

All the News Fit To Print: Rhode Island Newspapers

By Maureen A. Taylor

Several years ago, unbeknownst to most Rhode Island genealogists, the Rhode Island Historical Society successfully completed a series of grants awarded by the [United States Newspaper Project \(USNP\)](#) under the auspices of the National Endowment for the Humanities. According to the project's website, "The United States Newspaper Program is a cooperative national effort among the states and the federal government to locate, catalog, and preserve on microfilm newspapers published in the United States from the eighteenth century to the present." Genealogists can now locate, view, and in many cases, borrow on microfilm (contingent on library policies) any newspaper originally published in Rhode Island or any of the other participating states and territories. A full list appears on the project's website. An essential part of the USNP was identifying a library or archive in each state that would act as the major repository for those microfilms. In Rhode Island, that is the [Rhode Island Historical Society Library](#) (121 Hope Street, Providence, RI 02906).

The initial phase identified the newspapers and located them in libraries and archives around the country so that they could later be microfilmed. At the end of the grant, there were 1,699 titles cataloged, which breaks down to 450,000 pages microfilmed. While the microfilms are stored and accessible at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, that doesn't mean you have to live in Rhode Island to know what exists. With technical assistance provided by the Library of Congress, all the newspaper titles were cataloged into OCLC, a database that many public libraries and archives use.

Each catalog record contains the name of the paper, any name changes, frequency of publication, political stance (such as Democrat or Republican) and who owns the originals and microfilms of those papers. This means that genealogists have greater access to newspapers than ever before. Clarence S. Brigham's two volume *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers 1690-1820* (American Antiquarian Society, 1947) provides users with a short history of newspapers for each state and a list of who owned what as of 1947. It is a wonderful resource for papers published before 1820, but genealogists wishing to access material after that year had to contact various libraries and archives to find a copy of a particular paper. Now, with the OCLC database available at many public libraries, a reference librarian can usually find what you are looking for within minutes if you have the name of the paper. The RIHS keeps a notebook that contains a subject index to the cataloged newspapers, which includes everything from abolition to different ethnic groups (both English and foreign language papers).

History

Rhode Island has a fascinating history of newspaper publishing. The first paper in the colony was the *Rhode Island Gazette*, published from 1732-1733. The longest running newspaper is the *Providence Journal*, established in 1833 and still being printed today.

The early papers consisted of only four pages (a single sheet folded in half). There were two women who figured prominently in Colonial Rhode Island newspapers, Ann Franklin and Sarah Goddard. Franklin became the publisher of the *Newport Mercury* in 1762, when her son James died. She continued for about a year until she herself died in 1763. This paper ceased publication during the French occupation of Newport in 1776 and didn't resume until 1780. Goddard took over publishing her son William's paper, *The Providence Gazette*, when he decided to move from the city. She remained publisher until 1768.

The first foreign language paper in the United States was the *Gazette Francois*, printed in Newport from 1780-1781. Most new ethnic groups that moved into Rhode Island began publishing a foreign language paper for their community. Italians, Germans, and French-Canadians each published a combination of news from home and on local citizens.

According to James L. Hansen's "Research in Newspapers" chapter in *The Source* (Ancestry, 1997), "three nineteenth-century developments changed the newspaper dramatically: the invention of the power printing press, the development of the railroads (which allowed much wider distribution of a paper), and the increasing demand for news, especially during the Civil War." While individuals published the newspapers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the twentieth century was the age of the conglomerates, which bought up many small, locally produced papers. Today, with most papers online, it is easier than ever to look at yesterday's news. And with many of these newspaper websites

including online archives of older issues, it is possible to go back even further in time.

Using the newspaper

Newspapers can be utilized for genealogical research in a variety of ways. The majority of researchers try to find birth, marriage, and death notices, but this is only possible with a specific date. Additionally, newspapers only published vital record notices for prominent individuals prior to the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. Regardless, it is worth searching the papers for advertisements for businesses or local history events that can enliven your family history. Here are things to look for when seeking news on relatives in newspapers:

Obituaries: Search for several days after the death and in all available papers for an area. A death notice was usually only published if a family member wrote and submitted it, or if the individual was prominent in the community.

Marriages: These may include short announcements, anniversary notices, or full accounts.

Birth: When birth announcements appeared, the notice was brief and often incomplete.

Local News: The coverage ranged from political events to school news, and the publisher determined the extent of news covered in a particular newspaper.

Biographical Information: News items would often profile prominent citizens, business leaders, and even ordinary individuals involved in something newsworthy.

Shipping News: The lists of maritime arrivals and departures can help you ascertain the ship on which your ancestor immigrated.

Advertisements (announcements): Public and private announcements often appeared in newspapers, especially those published prior to 1800. They would report thefts, runaway wives, military deserters, and missing slaves and servants.

Advertisements (business): Your ancestor may have received advertising space for his or her business, which could provide an address or other interesting information.

There are several ways to access the information in Rhode Island newspapers using special indexes and online sources.

Indexes

- The Rhode Island Collection at the Providence Public Library (225 Washington St., Providence, RI, 02903) keeps an index to major events and prominent individuals featured in the Providence Journal from c. 1900 to the present.
- [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) is digitizing newspapers for their Historical Newspaper Collection database, including several from Rhode Island. These are searchable by keyword or newspaper title.
- For contemporary newspapers try using a standard search engine to locate them by title for access to their online editions and archived copies. The [RIGenWeb project](https://www.rigenweb.org) also features some useful links.
- For colonial papers to 1800, search *Runaways, Deserters and Notorious Villains*, volumes 1 and 2 (1995, 2001, Picton Press), which contains compiled newspaper advertisements for slaves, servants, runaway wives, and Revolutionary War deserters.

How to Obtain Copies

If you live too far away to visit a facility that owns a copy of the newspaper you are interested in you can obtain copies in the following ways:

- Since the RIHS is a non-lending library, you can't borrow microfilm from them. But you can write to their reference staff for assistance. They maintain a fee-based research service. Contact the RIHS for additional information.
- Your public library might be able to order copies of a specific page through interlibrary loan or borrow a reel of microfilm.
- It might be possible to purchase a reel of microfilm depending on which company microfilmed the newspaper.
- Hire a local researcher to search the papers for you. The RIHS website contains a list of individuals experienced

in using their library. You may also locate one through the membership directory of the [Association of Professional Genealogists](#).

If you are looking for a Rhode Island ancestor and haven't yet consulted newspapers, then you are overlooking a tremendous wealth of resources. When you can't find your Rhode Island roots, spend a few hours in front of a microfilm reader immersing yourself in news. You might just find that "missing link."