Historical Newspaper Research for New York State Ancestors

By Richard Hillenbrand

Oh, how we wish that we had early vital records laws in New York State!

The usual answer to the question of 'When did Vital Records start in New York?' is 1880. There are some exceptions, of course, such as the feeble statewide attempt from 1847 to 1849 requiring school teachers to collect data on births, deaths, and marriages. The law was not enforced and the reporting was incomplete. Some cities and local communities started their own record keeping earlier than 1880, but that was not a common occurrence.

A few of those 1847-1849 records are available at county level but they are not collected at the state level. The best thing to do is to check the various New York county GenWeb sites to see if those vital records are mentioned, then ask locally at a library or historical society.

You can also use church records, cemetery and gravestone records, tax lists, land records, court records, estate matters, and census records to help build a good picture of your family groups.

What we want to discuss here is the importance of using historical newspapers to locate data on your family. These are, in my opinion, some of the best resources to put meat on the bones of your ancestors' lives. You will find items of interest in newspaper reports that you will never find anywhere else.

All of the social news in small communities might inform you of minor events in your subjects' lives that will suggest what their world might have been like. If you are fortunate, you can find marriage announcements, death or funeral news, or estate settlement announcements. The inclusion of birth records seems more a twentieth century occurrence.

You might also find are day-to-day events, such as friends from afar visiting your forebears. Often these are other family members, and you might find clues in the newspapers as to where these people resided. Such subjects as property sales or auctions – even trouble with the law – make for interesting reading.

I once located an article about my grandfather's first cousin who had a livery service and was engaged during the winter months to haul a body from Syracuse to Lysander, New York. The snow was deep, the horse ran afoul, and sleigh and casket were both damaged; the horse had to be put down. Can you just image how often that story was told around the old cracker barrel? Historical newspapers are a fabulous resource.

The New York State Library has been extremely vigilant in locating caches of old newspapers. The staff there has a very active program called the New York State Library Newspaper Project. You may search or browse their online catalog, and it will help if you know the name of the newspaper and the date that you are seeking; however, you can also search by county or city to locate newspapers of interest to you.

This catalog is a finding aid to newspapers that are available on microfilm at the NYS Library (or cataloged there); the external holdings' location will be noted. One nice feature of this program is that almost all of the NYS Library microfilms are available through Inter-Library-Loan (ILL); duplicate copies of the film may be purchased by the reel.

For a project before 1860, one good resource to check is French's New York State *Gazetteer*. In the footnotes of each county section of the *Gazetteer* is a listing of titles of all of the known newspapers, with date ranges and publishers' names for each of the state's counties.

You should check various online library catalogs for newspaper indexes, as quite often individual or groups of historians have read through early issues of old newspapers and created name indexes to people and events. For many years this was about the only way we could find references to specific items that we could use in our research.

All that has changed in the past few years, as more and more of the collections of old newspapers have become available online through the digitization of microfilms and optical character recognition (OCR) of the text on those newspaper pages. What that gives us is the ability to index the complete newspapers to allow for instant computer

searching of all of words and subject phrases.

We are now able to find things almost instantly that would have taken a virtual lifetime just a few years ago. I can remember being hunched over for many an hour with my head stuck inside one of those old Readex metal monsters and scrolling film page by page. Computers do miss certain things, however. The OCR conversion of pixels to text is not an exact science yet, but it is a whole lot better than anything else that has come along.

Remember, you will want to check local holdings in the area that you are interested in. There are times that a small community might have some old newspapers in the local historical society or library, and some of these have never yet been digitized.

There are also many various compilations of vital records extractions that have been published from newspapers through the years. Some compilers' names to search for are: Gertrude A. Barber, Kenneth J. Scott, Fred Q. Bowman, and Mary S. Jackson and Edward F. Jackson. Then there are some newspaper extraction programs for various communities, towns, cities, counties all through the state. You should ask locally in the area you are researching, as well as searching various online library catalog systems. There are unique holdings in Syracuse and Rochester; at the State University of New York in Oswego; and in Wayne County (and within communities all throughout the state). It is best to ask a librarian for guidance.

There are two collections of digitized New York State newspapers that are online and free to use by anyone. The first is the Northern New York Historical Newspapers, provided by the Northern New York Library Network: this is a marvelous selection of newspapers from Oswego, Lewis, Jefferson, St. Lawrence, Franklin, Clinton, and Essex Counties. Current holdings offer more than one and a quarter million pages, from thirty-three different newspapers.

The next site is totally free and is sponsored by one man, Tom Tryniski, at FultonHistory.com. I have featured articles on Tom on my Blog and I recently wrote an account of an interview with him. His hobby, as he calls it, has exploded way beyond what one would think of as a hobby, and his website now has digitized over 6 million pages available from newspapers all throughout New York State. It all started with a gift of a collection of old postcards of Fulton, New York, which he put up on the web. Tom recommends reading the FAQ instructions on the website to take advantage of Boolean search methods.

As you are reading this on the *NewYorkAncestors.org* website, you no doubt are aware of the excellent online resources at the New England Historic Genealogical Society (NEHGS) website, *NewEnglandAncestors.org*. If you have a membership you will be able to access two excellent online newspaper databases, the 19th Century U.S. Newspapers and Early American Newspaper Series (1690-1876). Both of those collections have very nice sections on New York State newspapers.

The following resources are all subscription- or membership-based, and each has its own requirements, so take a look and see which ones might be of interest to you. They usually have a free section to look at or a free trial period so you can get to know the holdings before subscribing.

Ancestry.com is one of the early adopters of providing online genealogical information. They now have a very nice collection of historical newspapers online as well as their standard databases of people information. Ancestry also has the online versions of the New York Death Newspaper Extracts, 1801-1890, and the New York Marriages Extracts 1801-1880 compiled by Gertrude Barber.

Footnote.com is a resource that has been growing leaps and bounds over the last couple of years, and though they first started out by building a huge digital collection of original manuscript documents at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), they now also offer very nice holdings of historical newspapers. Their Small Town Papers Collection is very interesting.

GenealogyBank.com advertises 122 million articles in their collection of historical newspapers from 1690-1980. Obituaries, marriage notices, birth announcements, and other items were published in more than 500,000 issues of over 2,500 titles, with new content being added monthly.

The largest collection of digitized newspapers available online is through NewspaperArchive.com. This company

advertises that they have over 2.84 billion names indexed and more than 949 million articles regarding 754 cities, covering 240 years and 2,894 titles. Many of these are New York state newspapers. They do have some free areas of special collections that you might want to peruse before subscribing.

One caveat to bear in mind is that newspapers are not considered primary source documents, but they are contemporary to the time period you are researching. Another thing to consider is that almost all of these old newspapers were hand-type set in racks, page by page, printed, and then the type was broken down, sorted, and put back in the cases. The capital letter type fonts were stored in the "upper case" and the lower case type fonts were stored in the "lower case" of the type racks, all to be used over and over again until they had to be replaced.

The way I look at it is, they might not be primary documents, but they sure will get the juices flowing in your research plan. Historical newspapers open up all kinds of new avenues of pursuit.

Links to resources cited:

Ancestry.com
http://www.ancestry.com/

Footnote.com (subscription)
http://footnote.com/

FultonHistory.com (free) newspapers online
http://www.fultonhistory.com/

GenealogyBank.com
http://genealogybank.com/

NewspaperArchive.com (subscription)
http://newspaperarchive.com/

New York State Library Newspaper Project (free)
http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/nysnp/nygcty.htm

Northern New York Historical Newspapers (free)
http://news.nnyln.net/

Upstate New York Genealogy, website and Blog (free)
http://www.unyg.com/