The Last Newspaper Writeup: Obituaries and Death Notices
by Irene B Walters

Clayton Library is the genealogy/family history section of HPL, among the top 10 genealogy libraries in America, 1/3 of HPL’s special collections, which are the Clayton Library, the Houston Metropolitan research Center/ Texas and Local History Room (HMRC/TXR), and The African American Library at the Gregory School.

Death notices - Not necessarily what you think they are
• Death notices historically
  o A published statement that someone died or had a funeral
  o Were short & to the point
  o Found in the newspaper or in another publication like a church bulletin
  o Written by newspaper or publication staff, occasionally by family
  o Were free
• Death notices today
  o Either a short writeup or longer biographical writeup
  o Still found in the newspaper or church bulletin, but in print or online
  o Also found on funeral home or mortuary’s website and other places
  o Written by family members or funeral home staff
  o Are paid for most of the time

Obituaries have changed too
• Obituaries historically
  o A published biographical article that someone died
  o Usually were longer with more details, might ramble
  o Usually found only in a newspaper or published source
  o Written by newspaper staff or family
  o Could be free, but longer ones might have been paid for
• Obituaries today
  o Still a published biographical article that someone died
  o Still usually are longer with more details, might ramble
  o Might be found on a website, for a newspaper or published source or a funeral home
  o Could be free, depends on the paper
  o Usually are paid for & written by funeral home staff or family

Death notices & Obituaries
• Terms are sometimes interchangeable
  o Some newspapers and newspaper websites use either term
  o Obituaries is still the more common term
• Other terms may be used
  o Death announcement
  o Life tribute
  o Memorial (In memoriam)
  o Testimonial
  o Funeral announcement
  o Burial announcement
• Necrology
  • What medium you will find them in
    o Physical print -- Newspaper or journal itself, & Clippings
    o Microfilm
    o Digitized copy
    o Published online -- Newspaper website, Funeral home website, or Other websites
  • When were they written & published
    o Written -- Usually soon after the death, Writeups for famous people were kept in readiness by editors
    o Published -- Depends on publication schedule, Could be day of death, Could be after funeral, Usually within two weeks of death, & Non-news sources might publish them monthly or annually
  • Where published
    o Physical print
    o Newspapers
    o Society journals
    o Published online
    o Newspaper website
    o Funeral home website
    o Society website
    o Other websites
  • Where to find them
    o Physical print copies -- Libraries, Newspaper itself, Compiled books, Society journals, Clipping files, Historical societies, & Newspaper offices/archives
    o Microfilm -- Libraries local, university, state, Historical societies, & Possibly the newspaper offices
    o Digitized copy -- Paid & unpaid databases, & Websites
    o Email lists or newsletters
    o Published online -- Newspaper websites, Funeral home websites, Society websites, Alumni websites, & Obituary websites
    o Obituary websites
      ▪ Legacy.com -- https://www.legacy.com
      ▪ Obits.org -- http://www.obits.org
      ▪ Dignitymemorial.com -- https://www.dignitymemorial.com/obituaries
      ▪ Tributes.com -- http://www.tributes.com/
      ▪ Cyndislist.com/obituaries -- https://www.cyndislist.com/obituaries
      ▪ Obitsarchive.com -- https://www.obitsarchive.com/ paid site
      ▪ Echovita.com/ca (Canadian obits) -- https://www.echovita.com/ca
  • How to find obituaries
    o Historic
      ▪ Search print or microfilm newspapers, Road trip to holders of the newspapers, Interlibrary loan (ILL), Search digitized newspapers, Free websites, Library databases, Subscription databases, & Library or society lookup service
    o Modern (last 25 years to today)
      ▪ Search -- Digitized newspapers, Newspaper websites, Local news websites - radio and television, Funeral home websites, Society websites, Alumni websites, Obituary websites,
      ▪ Signup for email from funeral home
      ▪ Check for group email lists or newsletters
  • Finding online sites for historic newspapers
    o Finding HPL newspaper databases
      ▪ HPL has subscriptions to many newspaper databases
- https://houstonlibrary.org/all-databases-search
- Click on Category search then Newspapers
  - Library databases you might find at HPL or other libraries
    - 19th Century U. S. Newspapers Digital Archive
    - Accessible Archives
    - America's Historical Newspapers
    - Fold3
    - Newspaper Archive (regional or full US)
    - Proquest Historical Newspapers
  - Paid sites for historic newspapers
    - FindMyPast.com
    - Fold3.com
    - GenealogyBank.com
    - MyHeritage.com
    - NewspaperArchive.com
    - Newspapers.com
  - Web links to historic newspapers
    - Google News all newspapers -- https://News.google.com/newspapers
    - Small Town Papers -- http://www.smalltownpapers.com
    - Cyndi’s List -- https://www.cyndislist.com/newspapers/

- Finding more digitized historic newspapers
  - Do an internet search of:
    - digital newspapers and (your state or county or town)
    - historical newspapers online and (your state or county or town)
  - Remember** the same newspaper may be on or in more than one site or database

- Finding more modern online obituaries
  - Do an internet search of:
    - Obituaries and (your state or county or town)
    - Obituary and (your relative’s name) and (year and/or town)
  - Remember** the same newspaper may be on or in more than one site or database,
  & An obituary or death notice may be in more than one newspaper or place

What will you find in the record? Stats and Stories
- Minimal notice or obit
  - Name & Hopefully; date of death, funeral or burial information, Maybe a bit more
- Medium sized notice or obituary
  - Name, Date of death
  - Hopefully, some of the following: funeral information, burial information, age or birthdate, cause of death, relatives, religious affiliation, biographical information
- Large sized death notice or obituary
  - Name, Date of death
  - Hopefully, same as medium sized plus: information about illnesses, military career, political leanings, & character
- Might find multiple death notices or obituaries
- Might even be reprinted from another paper

Watch out for
- Mistakes-- Misspellings / typos, Dates / ages may be wrong, Places may be wrong, & Family members missing
- Wording of names -- Married daughters under husband’s name, & Widowed daughters listed using her first name
• Compare family members’ obituaries -- Change(s) in marital status of children or siblings, or death of family members
• Additional information elsewhere -- Might be in the same paper / even same issue, Might be in other area newspapers
• Might be different online vs. the physical newspaper

Find your family’s obituaries before they fade away and share them
• Genealogy software
• Shared or shareable database
• Ancestry.com
• FamilySearch.org
• Family newsletter
• Internet
• A blog
• Facebook
• In a book or booklet

Final points to ponder
• Get copies of obituaries
• Document your sources
• Reread them to see if new finds will shed more light on your tree
• Have fun!