

How To Search

OBITUARIES

to Find Ancestors & Trace Your Family Tree

THOMAS JAY KEMP

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Obituaries

NEWSPAPERS HAVE reported on the deaths of our ancestors, friends and neighbors since they were first published. These have ranged from simple statements that a person has died to long, detailed accounts of their lives. They often refer to other family members, leading your research in new, and often unexpected, directions. Whether short or long, obituaries provide important clues to your family history.

Obituaries can include:

- Full name of the deceased
- Date, place and cause of death
- Date and place of birth
- Full name of spouse
- Full names of the children and their spouses, and places of residence
- Full names of other relatives and their spouses, and places of residence
- Occupation
- Education
- Social groups
- Name of clergy and their denomination
- Name of cemetery

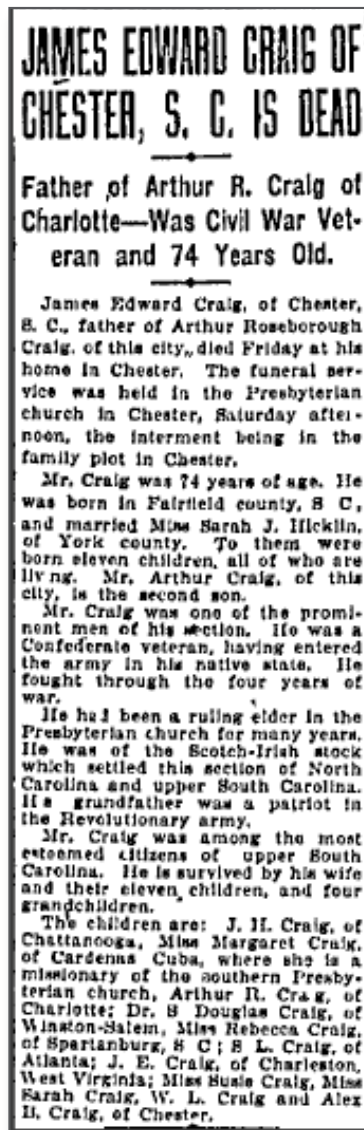
You will want to closely read every word of an obituary for the facts and clues that it provides for documenting your family history. Let's examine

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some actual obituaries in detail, and see how much information we can learn from them (see “[First Search Tip: Searching Newspaper Articles by Record Category](#)”).

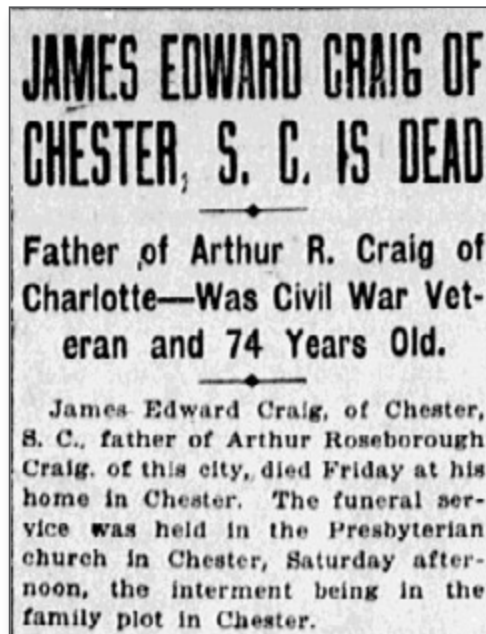
Family History Details and Clues

Here is a typical obituary notice. It was printed by the *Charlotte Observer* (North Carolina) on 30 November 1920, page 13:



What can we learn about James Edward Craig’s life and family from his obituary? Let’s start with the first section of this obituary and work our way through it:

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- Name: James Edward Craig. Obituaries are a good source to obtain your ancestor's full name, which can be very helpful with future searches.
- Date of death: "Friday." Since the newspaper was printed on November 30, 1920, a quick check of a 1920 calendar shows that the 30th was a Tuesday—and the previous Friday was November 26, 1920. Now we have the exact date of his death.

November						
Sun	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sat
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

- Place of death: Obituaries often give the exact location of the death. In this example it says: "at his home in Chester" (South Carolina).
- Age: 74 years old.

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- Family: We learn his son's full name (Arthur Roseborough Craig) and place of residence (Charlotte, North Carolina).
- Military career: The headline tells us James Craig was a Civil War veteran.
- Funeral: It was held "Saturday," which was November 27, 1920, at the Presbyterian Church in Chester, South Carolina. This is an excellent clue for where you should look for further information. You will want to see what other milestones/events the family celebrated or held at this church, such as baptisms, marriages, and other family funerals.
- Cemetery: Another great clue. The obituary states that he was buried in the "family plot in Chester." You will want to locate this cemetery to find more information about the other family members buried there.

That's a lot of information, just from the headlines and first paragraph!
Let's see what more we can find out:

Mr. Craig was 74 years of age. He was born in Fairfield county, S. C., and married Miss Sarah J. Hicklin, of York county. To them were born eleven children, all of who are living. Mr. Arthur Craig, of this city, is the second son.

Mr. Craig was one of the prominent men of his section. He was a Confederate veteran, having entered the army in his native state. He fought through the four years of war.

He had been a ruling elder in the Presbyterian church for many years. He was of the Scotch-Irish stock which settled this section of North Carolina and upper South Carolina. His grandfather was a patriot in the Revolutionary army.

- Born: "He was born in Fairfield County, S.C."
- Marriage: This obituary gives his wife's maiden name (Sarah J. Hicklin), a very helpful piece of information. It also tells us that she was "of York County."
- Family: "To them were born eleven children, all of who are living." We also learn another detail about the son mentioned in the opening paragraph: Arthur Craig was "the second son."

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- Military career: Here we learn some interesting details about James Craig's service in the Civil War. He fought for the Confederacy, having joined the army in South Carolina. He served for the duration of that bloody four-year conflict. Since he was 74 at the end of 1920, he was born in 1846—this means that when the Civil War began in 1861, he joined the fighting at the tender age of 15.
- Church service: Mr. Craig is called “one of the prominent men of his section.” We are also told that “He had been a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church for many years.” This is another good indication that there will be records about this family at the Presbyterian Church in Chester, South Carolina.
- Heritage: “He was of the Scotch-Irish stock which settled this section of North Carolina and upper South Carolina.”
- Ancestors: We learn that “His grandfather was a patriot in the Revolutionary army.” This is a fantastic family clue. Not only does it tell us that the Craigs were in America since at least the 1770s, but it points to an additional search: with a little more digging, you can find the grandfather's name—then you will want to contact the National Archives and obtain a copy of his service papers:
<http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records/standard-form-180.html>

We've already learned so much—and we still have two more paragraphs to go! Let's see what else we can find out about James Craig and his family:

Mr. Craig was among the most esteemed citizens of upper South Carolina. He is survived by his wife and their eleven children, and four grandchildren.

The children are: J. H. Craig, of Chattanooga; Miss Margaret Craig, of Cardenas, Cuba, where she is a missionary of the southern Presbyterian church; Arthur R. Craig, of Charlotte; Dr. S. Douglas Craig, of Winston-Salem; Miss Rebecca Craig, of Spartanburg, S. C.; S. L. Craig, of Atlanta; J. E. Craig, of Charleston, West Virginia; Miss Susie Craig, Miss Sarah Craig, W. L. Craig and Alex B. Craig, of Chester.

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- Social standing: Once again, we are told that Mr. Craig was well respected. Earlier, we learned that he was “one of the prominent men of his section” and “a ruling elder in the Presbyterian Church”; now we are told that he “was among the most esteemed citizens of upper South Carolina.”
- Family: “He is survived by his wife and their eleven children and four grandchildren.” This certainly helps set a course for additional family history explorations: you have 16 more family members to research. And to help with that research, the final paragraph of the obituary is a gold mine:
- Children: Obituaries give good information and clues like the names and relationships of close relatives and where they currently live. Notice how the family had spread throughout the South. By including the term “Miss” we know which of the daughters were not married:
 - J. H. Craig, of Chattanooga
 - Miss Margaret Craig, of Cardenas, Cuba, where she is a missionary of the Southern Presbyterian Church
 - Arthur R. Craig, of Charlotte
 - Dr. S. Douglas Craig, of Winston-Salem
 - Miss Rebecca Craig, of Spartanburg, S.C.
 - S. L. Craig, of Atlanta
 - J. E. Craig, of Charleston, West Virginia
 - Miss Susie Craig, of Chester
 - Miss Sarah Craig, of Chester
 - W. L. Craig, of Chester
 - Alex B. Craig, of Chester

As you can see, a close reading of an obituary can provide an incredible amount of family history. We’ve learned a great deal about James Craig himself—and we have learned about his ancestors and surviving family, with enough clues to suggest several additional searches you can perform. Obituaries do far more than tell you about the deceased—they provide a springboard to push you off into other searches, perhaps in unexpected places.

Learning Where in the “Old Country” Your Ancestor Came From

If your ancestor came from Europe, it is often difficult to pin down the exact

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town or county he or she came from. This is another way obituaries can be helpful to your family history research; you will want to search the obituary of your target ancestor for clues to that ancestral home. Don't limit your search to just the obituary notice of your target ancestor, but also examine the obituaries of other relatives from the first and second generation in this country. Here's a good example, printed by the *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, Louisiana) on 26 April 1893, page 4:

MOORE—On Tuesday, April 25, 1893, at 8:10 o'clock a. m., **ROBERT MOORE**, aged 62 years, a native of Ballyconnell, county Cavan, Ireland, and a resident of this city for the past fifty years.

Funeral will take place from the First Presbyterian Church, Lafayette square, Thursday, April 27, at 3:30 p. m.

This obituary states that Robert Moore was born in Ballyconnell, County Cavan, Ireland. Finding the exact town or county where your ancestor came from is a thrilling and important discovery; an obituary notice such as this one is a real treasure!

Obituaries Can Appear in Newspapers You Never Expected

One of the mistakes family researchers sometimes make is to limit the search for an ancestor's obituary to only the local paper where the ancestor died—not realizing the obituary may have appeared in another newspaper from an entirely different part of the country.

The following obituary, for Mrs. Catharine Reilly (1770-1874), is a good example of this. Her obituary was printed by the *San Francisco Bulletin* (California) on 23 October 1874, page 2:

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ONE HUNDRED AND FOUR YEARS OLD.—The Philadelphia *Ledger's* obituary column recently recorded the death, at Media, on October 3d, of Mrs. Catharine Reilly, at the advanced age of one hundred and four years and five months. This venerable lady was born near Cootehill, county Cavan, Ireland, May 4, 1770. She came to this country in 1840, landing in Philadelphia, and for many years subsequently resided there. She had seven children and twenty-four grandchildren, and belonged to a long-lived family; an aunt having recently died in Ireland at the age of one hundred and eight.

First of all, before we get to the place of publication issue, let's take a look at this obituary—it has plenty of the genealogical facts we're looking for:

- Date and place of birth: May 4, 1770, in Cootehill, County Cavan, Ireland
- Date and place of death: October 3, 1874, in Media, Pennsylvania
- Entry point into America and date: through the Port of Philadelphia, in 1840, where she lived “for many years”
- Descendants: 7 children and 24 grandchildren
- Other family history: her aunt “recently died in Ireland at the age of one hundred and eight”

This is terrific stuff—including that hard-to-find “where in the old country did she come from” information. Upon closer examination, we find there is another interesting fact this obituary reveals: it was first published in the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* before being reprinted in the *San Francisco Bulletin*.

Here we have an obituary of a woman who entered America through the port of Philadelphia, lived in that city for many years, and died in Media, Pennsylvania. If you search and do not find the obituary in a newspaper from her area, then expand your search. You may very well find the obituary printed in a place you never expected or thought to look. In this case, her obituary was printed in a San Francisco, California, newspaper!

Why? Because editors from distant newspapers routinely printed obituaries for relatives and friends of the family that had moved to their area. You just

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might find that the obituary you are looking for also appeared in a newspaper clear across the country, where you would not expect it. This could give you additional clues and lead your family research in unexpected directions.

Here's another example of an obituary turning up in a place where you weren't looking for it. Let's say you were looking for the obituary of your ancestor Richard Smith, of El Paso, Texas. You might be surprised to discover that his obituary was published in one of the local Spanish-language newspapers, *El Continental*.

Newspapers sometimes focused on specific ethnic markets and readership. In this case the target market was the Spanish-speaking population in El Paso, Texas. Notice that *El Continental's* obituaries extended beyond its target market group, however. Clearly the readers of *El Continental* wanted to keep current with the news of the entire community and not just newspaper articles about other Hispanic Americans, and this paper obliged them.

Here is Richard Smith's obituary, printed by *El Continental* (El Paso, Texas) on 20 January 1959, page 3:



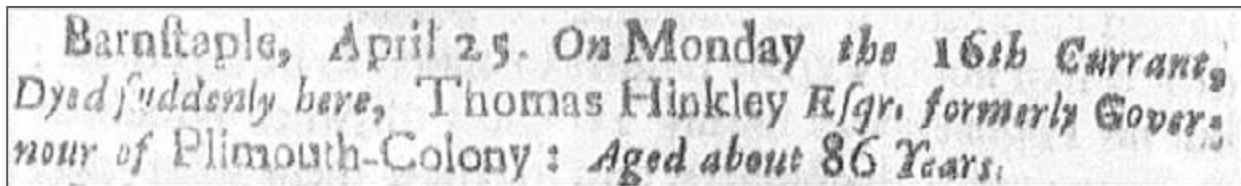
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Be Prepared for Unusual Spelling and Word Usage

Both spelling and language have changed during the 300 years that newspapers have been published in North America, so be prepared for a certain degree of unfamiliarity when reading obituaries from historical newspapers.

Spelling

Noah Webster didn't publish the first edition of his dictionary until 1806, so don't be surprised at the variety of spellings in early American newspapers. Look at this example, printed by the *Boston News Letter* (Massachusetts) on 30 April 1705, page 2:



Barnftaple, April 25. On Monday the 16th Currant, Dyed suddenly here, Thomas Hinkley Esqr. formerly Governour of Plimouth-Colony: Aged about 86 Years.

The very first word of this obituary reveals some typesetting choices that often confuse modern readers: the use of the letter “f” for an “s,” and the use of a “p” for a “b.” Barnstable is here spelled “Barnftaple,” and it takes a while to get used to that sort of thing.

Look at the spelling of some other words in this short 1705 obituary:

- “Currant” for current
- “Dyed” for died
- “fuddenly” for suddenly
- “Governour” for Governor
- “Plimouth” for Plymouth

Word usage

Some examples of word usage unfamiliar to modern readers can be seen in this 1822 obituary, printed by the *Providence Patriot* (Rhode Island) on 18 September 1822, page 3:

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“In Gloucester, 11th inst. Mrs. SARAH WADE, consort of Mr. Charles Wade, and only daughter of Mr. Jonathan Pray, of Foster. She has left a disconsolate husband and four children to mourn their irreparable loss. Her funeral was attended on the 13th inst. from her father’s house in Foster, when a suitable discourse was delivered by the Rev. Joseph White, on the occasion.”

- “consort”: Charles Wade’s wife, Sarah, is here identified as his consort. This was the standard way editors referred to a spouse, usually the wife, in an obituary notice.
- “inst.”: Sarah died on the “11th inst.” and her “funeral was attended on the 13th inst.”—this means “in the present month.”

Using an 1822 calendar, we see that she died on Wednesday, September 11, 1822, and that the funeral was held on Friday, September 13, 1822:

September						
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30					

Notice also the excellent clues and family details provided by this obituary to guide further research:

- Place of death: Gloucester (Rhode Island)
- Husband’s name: Charles Wade
- Relative: she was the “only daughter of Mr. Jonathan Pray, of Foster” (Rhode Island)
- Surviving family: husband and four children

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- Funeral: held at the father's home in Foster, Rhode Island
- Minister: Rev. Joseph White delivered the sermon

So when dealing with obituaries from very old newspapers, be on the lookout for different spellings and word usage. The more research you do, and the more old obituaries you examine, the more you will become familiar with their patterns. And as these examples have shown, old obituaries can provide just as much helpful family information and clues as modern ones.

“Papers Please Copy”

Another example of unfamiliar word usage is the phrase “papers please copy.” You will want to keep a sharp eye out for this phrase, because it can provide important family clues. This phrase was used by newspaper editors to alert editors in other parts of the country that this obituary or article is of particular interest to their readers, and is another reason why obituaries sometimes appear in newspapers you would not expect.

Here is an example, printed by the *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune* (Ohio) on 19 March 1883, page 5:

DEATHS
AYLWARD—In St. Louia. March 17, Martin
Aylward, aged 61 years.
[Indianapolis papers copy.]

- Martin Aylward died in St. Louis, but obviously had some connection to Indianapolis—you will want to pursue this clue and see what that connection was, and what family history details it might provide you

Here is another example of this phrase, printed by the *Daily Inter Ocean* (Chicago, Illinois) on 29 April 1880, page 5:

DIED.

RICE—April 19, at the residence of his brother-in-law, Walter Welch, No. 16 Gurley street, John Rice, aged 32 years.
Rochester, N. Y., **papers please copy.**

HOLDEN—At No. ~~409 Dearborn avenue~~, Sunday, April 18, Lillian Rhodee, only child of George H. and Lillie J. Holden, aged 14 months and 6 days.

CURLY—April 19, 1880, Mrs. Alice Curly, aged 70 years.

COLFER—April 19, Maggie, infant daughter of Matt and Nellie Colfer, aged 1 year and 10 months.
Patterson, N. J., Boulder, Col., and Montreal, Canada, **papers please copy.**

RITCHIE—~~On the 19th inst.~~, at Ottumwa, Iowa, of paralysis, Agnes A., beloved wife of Robert Ritchie, aged 54.

LAVERY—April 20, Rosey Lavery, beloved daughter of D. D. and Bosey Lavery, aged 15 years and 25 days.

These are clues to where other members of the family lived, or where the deceased had business or social ties:

- Clearly the Rice family had ties to Rochester, New York
- The Colfer family had ties to: Patterson, New Jersey; Boulder, Colorado; and Montreal, Canada

Once you find such clues, follow them up with searches for your ancestors in the locations indicated. You never know what you'll find!

Obituaries: A Genealogist's Best Friend

It's impossible to overstate how important obituaries are to genealogy. They often are the record that provides the fullest summary of your ancestor's life. GenealogyBank has more than 218 million obituaries and death records contained in our collection of more than 6,500 digitized newspapers, with coverage from 1690 to today ([click here](#) to see the complete title list). As the examples in this chapter have shown, obituaries and death records are goldmines for genealogists, providing many dates to fill in your family tree, many details to learn more about your target ancestor, and many clues where to go for further family history research.