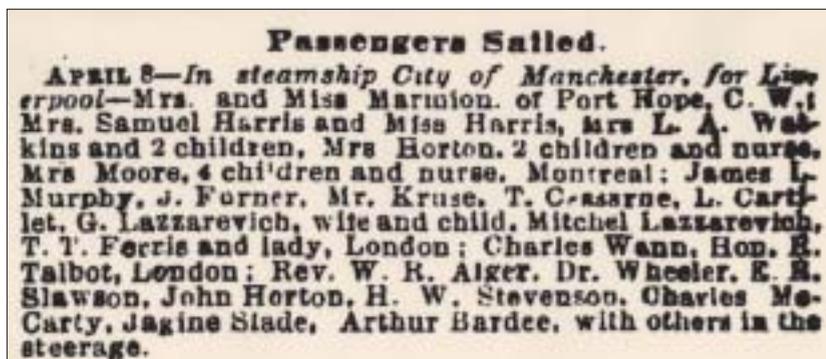
### YOUR US CIVIL WAR ANCESTOR IN THE PAPERS

Perhaps you already have a good bit of information on your Civil War ancestors, but a newspaper search might help further document an ancestor's service. Unlike many official and historic sources, which concentrate on high-ranking officers, newspapers were packed with mentions of enlisted men. They appear not only on casualty and hospital lists, but they often sent letters that were published in their hometown papers. The letters might recount a recent battle, or in quiet times, give details of everyday camp life that would otherwise have been lost. Some letters were sent directly to the editor, while others were mailed home, and then the families permitted excerpts to be published.

Searching for particular units will take several tries under different names, i.e., "Twelfth New York Cavalry", "12th New York Cavalry", "12th NY Cavalry", "Twelfth Cavalry" AND "New York", etc. Also Civil War soldiers, in practice, referred to their units by their commanders' names, so (for example) "Company C, 62nd Georgia Cavalry" might be called "Captain

Ellis's Company" of "Griffin's Regiment" in the newspapers.

Civilian ancestors might also be in the newspapers. Both governments struggled to provide adequate food, medical care, clothing and bedding for their troops. Local volunteers filled in, sending the armies donations of blankets, bandages, knitted socks, herbal



*Above: A list of passengers aboard the City of Manchester, which left New York for Great Britain on 8 April 1865. Passengers on such lists might be identified by full name and home town, or sometimes just initials and surnames.*

and patent medicines, tea, coffee, liquors and wines, ice and food. Civilian donations were acknowledged in the papers by hospital surgeons, company officers and grateful soldiers. Another frequent donation was lint; women scraped cotton or linen sheets with sharp blades and collected the lint for hospitals. A standard medical procedure at the time, wounds were packed with lint and then wrapped in bandag-



es. Newspapers also describe benefit concerts, plays, lectures and fairs given for the soldiers, often listing the names of those who took part in them.

Service in earlier and later conflicts, particularly the World Wars, is also richly documented in online papers. Small-town newspapers are the most likely to have space for mentioning a particular individual. In general, the Northeastern and Midwestern US are

*Above: In newspapers, post offices advertised lists of people with unclaimed letters. The envelopes were stamped with the inscription "Advertised", circled above, which indicated that the recipient owed an extra cent or two to help defray the cost of the ad. This example dates from the US Civil War.*

## Using Old Newspapers Online

the best represented regions for online papers.

### TIPS FOR FINDING, SAVING AND COPYING CLIPS

When searching by date for a particular event, you might need to look several weeks after it happened to find it in print. It could take as much as three months for sailing ships to bring news across the Atlantic. Before the advent of the railroad and the telegraph, news could take several weeks to travel from distant points of the US. The transmission of news was dependent upon the speed of the wind or the horse, and further slowed by poor roads and the unreliable schedules of stagecoaches and packet boats. Telegraph messages were expensive, so nonessential news would still travel cheaply but more slowly by mail.

Text scanning is dependent upon the quality of the available newspapers. The oldest papers were subject to troubles with thick or runny ink that cause scanning problems a century or two later. Some scans are made from microfilm, which may have scratches or areas of light or dark text. Digital photography programs are useful for adjusting light or dark article images.

Online newspaper pages can usually be viewed as PDFS, TIFFS, JPEGS or

other common picture file formats. Saving the entire page is one option. You can also highlight or select a piece of text, then print it. This saves time wading through the whole page later on if you will only need one small ad or clipping. I also find it saves time when finding lots of small clippings to copy them, and then paste them into a single Word document. If you enlarge the page you are viewing and then copy your clip-

ping, it makes a more legible clip to paste into the Word document.

Remember to note the name of the newspaper and the date for each selected document; it might drive you crazy if you need to find the date or newspaper later. Be sure to get everything that you might possibly be interested

in, in case your service or library changes its list of available newspapers in the future.

If you are searching in a library, you can save time by e-mailing PDFS of the articles that you want to your own e-mail account, so you can print them at home.

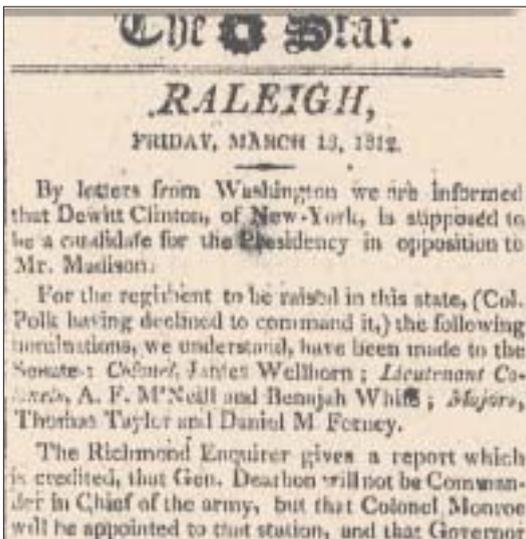
Depending on the site you are using, you may have one or more options for sorting or thinning search results. Restricting the search to news stories can filter out hundreds of irrelevant and repetitive ads. You might also limit the search to years between, before, or after certain dates. Results can usually be displayed chronologically (either oldest or newest first), or arranged by a relevancy score based on the number of keyword "hits" in the article, or whether or not the keyword appears in the headline.

Many services that provide online newspapers will need to place temporary cookies on your computer, so your browser must be set to accept them. This can be complicated; if your firewall or virus protection service blocks cookies, you might have to check with your Internet service provider to learn how to allow cookies from sites that you want to use. Sometimes error messages will still pop up when using an online newspaper service; clearing the old cookies from your browser cache in Internet Explorer will often eliminate that problem, and let you get back to searching.

### WHERE TO FIND THEM

Several fee-based sites offer extensive selections of online historic newspapers. The Godfrey Library website, [www.godfrey.org](http://www.godfrey.org), offers a particularly rich combination that includes Newsbank's Early American Newspapers, as well as Gales' "Times Digital Archive" (the *Times of London*, 1785-1985), several useful resources from Accessible Archives and Newsbank's "The Dallas Morning News Historical Archive" (1885-1987).

As of this writing, Newspaper-Archive.com offers a spectacular collection of more than 35 million pages, from 2,239 different newspapers ranging from 1759 to 2006. Not only do they offer hundreds of city and small-town newspapers from many US states, but they also have selections of papers from Canada, Britain, Ireland, Jamaica, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa and Denmark.



**A search on Early American Newspapers found a relative, Daniel M. Forney, of the author who was appointed a major in the War of 1812.**

Newsbank's Early American Newspapers offers 1.5 million newspaper pages from 717 titles, mostly dating between the lone 1690 issue of Boston's *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick* and 1876. Their selection covers newspapers from 23 states and the District of Columbia, and is rich in coverage of Colonial- and Federal-era America.

The offerings from Accessible Archives, available at the Godfrey Library, include text versions of selected articles from prominent Northern and Southern papers in "The Civil War: A Newspaper Perspective"; the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (1728-1800); two useful black history resources, William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* and "African American Newspapers: The 19th Century"; and the "*Pennsylvania Newspaper Record: Delaware County 1819-1870*".

Many of the above services can be subscribed to individually. A large selection of digital vintage newspapers is also available at Ancestry.com. In addition, your local branch or university library might now subscribe to one or more online historic newspapers.

### FREE VINTAGE ONLINE NEWSPAPERS

There are also some free online newspaper archives, although most are limited to a single newspaper or the papers of one state. One is the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Its 1841-1902 issues are made available by the Brooklyn Public Library at [www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/eagle/](http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/eagle/). Some excellent statewide projects include Colorado's Historic Newspaper Collection at [www.ColoradoHistoricNewspapers.org](http://www.ColoradoHistoricNewspapers.org); the Missouri Historical Newspaper Project at <http://newspapers.umsystem.edu>; and Utah Digital Newspapers at [www.lib.utah.edu/digital/unews/index.html](http://www.lib.utah.edu/digital/unews/index.html). More than 1.5 million newspaper pages from northern and central New York can be searched at Thomas Tryniski's website, <http://fultonhistory.com/Fulton.html>. American Memory at the Library of Congress offers an online version of the 1918-19 issues of the US Army newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, a good place to look for WWI material, at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/sgphtml/sashhtml/sashome.html>.

Past Portal, a digital project of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, offers online access to the 18th-century *Virginia Gazette*. To be exact, it offers access to all the *Virginia Gazettes*; there

were three different Williamsburg papers by that name between 1736 and 1780. All three were competing at the same time in 1775-76! You can find the *Virginia Gazette* search page at [www.pastportal.com/browse/vg/](http://www.pastportal.com/browse/vg/). The search page will offer a block for each letter of the alphabet, and clicking on a block will open a master list of topics starting with that letter. The thorough



indexing seems to include every surname mentioned in the papers. Because of the scarcity of newspapers in colonial America, the *Virginia Gazettes* also contain advertisements and news from other Southern colonies. They are worth a look for anyone with ancestors from the colonial South.

Papers Past, a project of the National Library of New Zealand, offers online access to 19th-century newspapers from that country at <http://papers.past.natlib.govt.nz/>. You can browse by date, but cannot yet search by word. Some Australian material, picked up by New Zealand newspapers, is found in Papers Past.

Maybe, with a little luck, this array of online newspapers will give you an unexpected glimpse of an ancestor arriving in a new town, coming home safely from a war, spouting off on a political issue, or otherwise just taking part in everyday life one or two centuries ago.

*The University of Utah's "Utah Digital Newspapers" is a good example of a project that offers the historic newspapers of a particular state.*



*Freelance writer and artist David A. Norris lives with his wife Carol and far too many books in Wilmington, North Carolina. David's recent magazine and encyclopedia articles have taken him from the Imperial Roman Army to the celluloid collar.*

