

Search Hyphenated Words in Historical Newspapers to Get Up To 30% More Results

Finding your ancestors in newspaper articles is in my opinion – an art, not a science. You must be clever and resourceful to get around the quality limitations in old newspapers

A “feature” of older newspapers is the use of the hyphen. Hyphenated words were often used heavily to save space and due to the limitations of fixed-width type.

Here is an example of how often hyphens have been used. In this case, 6 times in two short paragraphs!

That’s over 30% of the lines! So if you don’t search for the hyphenated words, you could lose up to 30% of the potential results.

“Dufus Hatch—“Uncle Rufe” as he is known in New York—addressed a letter to *The Hour* last Saturday giving the true inwardness of the passenger war—all the roads have lost heavily and show greatly reduced receipts. The Vanderbilt roads make no reports, but it is suspected that they feel the war quite as much as the others. There are two exceptions—the Reading and the Louisville and Nashville.

The *Washington Republican* says: “There is no other city on the continent where it is so easy for a young man of good address to get appointed to the position of a son-in-law to a gentleman of wealth and standing as it is in Washington during the season. And this sort of appointment is really more desirable than that of Consul in a warm climate.” If there is a stampede of bachelors to the National Capital, the *Republican’s* paragon will be to blame.

The bottom line is that if you search for a portion of your ancestor’s surname (or any other word, not necessarily a name), rather than the entire word, you may get additional results. For example, if your ancestor’s name was “Jorgenson” try searching for “Jorgen.” The typesetter may have split the word so that at the end of one line are the letters “Jorgen-” with the hyphen, and the next line may start with “son”. I have an ancestral line with the surname “Braunhart”. Many times an article may have a line that ends with “Braun-” and the next line starts with “hart”. This creates some additional challenges, just like “Williamson” may be split up as “William” and “son”. The first and second set of letters end up being a very common set of syllables so your results may be too numerous to be of much help.

Here are three examples that show the different uses of the hyphen. And always consider that the “break” may not always be in the logical place in the word.

An unidentified man stepped in front of a moving car at the corner of East First and Los Angeles streets yesterday afternoon, and was knocked to the ground, sustaining a deep three-inch laceration of the scalp, with possibly a fracture of the skull.
The man was under the influence of liquor at the time, say witnesses to the accident, who reported that he left a saloon a moment before he was struck by the car and attempted to cross the tracks, unmindful of the approaching car. Inmates of the saloon say that his name is believed to be William Patterson, but no one who knew him could be found.

At Hotel Hollywood Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Letts gave a large dinner party last evening. Christmas bells and red satin ribbon were arranged in canopy effect over the table and holly and ferns decorated the table. Covers were laid for Mr. and Mrs. Harry Philp, Mr. and Mrs. C. B. Weaver, Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Aldritt, Rev. and Mrs. A. Hardie, Mrs. Richard Letts, Misses Ethel Hardie, Ada, Edna and Gladys Letts, Lila and Dorothy Weaver, Dr. W. S. Philp, Masters Harland Weaver, Cyril Aldritt and Arthur Letts, jr.

WASHINGTON, Dec. 25.—Because of the prisoner’s previous good military record the president has issued a pardon in the case of Paul H. McDonald, formerly first lieutenant of the Tenth infantry. He was convicted about a year ago on the charge of obtaining money under false pretenses and sentenced to be dismissed from the army and to serve two years in the military prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kas.

In the first case, you could search for “Patter” when your target name was “Patterson”

In the second case, even a short word like “Hardie” is split up, so you would search for “Har”. This may lead to too many results but is worth a try.

Be open-minded about where the split may occur. In the third case I wouldn’t think that the name would be split this way, but searching for “McDon” and “ald” may lead to many more results.

Don’t give up and remember that hyphenated words give you additional opportunities and additional searches.

