

Newspaper Clippings - Using Reverse Search to Cite Sources and Save Your Sanity



We've all been there as genealogists and family historians . . . have you had this scenario during your own research?

A well-meaning relative sends you a packet of newspaper clippings about your ancestors. Or you receive several obituaries pasted to 3x5 inch index cards. Or you are given a scrapbook created in the 1920s or 1930s with a variety of news articles clipped from newspapers and magazines.

Of course, when clipped there is no date, no newspaper masthead or header with the name, volume number, page number etc. Your relative (or someone) may have handwritten the date or other information along the margins, but rarely do they include everything you need as a researcher.

So how do you track down the original source and cite it properly?

The Problem: Tracking Down the Source of Newspaper Clippings

I've seen the above challenging situation posted dozens of times in many different Facebook groups. Usually the conversation starts out with a question on how to properly cite the information. And then a discussion ensues as to whether the source is the scrapbook, for example, or the original newspaper article.

I'll bet that as a family history researcher you are sitting on tons of similar clippings, some scanned, some pasted on index cards. When I've asked other genealogists about these "UNOs" (Unidentified News Objects) I get these responses:

- "I just get frustrated and I use the information as a clue in my research to find other, more reliable documents."

- “I try to browse through newspaper sites, but I don’t know where to start since I don’t have a clue as to the date or location.”
- “I just use “source unknown” in my source citation.

It can be very frustrating and disheartening when working with newspaper clippings. It almost seems like you are being “teased” doesn’t it? Well, there is hope and I have some solutions.

The Solution: Digitized Newspapers to the Rescue!

Have you ever considered taking a snippet or two from the text in the clipping, and using online resources to see if the newspaper or magazine has been digitized? Over the past 10 years, the number of historical newspapers that have come online is staggering. So does my solution involve subscribing to many different paid websites like [GenealogyBank](#) or [Newspapers.com](#)? Does the solution involve searching free resources, and if so, how would you know where to start?

Here is the key concept to remember when doing a “reverse search” on newspaper clippings: GO BROAD NOT NARROW. This is a basic mantra I use when I teach newbies about genealogy. Very often, we try to search too narrowly and we miss out on gems that are sitting right there waiting to be mined. Use the case study and the tips below to see if they won’t work for your own newspaper clipping challenges

Case Study: The Obituary of Catherine O’Keefe

Catherine Sullivan O’Keefe was my 3rd great-grandmother and was born in 1837 in Albany, New York. I actually have a photo of her at age 80 sitting on the front porch of the family home in The Bronx, New York about 1917. In addition, I inherited her hand-forged wedding silver from about 1957. So I’m always looking for more information to document her life.

I received a faded newspaper clipping listing her obituary and there was no other information as to date, newspaper, etc. See the scanned image below and you’ll see that the text itself, at least on the surface, is not of much help. Phrases like “died Sunday night” are not of much help. In addition, some of the daughters listed as survivors are done so using their married names. So what to do?

MRS. CATHERINE O'KEEFE

Former Resident of Lowville Dies in
New York—Funeral at St. Peter's
Church Today.

Mrs. Catherine Sullivan O'Keefe, 91, a former resident of Lowville, died Sunday night at the home of her daughter, Mrs. W. D. Austin, New York. The remains were brought to the undertaking rooms of Graves & Virkler, Lowville, Wednesday, and funeral services will be held from St. Peter's church at 9:30 this morning. Burial will be in Rural cemetery.

Mrs. O'Keefe was born in Albany in April, 1837, but came as a child to Lowville with her parents. Practically all her long life was spent in this village, until ten years ago, when she sold her home here and went to live with her daughters. Her husband, David O'Keefe, died in 1870.

Surviving are a sister, Mrs. Margaret O'Neil, of this village; four daughters, Mrs. Austin and Miss Ella O'Keefe, of New York; Mrs. David Barry, of Dedham, Mass., and Mrs. James Downey, Birmingham, Ala., and two sons, Frank D. O'Keefe, Carthage, and Maurice O'Keefe, of Staten Island. A sister, Mrs. Elizabeth Conway, 83, died in this village about a month ago.

Well, using the tips below, I did manage to locate the original newspaper along with the date of the article and enough information to create a solid source citation. I did all of this online and for FREE and without having to browse through newspaper websites.

Tip #1: Use Google Search with a Unique Phrase

Review the newspaper clipping and look for a unique phrase or at least one that will narrow down any search performed on Google. In the case of the O'Keefe obituary, I selected "former resident of Lowville dies" and I also added the surname Sullivan:



sullivan "former resident of lowville dies"

Here's a clue from our Google search . . . look closely at how the image text has been rendered based on the preview from Google:

CATHERINE O'KEEFP. Former Resident of Lowville Dies in. New York—Funeral at St. Peter's. Church Today. "s. Catherine Sullivan O'Keetfe, 91, former resident of Lowville, died. Sunday night at the home of her daughter-in-law, Mrs. W. D. Austin New York. The remains were brought to the undertaking rooms of Graves &

So what do we see? Understanding how text is rendered can help you set up a good search in Google or another search engine:

- The surname O'Keefe is listed as **O'Keefp** as well as **O'Keetfe**. I know from experience that OCR software often cannot scan the apostrophe in Irish names very well – so my search might have to be Keefe. This is why I opted for using “Sullivan” in my search string at Google since OCR had a better success rate of scanning that surname properly.
- The word “night” is actually “**nlgih**.”
- The phrase “Former Resident of Lowville Dies in New York” has period thrown in after the word “in” – this often happens when OCR encounters the end of a line. You can see this in other areas of the article as well where the line ends; a period is inserted in the scanned text. This is why I did not include “New York” from the second line of the heading in my search.

Keep in mind that you may need to try different snippets of text unless you know exactly how the newspaper website will render the scanned text. Don't give up after the first search . . . keep trying!

Tip #3: Build a Hit List and Surname Variation List based on OCR Errors

In addition, look for “patterns” in OCR errors from the Google preview. One bonus from this detailed review: I now know that the New York Historic Newspaper website may index O'Keefe as O'Keefp or O'Keetfe so I will go to the website and use those as surname variations! Do the same for place names. And look to see if the website offers the ability to download the page as a .txt format file.

Tip #4: What about Subscription Newspaper Sites?

Don't believe that this reverse search on Google concept won't work for sites like [GenealogyBank](#) or [Newspapers.com](#). The fact is that many times these sites WANT the PDF pages behind their paywall to be discovered on Google and other search engines. It can be enough of a “tease” especially with three lines of preview text, to induce you to subscribe to their site. When clicking on the link you'll likely be offered a free trial or a special discount coupon to gain access to the entire article and information you need.

Tip #5: Transcribe the Text and Post It Online to Help Fellow Genealogists

Here is a “giving back” trick that I use all the time when working with newspaper articles: I transcribe the article (usually using my Dragon Naturally Speaking software and a headset with microphone) then I post the content to my blog or website. If you don’t have your own site, consider posting it to a specific genealogy group on Facebook or email to some website that might want to use the content.

I do the same thing when I’ve transcribed a letter or document from a collection at a library or archive. I send a printed copy of my transcription to the archive, sometimes with a small donation, as a thank you!

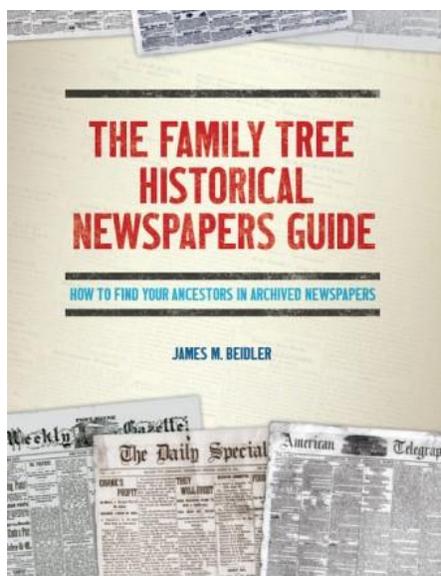
The Source Citation for Catherine Sullivan O’Keefe’s Obituary

So as a result of my “reverse search” tricks, here is what I have now for the scanned image of Catherine’s obituary:

"Mrs. Catherine O’Keefe," *The Journal and Republican* (Lowville, New York), 16 February 1928, p. 5, col. 3, para. 8, digital images, New York Historic Newspapers (<http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org>: accessed 15 February 2018).

Conclusion

Technology has its blessings and its curses as well, especially when it comes to OCR and historic newspapers. Don’t despair when confronted by a pile of newspaper clippings. Using a basic reverse search and some good sleuthing, not only can you identify the source of your news clipping, but you’ll build a list of clues and surname variations to use for future searches!



Want More Tips on Using Historic Newspapers for Genealogy?

Check out [The Family Tree Historical Newspapers Guide](#) by James M. Beidler, from Family Tree Magazine! "This comprehensive how-to guide will show you how to harvest the "social media" of centuries past to learn facts about your ancestors as well as the flavor of the times they lived in. With step-by-step examples, case studies, templates, worksheets, and screenshots, this book lays out what genealogists can find in online (and offline) historical newspapers, from city dailies to weekly community papers to foreign-language gazetteers and publications from religious, ethnic, and labor societies."

Click [HERE](#) to read my recent review. Click [HERE](#) for the e-book version (PDF) and click [HERE](#) for the print version - via Family Tree Magazine

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