

The Genealogy Box



A supplemental newsletter for genealogy and family history research in Harrison County, Kentucky.

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What is an Obituary and How Do You Find One?

One wouldn't necessarily associate the word "perverse" with genealogy, but there are definitely some perverse aspects to genealogy and family research, especially as evidenced by the glee expressed whenever a genealogist finally locates the much-sought-after obituary of a distant family member or research subject (These same emotions can also be stimulated by death certificates, funeral records, and tombstones!).

Obituaries were, and still are, the "vehicles" which have brought news of an individual's death to their contemporaries, yet today an informative obituary is the record source which helps, more than any other, to bring family trees to life, with all the details they can offer about family relationships, occupations, and all the other the elements of any individual's life story.

Dictionary.com defines an obituary as "a published notice of death, sometimes with a brief

biography of the deceased." While most of us recognize an obituary when we see one, not all newspapers over the past three centuries were so careful as to publish any "notice of death" for all of those who may have been known to its subscribers.

As a general rule, if you can find a reference to an individual's passing in indexes of death certificates, funeral home records, or tombstone inscriptions, you will often be able to find some mention of that person's death using this information to search local newspapers in the days or weeks after their death.

In some newspapers an obituary column may be filled by what are called "death notices" in the classified ads section, "funeral notices," or news items in the local news or community columns. In some cases, not a single word of a death can be found, and the report of a death might be relegated to nothing more than an entry in a list of burial permits issued.

Sometimes only if you were well-known or established in your profession, or perhaps died in a tragic accident or were suicide, did you rate the full treatment of an obituary or news item. At the other end of the spectrum, one rural Ohio River community published brief notices in the news sections of the paper, and then full biographies of the deceased, often written by surviving family members, in the "in memorium" section of the newspaper's classified ads, sometimes in the same issue, sometimes a week or so later. Success in locating an obituary, or a stand-in for one, all depends on what the editorial policies of the newspaper were at the time of its publication.

Harrison County Newspapers—The archive of newspapers available for use in the search for obituaries is extensive. The most referenced 20th century

newspapers are the *Log Cabin* (1896 - 1960) and the *Cynthiana Democrat* (1869 - Present), both of which have been microfilmed and are available for review at the Cynthiana-Harrison County Public Library (Visit cynthianalibrary.org to view a list of their holdings). If you can't make it to Cynthiana, and since the C-HCPL does not make its microfilmed collection available for interlibrary loan, you may want to consider looking to the University of Kentucky in Lexington either to purchase or borrow these same microfilms (A list of Harrison County titles held by U.K. is available online at tinyurl.com/4jtvyd). The Kentucky Historical Society in Franfort also has a limited collection of microfilmed newspapers.

During the late 18th and 19th centuries the county never seems to have lacked for local coverage with titles such as the *Guardian of Liberty*, the *Advertiser*, the *Gleaner*, the *Western Visitor*, the *Cynthiana (Weekly) News*, *Town Talk*, the *Harrison County Courier*, the *Cynthiana Times*, and the *Cynthiana Democrat* serving the county's needs. Unfortunately, the complete runs of only a few of these titles have survived long enough to have been preserved or microfilmed, and so the number successful searches within this period can be limited.

Preservation issues are not the only cause of some serious gaps in the timeline of newspaper coverage of the county; at times history itself has interfered with modern research efforts, such as when the pro-secessionist *Cynthiana Times* ceased operations during the Civil War with the arrest of its editor, A.J. Morey. The paper did not resume publication until October, 1865 as a paper "entirely independent of sectional or preconceived prejudice in politics."

You can read more about newspaper censorship during the war in William A. Penn's *Rattlin'*

Spurs and Broad-Brimmed Hats, the story of Cynthiana and Harrison County during the Civil War. Chapter 9 of W.H. Perrin's 1882 *History of Bourbon, Scott, Harrison, & Nicholas Counties, Kentucky*, articles in the 1896 and 1905 special editions of the *Cynthiana Democrat* and *Log Cabin*, and the March 1, 1928 *Cromwell's Comments* column (pp. 9-10 of the anthology) are also good sources for information about the history of newspaper publication in the county. Also, look to the January, 2008 (Vol. 9, No. 1) issue of the *Harrison Heritage News* for diagrams prepared by George Jacobs which trace the history and genealogy of Harrison County newspapers and their editors.

I've looked up a few thousand obituaries in a hundred or so newspapers and so have picked up a few tricks with this kind of research. The following tips may help you to make a successful obituary search with any newspaper, especially using Harrison County resources.

Research Aids—Few aids for the research of Harrison County's newspaper archive existed until 1996, when Eric C. Nagle (FordNagle.com) published *Vital Records from Newspapers of Harrison County, Ky., 1836-1900*. Articles found in the *Western Visitor*, *Cynthiana (Weekly) News*, *Town Talks*, the *Log Cabin* were searched for birth, marriage, and death citations and then extracted or abstracted to compile this unique volume. Items from 1836, 1839, 1851-57, 1866-1873, 1875, 1878, 1884, 1885, 1887-88, 1896-1900 are included. The bound version comes with an index and the text of the volume is also offered on a CD-ROM, which is searchable.

Never Too Soon—When searching for an obituary, even though it may seem an unlikely or unusual occurrence, be sure to include the issue of the date of death among the newspaper issues you examine. Depending on

whether it was a morning or evening paper, and the time of day the paper went to press, your subject's obituary may actually have been published the day of death, at least according to the date cited on the paper's front page. Such a "timely" publication may have occurred because the person's death was expected, when the family or undertaker may have been prepared for the swift placement of such an announcement. Such an occurrence can be common with dailies, but it is much rarer with weeklies such as the *Cynthiana Democrat* and the *Log Cabin*.

Sometimes Late, Sometimes Never—Look at least three issues beyond the date of death of your subject, whether it be a daily or weekly newspaper. Most of the time an obituary can be found in the first or second issues following the date of death, but occasionally more diligence is required to find that elusive obituary.

On occasion you may have located a definite date of death for a person, but you may have no clue that the person was not have been a resident of the county for a long period before their death, and so, depending on where they were when they died, it may take longer for the news of their death to reach the local paper of their hometown or county, and so you may have to make a more extended search.

Every now and then a relative or family friend may write a personal obituary "in memorium" to their loved one which may not appear until a month or more after the subject's death, so you may want to extend your search timeline to catch a hold of such treasures.

Not until early in the 20th century did many newspapers run an established obituary column in every issue for their readership. Today the *Cynthiana Democrat* publishes obituaries on page six, and has done so for decades. But newspapers of old, like the world

they served, were smaller, and operating on shorter deadlines, and so a death may have been reported by word of mouth (then via telegraph & telephone, when those came along), or by post (in a time when letters were delivered twice a day), instead of by the local newspaper, and so depending on a number of factors, timing, space, costs, etc., not everyone had an obituary or death notice published. Luckily, at least for 20th century newspaper research, such occurrences are rare.

All Deaths Are Local—Even when a newspaper maintains a regular obituary column, be sure to check the columns of news for the communities or neighborhoods in which your research subject resided. Sometimes you may not know in which column to look until you have already found an obituary elsewhere, but U.S. Census records should be of some help in determining where a person lived before they died. Also, the location of the cemetery where they were interred should serve as a good clue as to their past or last residence(s).

These local news columns were often written by resident "stringers" and often contain even more information than the formalized obituary itself, and were written in an even more personal style, perhaps by someone who was family or a friend of the deceased. For many decades both the *Democrat* and the *Log Cabin* maintained community columns for just about every town and community in Harrison County. These columns should not be overlooked if you have the time for a more extensive search. In some cases, these local news columns may even be the only source of the news of your research subject's death.

Calendars of Events— Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you can never come up with a date of death for a person that gives a month and day that will allow you

to locate an obituary for the person, at least without a lot of time scrolling through a lot of microfilmed newspapers. Many tombstones only indicate the years of birth and death, and for some communities or counties there are no vital records indexes of any kind, whether they be indexes of death certificates, funeral home records, or local newspapers.

If you are still stuck with only the year of death before you begin an obituary search, one possible solution to finding an obituary without looking through an entire year of newspapers, is to examine the first couple of issues of your research subject's local newspaper for the year immediately following the death. Often a paper will publish a calendar of local events for the preceding year, which includes the dates of the marriages, births, and deaths which occurred in the local community or county. The *Cynthiana Democrat* and the *Log Cabin* have both published such calendars over the years. See if you can find the exact date of death using these local calendars of events, and if you do, finding the obituary should be a lot easier.

Double the Pleasure, Double the Fun—Until 1960 Harrison County had at least two newsweeklies in print, and so for most research subjects there is the opportunity to at least double the effectiveness of your quest for an obituary. *The Cynthiana Democrat* was and is nominally a Thursday paper, while the *Log Cabin* had a Friday publication date for most of its run. After the merger of the two weeklies, the texts of the obituary columns of both papers became virtually identical, even down to the page and column citations . . . but look in both anyway, if for no other reason to confirm the information found in either! (The obituaries of a great-great-aunt come to mind; in one paper she was reported to have been buried in Battle Grove

Cemetery, while the other cited Pythian Grove Cemetery as her final resting place. Her grave was eventually located in Pythian Grove.)

Obituaries on Page 2 . . . and 4 . . . and 7 . . . and, uh, 9?—Be sure that you've seen all there is to see regarding all the deaths reported in any issue of a newspaper. Too many times the maddening practice of spreading an obituary "column" over several pages in one issue of a newspaper has been seen, without any reference given to the column's continuation on another page or any indication that there may be more obituaries in the same issue. Skim over a few issues before and after the one you need to search, to see what trends are apparent.

The Paper on Your Neighbor's Doorstep—When no newspaper archive exists for the locality of your interest or if it fails to yield any results, you may want to consider searching the newspapers of a neighboring county, or even those of urban centers nearby.

Many rural county newspapers have often published brief summaries of the news of their neighbors, including deaths (maybe even full obituaries, especially if the deceased had ties to their own communities). Lists of microfilmed newspapers for these counties bordering Harrison are also available at the aforementioned U.K. site, and the earliest available papers of several counties have been abstracted and indexed, such as the multi-volume set offered for sale by the Grant County (Ky.) Historical Society, for example.

For Harrison County subjects, you may wish to search Cincinnati (Oh.) newspapers or those of Lexington (Fayette County) or Covington (Kenton County) in Kentucky. Even though separated from Harrison's borders by a county or two, the newspapers of these population centers also have published the obituaries of

Harrisonians over time. The benefit of searching these larger publications is that many have had much longer runs than their rural cousins, have been preserved, microfilmed, and even been indexed, and their indexes have been placed online, such as the Cincinnati-Hamilton County Public Library's Newsdex (www.newsdex.cincinnati.org) or the Kenton County Public Library's Northern Kentucky Newspaper Index (<http://tinyurl.com/5fthxf>).

Obituaries Must Be Paid For—It would seem that death is not the ultimate price to pay after all, especially if you want a few kind words written in your favor after you "go," as evidenced by the text below, which was discovered in the February 27, 1919 issue of the *Cynthiana Democrat* (Page 6, col. 5). Similar warnings were published in other Northern Kentucky newspapers over time, so if you ever wondered about that ever-elusive obituary of Great-Aunt or Uncle, or other beloved and esteemed ancestor, might never have appeared at all, no matter how hard you have searched, this article might explain why they can't be found today:

"It seems to be necessary to state again that *The Democrat*, as well as all other well regulated newspapers, charge for publishing obituaries. Persons continue to send them in with request for publication and seem offended when they do not appear. It should be remembered that the charge is five cents a line, which is one cent a word. Therefore, please count the words and send check or cash with the request to publish, otherwise we shall be obliged to omit the obituaries. *The Democrat* prints notices of deaths as prom[p]tly as possible after the information reaches us and usually full details are given. We of course make no charge for this because it is a matter of news."

The 1896 Special Edition of the *Cynthiana Democrat* & the 1905 Souvenir Supplement of the *Log Cabin*

New Online Resources for Harrison County, Ky. History & Genealogy Research

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[This month new pages are being added to the author's website at www.HarrisonCountyKy.US/newspapers-and-obituaries, pages which contain the complete texts, or nearly so, of two special editions of Harrison County newspapers which were published over a century ago.]

In June, 1896 the *Cynthiana Democrat* published a "Special Edition," a 24-page edition chock-full of photographs of Cynthiana and its business establishments, biographical sketches of its businessmen, government, and church leaders, as well as descriptions of its government, school, and church facilities.

Then, nearly a decade later, on November 11, 1905 the *Log Cabin* Printery of Cynthiana, Kentucky followed up with a "Souvenir Supplement" of the *Log Cabin*, a 32-page issue with content similar to that of *The Democrat's* 1896 edition, and it also included a page devoted to Harrison County's second largest community, the "city" of Berry.

Both issues are "must-sees" for anyone interested in life in Cynthiana or in the county as it appeared just a little over a century ago.

Indexes have been posted to the website for some time, and they include the names of every individual mentioned in the special editions (Each edition has its own online index). Once you find your research subjects name, take note of the page numbers and then click on table of page number links in the banner at the top of each page for that issue. Once there, scroll down the web page to find the reference your research subject or simply perform a word search of that page.

The editor of the 1896 edition of the *Cynthiana Democrat* had in mind that the paper should be used by future generations, realizing great changes were to come, but that his contemporaries were not to be pitied but

were rejoicing in the times in which they lived. He wrote:

"When this edition of *The Democrat* shall be fished from the depths of some old cedar chest one hundred years from now, and new generations shall gaze on the faces of people long since laid in peaceful slumber beneath earth's emerald robe, it would be interesting to hear the comments and listen to the speculations upon what an unfortunate people we were. All the pride and glory of our little city will have been swallowed in the

advancement of the ages. All marvels of electricity will have been eclipsed. The systems of locomotion revolutionized, the art of photography metamorphosed, printing brought to a mere matter of pushing the button.

"We live in perfect comfort. We have all the necessaries and a great many luxuries of life, and, so far as temperance, morality and religion are concerned, the world has never seen our equals. When the time for departure from this existence shall arrive, the majority of us will be ready for the journey, and will, we

hope, leave for the benefit of those that are to come the testimony of lives that have been well spent and work that shall live after us."

While it is unlikely that you will find a copy of either edition in a cedar chest today, reprints of both the *Log Cabin* and the *Cynthiana Democrat* have long been available for purchase for only \$5 each through the mails from the [Harrison County Historical Society](#) or onsite at the [Cynthiana-Harrison County Museum](#). So if you would like to hold a little history in your hands, please consider purchasing either edition (or even both) for your genealogy or local history library. With your copy in hand, you, too can feel as important as former *Log Cabin* editor J.M. Wilson, Jr. (Pictured above) must have felt when he posed with an edition of his newspaper! ;-)

