

Newspaper Research Tip – 5 Things to Consider When Selecting an Online Newspaper Subscription Site

Finding information and articles in newspapers about your ancestors is incredibly rewarding. And the amount of information about your ancestors in old newspapers is likely more than we can find. If you follow this site, you know that I am “big” on using old newspapers as resources to find about your family and their stories. And that there are over 40,000 links to Free Collections at the [Newspaper Links](#) page

But what about the paid newspaper subscription sites? I have used the three large ones in the U.S. (Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchive, and GenealogyBank). There are other sites where newspapers are available, such as Ancestry.com, British Newspaper Archive, FindMyPast, MyHeritage, etc. There are pluses and minuses to all of these sites, but this article is not a comparison of these sites.

Why is that you ask? In my opinion, each person should make up their own mind as to what characteristics are important to them and how each of these sites fit your particular preferences.

What are the five most important characteristics? Here’s what I believe are those that you should consider:

User Interface and Searching Features – every site mentioned above (and those not mentioned) have different user interfaces – some are simple and easy to figure out and use; some have richer capabilities and features. I always like to try the “Advanced Search” features because that generally indicates the total breadth of capability. And one MUST read the Help documentation for each of these sites. Generally they will let you know what type of search criteria can be entered – for example Boolean and proximity searches. Quite honestly I have heard many subscribers complain about not finding anything when they haven’t even tried to learn all the search capabilities available to them.

Scan and OCR Quality – the index that the site has created is only as good as the quality of the original scan and the OCR software that they use to build the index. Were the newspapers scanned from originals or from microfilm, or from copies of microfilm? Some of the collections that I have seen have an extremely poor quality image displayed after selecting a search result. This indicates to me that the original image that they applied the OCR process to was degraded and hence the index certainly will suffer. In other words – your ancestor is mentioned but the scan was so lousy that the OCR process could not build an acceptable index entry with the correct spelling of the name.

Price and Billing Practices – some of the aforementioned sites are 4 times as expensive as the others. Some have a monthly plan, some annually only. Some auto-renew and some do not. If you purchase a subscription it is incumbent on you to read the terms of the subscription as well as the fine print. As always with any purchase online – it is buyer-be AWARE. Many have a free trial period, which gives you a chance to try before you buy a long term subscription.

Collections Available – just as in Real Estate where the motto is “Location, location, location” – the motto for subscription newspaper research sites is “Database, database, database.” I get asked all the time if someone should purchase a subscription to site A. I always ask them first – for the states, cities or areas that you are researching, as well as the dates that your ancestors lived there, does the site have a collection of newspapers available? If it doesn’t for a preponderance of your ancestors – if you purchase a subscription don’t complain when you can’t find anything. All sites have a list of what newspapers and dates are in their collections. Check those out before you buy.

Image Downloads – this is critical. Can you download just the image? Can you download the entire page in pdf? How zoomable is the image or pdf after you download it? The reason this is critical is because some of the sites do not have an image or pdf that allows you to zoom to make a larger image without distortion. I find this unsatisfactory when snipping obituary notices which tend to be quite small in size – and if there is distortion after making the obit larger, one can’t read it.

Most sites have some sort of free trial or a short time subscription so you don’t have to plunk down money for a whole year if your resources are tight and you just want to check out the site.

So check out free old newspaper resources but don’t forget these historical newspaper subscription sites – they have different collections available than those on the free sites.

Your family history research will be enhanced by using all resources available to you.

