

# Dissecting Death Notices for New Clues

George G. Morgan offers a number of strategies for extracting the maximum information from an ancestor's death notice



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**G**enealogists know that obituaries are public notices of the death of an individual, and that they can provide biographical information and details about family members. All too often we read through them and only absorb the obvious information and neglect to read between the lines for important clues that are suggested or implied.

The focus of this article is to provide a methodology for effectively dissecting obituaries and other death notices in order to identify, locate, and access a broad range of evidentiary

resources that can expand and flesh out your knowledge of an individual and his or her family.

## There May Be More than Just an Obituary

Going back in time, some newspapers published multiple editions each day. A newspaper in a large town or city may have published an edition in the morning, one in the afternoon, and another in the evening, and the contents may have been substantially different in each issue. Newspapers in smaller locales may only have published one

edition per day, and some may have been published once a week or less frequently.

The first thing to recognize is that an obituary is only one type of death notice. It was not unusual for there to have been three death announcements for an individual. They are:

- **Death Notice** – The first announcement was usually brief and contained little more than the name, date and time, and place of death.
- **Obituary** – The second publication was the obituary, which tended to be a longer notice. It usually contained the same information as the death notice, but more biographical details such as the person's age, origins, education, military service, employment, religious affiliation, organizations to which the person belonged, community activities, and other types of information. This notice may also include names of both deceased and surviving family members. The date, time, and location of a funeral in the place of interment may or may not be included in this notice.
- **Funeral Announcement** – The third notice provides details about the funeral service and interment. It may include much or all of the information that was in the obituary, but also expect to see even more details. You can expect to see the location of the funeral and any mortuary

involved. The funeral may have taken place from the home, in a mortuary or funeral home, in a house of worship, or at the cemetery. Name(s) of officiating clergy are important clues to religious affiliation and, therefore, to membership records. The list of pallbearers, both active and honorary, may include family members, in-laws, business associates, and dignitaries associated with both the deceased and other members of the family. Note that the funeral announcement may have been published before the service or afterward, in which case, the details may be more concise.

In addition to these types of death notices, you may find other kinds of listings in newspapers. These may appear near the time of death or, in some cases, a long time afterward.

- **News Story** – A news article may have been published if the person was famous or particularly noteworthy. This type of editorial may contain a wealth of details about the person's life or career.
- **Accident Report** – If the person died as a result of an accident or injury, there may have been news coverage of the event with other details about the individual's life.
- **Memorial Service** – A memorial service may have been held in addition to, or in lieu of, a funeral. You may find notice of a memorial event included in the obituary and/or the funeral notice.
- **Commemoration/Anniversary Notice** – It is not unusual for family or friends to place a commemorative notice in the newspaper after the event. These may appear on the anniversary of the person's death, on their birthday, on a wedding anniversary, or in recognition of some other event.

You can see that it is important not to assume that there is only an obituary; there may be other articles and notices that were probably published before and/or after the obituary itself.

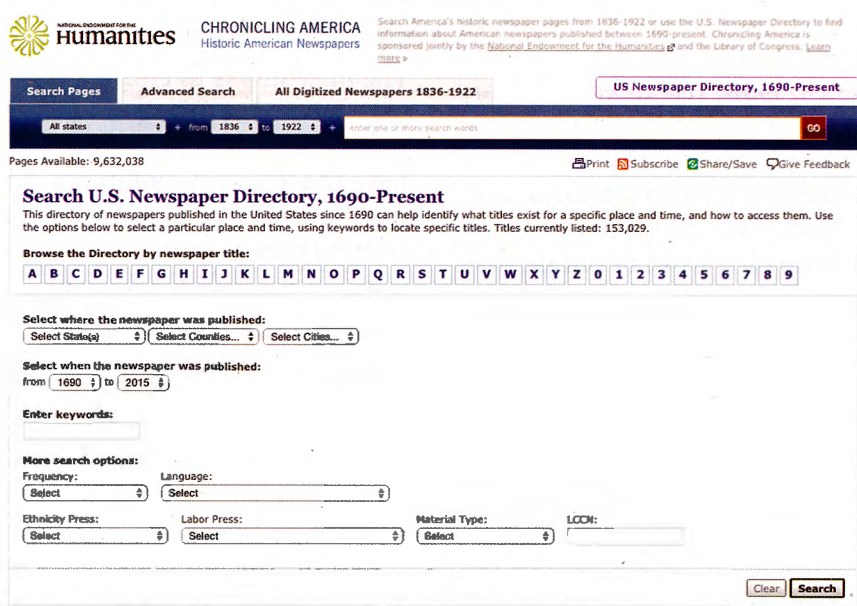
## Where Do I Find Death Notices?

Now that you understand what you should be looking for, where are you going to find the death notices? The first step is to determine what newspapers were published in what areas and what might be available. Let's assume you are interested in American newspapers. The Library of Congress' Chronicling America website, at <http://chronicling.america.loc.gov>, is an excellent place to start. (See the screen shown.) Click on the link labeled US Newspaper Directory, 1690-Present. Here you can browse by newspaper title using the alphabetic/numeric link, or use filters by state, county, and time period to identify titles. Click on the tab labeled All Digitized Newspapers: 1836-1922 and use filters and search word box to identify

specific publications. In any case, you will be able to see which publications and dates have been digitized and made available at the site. Remember that copyright law protects US publications produced from 1923 forward.

The National Digital Newspaper Program (NDNP) is a partnership between the National Endowment of the Humanities (NEH) and the Library of Congress to develop an Internet-based, searchable database of US newspapers. Libraries, archives, universities, and other organizations in 38 states at this writing have received awards and are involved in this program. (See [www.loc.gov/ndnp/awards/index.html](http://www.loc.gov/ndnp/awards/index.html), and check the websites for those organizations to determine what they may have digitized and made available online.)

A wealth of digitized US newspapers are available through subscription websites such as Ancestry.com, Fold3.com, MyHeritage.com, NewsBank.com, Newspapers.com, Newspaper-Archives.com, and others. Libraries and archives may also have



Screen from the Library of Congress Chronicling America website.

institutional subscriptions to databases such as ProQuest's Historic Newspapers (*New York Times*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and other cities), America's Genealogy Bank, America's Obituaries and Death Notices, and others. Check both public and academic libraries in your area to determine what subscriptions they have and how you can access them. In addition, the Google News Archive, at <http://news.google.com/news/papers>, also has digitized newspaper titles from around the world.

Don't overlook the fact that the newspapers may not have been digitized, indexed, and placed online. They may have been microfilmed, even those dating from 1923 onward, and the microforms may be held in collections of libraries and archives.

## How to Dissect Death Publications for New Clues

Let's now look at the methodology behind getting the most out of a death notice. Begin by locating and printing one type of death notice, like an obituary. Slowly and carefully read each word and phrase in each sentence. Now, reread the obituary aloud to yourself. Consider the obvious information stated; and let's call that "direct information".

Next, use a pencil or pen to underline each word or phrase that:

- provides you with "direct information" for which there may be documentary evidence;
- suggests some indirect piece of information or evidence; or
- implies some piece of evidence from which more information may be derived.

Now, reread the obituary and focus on the underlined words and phrases. It is at this point

### F. M. Stocks, Pioneer Resident of Atlanta, Dies at Residence

Francis M. Stocks, a pioneer resident of Atlanta and one of the city's most prominent men, died at 4 o'clock Wednesday afternoon at his home on Piedmont road at the age of 68 years.

Mr. Stocks came to Atlanta in 1880, was founder and proprietor of the Stocks Coal company, and conducted a prosperous business for 38 years. He was a Christian gentleman and a member of the Walker Street M. E. church since he first came to Atlanta. He was always ready to give to charitable work and to help those in need.

Mr. Stocks had a slight stroke of paralysis seven years ago, when his wife died, and has never been himself since. In April he had his second stroke, and he had been very low until his death Wednesday.

He is survived by five children, Thomas F. Stocks, Miss Nellie Stocks, Mrs. Gerald O. Hannah, Mrs. Alvia M. Weatherly of Birmingham, and Mrs. W. Watts Morgan, and two brothers, James D. Stocks and William H. Stocks.

Funeral arrangements will be announced later.

Obituary for Frances M. Stocks from *The Atlanta Constitution*, Thursday, 27 June 1918 (Page 10). (Courtesy of Newspapers.com)

that you will begin to carefully analyze these to identify potential new sources of evidence. The example shown is for Francis Marion Stocks who died on Wednesday, 26 June 1918, in Atlanta, Georgia.

## Create a Working Document

The next step is to create a working document using a spreadsheet. Your document should have the following column headings, and will be used to list the content noted.

- **Text** – Transcribed directly from the obituary
- **Suggests** – What the text suggests or implies
- **Evidence** – Types of evidence that may provide information
- **Location** – Where the evidence may now be found
- **Access** – Where and how you can access the evidence from that location

Remember that the information printed may or may not be accurate. A family member providing information may have been distraught and made errors. A representative from a mortuary or a newspaper may have incorrectly written or garbled the information. A reporter may have introduced errors and those may have been missed in an editorial review. As a result, always be skeptical of information in print and seek more reliable evidence elsewhere.

It's time to begin a detailed analysis of the text you underlined in the obituary. Transcribe each word or phrase in sequence in the *Text* column of the spreadsheet. For each item, ask yourself the following questions:

- What kind of direct information or evidence is included?
- Is there only one piece of information suggested or implied, or are there multiple pieces?
- What are each of those pieces of information?

Make a separate entry on the spreadsheet in the column labeled *Suggests* for each piece of information suggested or implied. Reread the obituary and analyze each item again.

The next step is to evaluate each of the suggested/IMPLIED items and consider what type(s) of evidence might be available to document the fact. There may be several types of evidence that could be used. For example, Mr. Stocks is described as a pioneer resident of Atlanta. We might expect to find information in the form of published histories of the city and/or the county that include his name and other details. Further research into his arrival, stated to be in 1880, might include city directories,

TEXT	SUGGESTS	EVIDENCE	LOCATION	ACCESS		
Frances M. Stocks	Full name	Histories	Public library	Atlanta-Fulton Public Library		
			Ancestry.com	<a href="http://www.ancestry.com">http://www.ancestry.com</a>		
			FamilySearch Books	<a href="https://books.familysearch.org">https://books.familysearch.org</a>		
pioneer resident of Atlanta	Early resident of the area	Histories	Public library	Atlanta-Fulton Public Library		
			Ancestry.com	<a href="http://www.ancestry.com">http://www.ancestry.com</a>		
			FamilySearch Books	<a href="https://books.familysearch.org">https://books.familysearch.org</a>		
		Newspapers	Newspapers.com	<a href="http://www.newspapers.com">http://www.newspapers.com</a>		
			Library of Congress' Chronicling America	<a href="http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov">http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov</a>		
			Digital Library of Georgia	<a href="http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu">http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu</a>		
			Google United States Online Historical Newspapers	<a href="https://sites.google.com/site/onlinenewspapersite/Home/usa">https://sites.google.com/site/onlinenewspapersite/Home/usa</a>		
one of the city's most prominent men	Important person	Histories and newspapers	Public library	Atlanta-Fulton Public Library		
died at 4 o'clock Wednesday afternoon	Full name	Death certificate	GA Vital Record Office; Fulton County Health Department	Write, e-mail, or visit		
	Time of death					
at his home on Piedmont road	Details of professional life	Newspaper Records	Public Library	Atlanta-Fulton Public Library		
			Newspapers.com	<a href="http://www.newspapers.com">http://www.newspapers.com</a>		
			Library of Congress' Chronicling America	<a href="http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov">http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov</a>		
			Digital Library of Georgia	<a href="http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu">http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu</a>		
	Date of death	Perpetual calendar, based on date of obituary	Online perpetual calendars	Various Internet sites		
					No medical records	Probably none
					Address	City Directories
			Public Library	Atlanta-Fulton Public Library		
			Ancestry.com	<a href="http://www.ancestry.com">http://www.ancestry.com</a>		
			City Directories of the United States	<a href="http://www.uscitydirectories.com">http://www.uscitydirectories.com</a>		

Portion of the spreadsheet for the obituary of Frances M. Stocks. (Courtesy of the author)

newspapers, unpublished historic manuscripts, or other resources.

You will want to make an entry in the **Evidence** column for each type of evidence you think might provide more documentation for the suggested/implied item. You may not be familiar with every type of evidence, in which case you may want to learn more about different types. Fortunately there are some excellent learning and reference resources available. These include:

- FamilySearch Wiki - There are more than 80,000 articles available for research around the globe at [http://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Main\\_Page](http://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Main_Page).
- Ancestry.com/Learning Center
  - Search for articles on any topic, including record types.
  - Family History Wiki - Two of genealogy's best reference books are available and searchable in full-text:

*The Source: A Guidebook to American Genealogy*

*Red Book: American State, County, and Town Sources*

- Ancestry.com Ancestry Academy - This is a growing collection of excellent video presentations by the very best genealogical presenters. Many courses are free, while others are accessible for a fee or available to subscribers to the Ancestry World Deluxe Collection.

Once you have determined the types of evidence that may provide you with strong documentation, move to the next column titled **Location**. Assess each type of evidence and determine the location(s) where that material is located today. Remember that the best evidence is going to be the original documents created at or near the time of an event. Not everything has been digitized, and so you may have to contact or visit the actual location to obtain copies.

It is not unusual to find that one type of evidence is available in multiple formats and/or from

multiple facilities. Remember, too, that not every digitized record has been indexed to allow for easy online access. You will find that many digitized documents have been placed online in browsable format only — without indexes. However, the collections are organized online in the same way that they are stored in their original repositories. Your access will, therefore, be similar to visiting the location and manually paging through records, or scrolling through microfilmed images of those records.

Once you have entered each of the possible locations from through which you can access the evidence, now determine how you can access the evidence so that you can personally review and analyze it. Your next step is to make entries in the **Access** column. There should be an entry for every evidence type and location. These might include: visit the facility and an address; write, email, or telephone; the URL of a webpage; hire professional researcher. The example shows a portion of my spreadsheet for this obituary.

Include a source citation for the item on your spreadsheet so you and others can locate the obituary or death notice. Save and print your spreadsheet. (I named my spreadsheet STOCKS-FM-Obituary-27June1918.xls.)

## Make a Research Plan

Reread the obituary and spreadsheet. Additional evidence types may come to mind, and you can add those with their locations and methods of access.

It is time to compile a research plan, and you might use a word processing document or spreadsheet for this purpose. Open the document and begin going through your spreadsheet, this

time beginning with the Location and Access columns. Make a list by location and/or access point, and list the type of evidence/ documentation you expect to find.

The example shown shows several facilities in Fulton County, Georgia, each one of which lists different evidence types, some of which include multiple research items. The city directories research is quite extensive. Remember that some locations may have some or all of their records online. You will need to investigate the location to determine whether you would need to visit in person, communicate by phone, email, or in writing, or whether digitized record images might be available to access.

Make notes for yourself about any details you want to remember or hypotheses that you want to investigate, prove, or disprove.

Your research plan can now be used to gather new evidence for personal evaluation. In the process, make notes about what you find *and* what you *don't* find. Remember that the absence of evidence may be as important as that which you discover. Your research also may reveal new evidence and clues for other people, in which case, you should make notes for additional investigation into their lives.

Following your research into all locations and access points, assemble everything you have gathered. It's now time to perform a thorough review of the evidence you have found — or not found — and to document your conclusions. Remember to include the source citation for each piece of evidence. This is essential for evaluating the strength of the information within the evidence.

### Research Plan for Francis M. Stocks

#### Fulton County Health Department

- Francis M. Stocks' death certificate
- Wife's death certificate

#### Fulton County Courthouse

- Marriage record for Francis M. Stocks
- Jury lists
- Land and property records
  - Home address
  - Stocks Coal Company
  - Other real estate holdings
  - Tax records concerning all properties
- Probate files

#### Atlanta-Fulton Public Library

- City Directories
  - Francis M. Stocks home address
  - Check 1875-1881 directories to ascertain year of arrival
  - Stocks Coal Company listings – years and locations
  - Relatives in Atlanta (children)
    - Thomas F. Stocks
    - Miss Nelly Stocks
    - Mrs. Gerald G. Hannah
    - Mrs. W. Watts Morgan
  - Relatives in Birmingham, Alabama
    - Mrs. Alvis M. Weatherly
  - Relatives in Atlanta (brothers)
    - James D. Stocks
    - William H. Stocks
  - Walker Street M. E. Church
- Newspapers (microform and clipping files)
  - Articles about Francis M. Stocks
  - Ads for Stocks Coal Company
  - Obituaries
- Histories
  - Local and county histories mentioning Francis M. Stocks or Stocks Coal Company
  - Possibility of a Stocks family history
- Institutional database subscriptions accessible in or through the library

*Portion of the Research Plan developed from the obituary of Frances M. Stocks. (Courtesy of the author)*

### There May Be More...

Remember that there may be other published material about an individual's death. It is, therefore, important to search or browse the publications in which you found one item. In the case of Mr. Stocks, the funeral notice (shown) was published the next day, and provided details of his funeral, the officiating clergy, the pallbearers, his surviving family members, and dignitaries in attendance. Additional research into any of these people may

reveal more details into Mr. Stocks' life.

Remember that death notices may have been published in other places too. An obituary might also have been published in a previous place of residence. A death notice for an individual of some prominence may also have appeared in other newspapers as well. Don't overlook newsletters, newspapers, and journals published by ethnic, religious, fraternal, alumni, and/or trade organizations.

**STOCKS**—Friends of Mr. Francis Marion Stocks, Mr. Thomas F. Stocks, Mr. and Mrs. Gerald G. Hannah, Miss Nellie Stocks, Mr. and Mrs. Alvis M. Weatherly, Mr. and Mrs. W. Watts Morgan, Mr. and Mrs. W. H. Stocks, Mr. James D. Stocks, are invited to attend the funeral of Mr. Francis M. Stocks this (Friday) afternoon, June 28, 1918, at 3 p. m., from the residence, Piedmont road, near Buckhead, Rev. A. E. Sansburn and Rev. J. R. King officiating. Interment at Oakland. The following gentlemen will serve as pallbearers and please meet at Barclay & Brandon's at 2:15 p. m.: Messrs. James L. Mayson, Charles I. Branan, Joseph A. McCord, Alfred Truitt, J. Bulow Campbell and Dr. K. H. Boland. The following gentlemen will act as honorary escort and please meet at the home: Governor Hugh M. Dorsey, W. L. Randall, Charles E. Sciple, Charles G. Harria, A. C. Turner, M. L. Thrower, Dr. M. T. Salter, Dr. H. F. Scott, John S. Owens, Mayor Asa G. Candler, S. W. Carson, R. W. Barnwell, Dr. Lewis Gaines, Colonel Reuben Arnold, Dr. Floyd W. McRae, Dr. Charles F. Benson, Edgar S. Kelley, Henry W. Davis, George A. Gershon, Joe Gershon, Dr. David B. Smith, George Donaldson, W. E. Treadwell, Captain James W. English, James I. Suttles and Henry B. Kennedy. Limousines will leave Barclay & Brandon's at 2:15 and autos will meet trolley car at Jacobs' drug store at Buckhead to convey friends to the residence. All coal dealers and operators are invited to attend.

Funeral Notice for Frances M. Stocks from *The Atlanta Constitution*, Friday, 28 June 1918 (Page 14). (Courtesy of *Newspapers.com*)

## Summary

The efforts you expend dissecting an obituary or other death notice will pay off in four ways. First, you'll have analyzed the content word-by-word and phrase-by-phrase to identify pointers to multiple types of evidence in multiple formats in multiple locations. Second, you'll have become intimately familiar with details of the individual's life and of some of the people in it. As a result of this work, your personal knowledge about the individual is substantially expanded. Third, the acts of writing down and carefully analyzing the details will have reinforced your knowledge. Finally, you will have obtained evidence copies that you can personally analyze and that will document facts in an individual's life.

Dissecting death notices can be invaluable in identifying new clues and locating additional evidence. It can expand your research and may potentially help break through some of your brick walls. ☒☒

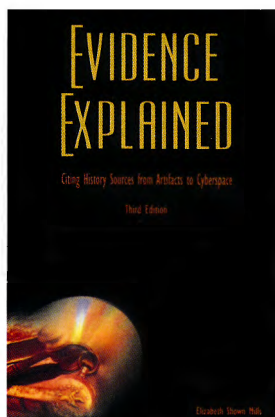


**GEORGE G. MORGAN** is president of Ahal Seminars, Inc., and a popular genealogy speaker in the US and abroad. He is a prolific author of books and magazine articles. The fourth edition of his highly popular book, *How to Do Everything: Genealogy*, was published by McGraw-Hill in early 2015. He and Drew Smith are the co-hosts of *The Genealogy Guys<sup>SM</sup> Podcast*, the longest running genealogy podcast with thousands of listeners around the globe.

## Evidence Explained: Citing History Sources from Artifacts to Cyberspace. Third Edition

Eight years have passed since the first edition of *Evidence Explained*, the definitive guide to the citation and analysis of historical sources — a guide so thorough that it leaves nothing to chance. Yet advances in genealogy and history research, changes at major repositories and online information providers, and the ever-evolving electronic world have generated new citation and analysis challenges for researchers. While countless websites now suggest ways to identify their offerings, few of those address the analytical needs of a researcher concerned with the nature and provenance of web material, whose numerous incarnations and transformations often affect the reliability of their content.

Like the previous editions of *Evidence Explained*, the third edition explains citation principles for both traditional and non-traditional sources; includes more than 1,000 citation models for virtually every source type; and shows readers where to go to find their sources and how to describe and evaluate them. It contains many new citation models, updates to websites, and descriptions and evaluations of numerous contemporary materials not included in earlier editions.



### Highlights of the third edition include

- QuickStart Guide
- Expanded “3x3” Evidence Analysis Process Model
- Expanded coverage for genetic citations
- Expanded coverage of layered citations

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