

# MARRIAGE RECORDS FOUND IN NEWSPAPERS:

Engagement, Marriage, Anniversary and Divorce Records

Thomas Jay Kemp

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## **About the Author**

Thomas Jay Kemp is the Director of Genealogy Products at GenealogyBank. Tom is an internationally known librarian and archivist. He is the author of over 45 genealogy books and hundreds of articles about genealogy and family history. Tom previously served as the Chair of the National Council of Library & Information Associations (Washington, D.C.) and as Library Director of both the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the New England Historic Genealogical Society. He began his career in 1963 as the Assistant to the Librarian in the Genealogy & Local History Room at the Ferguson Library (Stamford, Connecticut).

# Marriage Records Found in Newspapers: Engagement, Marriage, Anniversary and Divorce Records

MARRIAGE IS one of the most important decisions many people make in their lives, an act watched and recorded by society. Each stage in the process—engagement, marriage, and the celebration of anniversaries—is often announced to the public in the form of notices published in the local newspaper. For those marriages that fail, newspapers often publish divorce notices and records as well.

These notices usually provide more information than just the specific couple getting married—or divorced. You will often find the names of other family members and their places of residence, as well as stories that help make up your family history.

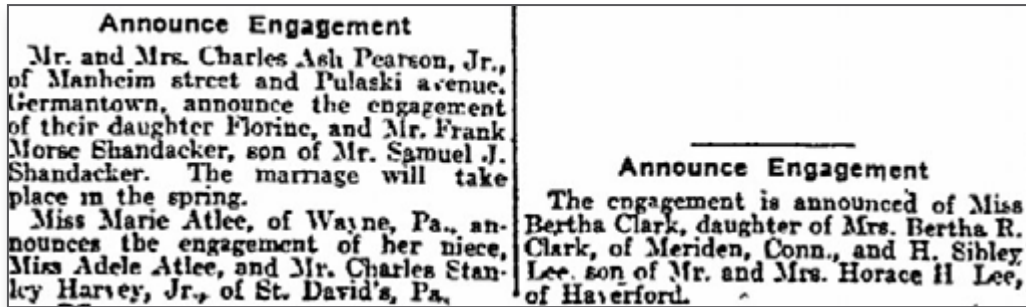
Let's examine the four kinds of marriage-related notices (engagement, marriage, anniversary, and divorce) to see what kind of genealogical information these notices contain.

# Marriage Records

## Engagements

Marriages are good news, and that news begins with the engagement announcement.

Engagements are usually announced by the parents, as in this first example printed by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Pennsylvania) on 4 March 1917, page 8:



From the first example, we learn:

- The names, address and hometown of the parents
- The names of the future bride and groom
- The name of the fiancé's father (Why no mention of the mother?)
- Approximate time of the wedding ("in the spring")

From the second example, we learn:

- The name and place of residence of the person announcing the engagement (Surprisingly, the fiancé's aunt is the one making this announcement)
- The names of the future bride and groom (Why no mention of the fiancé's parents?)

From the third example, we learn:

- The names of the future bride and groom
- The name of the fiancé's mother and her place of residence (Why no mention of the father?)
- The names and place of residence of the fiancé's parents
- Notice that in this example the wording is changed slightly and there is no attribution of who is announcing the engagement

## Marriage Records

Carefully examine these engagement notices for family history clues:

- Are the full names of the intended bride and groom given?
- Families come in all sizes, shapes and combinations. If the names of the parents of the bride and groom are not listed—that is a clue
- Dig deeper to find out why they were not listed. Death? Divorce? A rift in the family?
- Families migrated across the country over the past centuries. Youth went away to college in other states or settled in new areas to find employment. Therefore, as in the last example, it is common to see engagements of a young woman from Connecticut to a young man of Pennsylvania.

These three examples of engagement notices provide a number of names and places of residence for your family tree. Look for clues in the information given and omitted from the announcements to further guide you in your research.

In the 20th and 21st Centuries it has been common to include a photograph or etching of the bride-to-be or of the couple. Finding pictures of our ancestors in their youth is an added bonus. Here's an example of an engagement notice printed in 1912 by the *Boston Journal* (Massachusetts) on 21 November 1912, page 4:

**Announce Engagement  
of Former Classmates**



**MISS GEORGIANA FRANCIS.**  
Newton girl whose engagement is announced.

Miss Georgiana Francis and Ralph P. 26, Wales of Bowery street, Newton Falls, who were sweethearts since a girl and a boy at the Newton High School, graduating in 1911, are to be married. The engagement was announced yesterday by Mr. and Mrs. William Francis, 244 1/2 Park Avenue, N.Y. Mr. Wales is the son of Mr. and Mrs. P. 26, Wales of Bowery street, Newton Falls, and when a girl at the Newton High School, she met him in town with Miss Francis. They were much together then and recently, when their former classmates received the announcement of the engagement, they were eager to express their congratulations. The date of the wedding has not been announced.

# Marriage Records

## Marriages

Let's take a look at a typical marriage notice. This one was printed by the *Dallas Morning News* (Texas) on 22 July 1962, section 7, page 4:



MRS. JOHN SCOTT McMAHON

## Joan Wilson Marries John Scott McMahon

Whaley Memorial Methodist Church in Gainesville was the setting for the Saturday wedding of Miss Joan Wilson and John Scott McMahon, who will live in St. Charles, Ill., after a short wedding trip.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnie W. Wilson of Gainesville are parents of the bride, who is a former student of Austin College and a member of Alpha Delta Chi.

The bridegroom is the son of Mr. and Mrs. J. L. McMahon of St. Charles, Ill., formerly of Dallas. He was graduated in May from Austin College, where he was president of Drake fraternity.

Dr. Earl J. Patton, who heard the vows of the bride's parents 33 years ago, officiated, assisted by the Rev. William D. Craig of Nocona.

The bride was given in marriage by her father, and honor attendants were Miss Jean Wilson of Gainesville, sister of the bride, and the bridegroom's father.



## Marriage Records

Let's enlarge the text block so that we can easily read all the family information contained in this marriage notice:

**Joan Wilson Marries  
John Scott McMahon**

Whaley Memorial Methodist Church in Gainesville was the setting for the Saturday wedding of Miss Joan Wilson and John Scott McMahon, who will live in St. Charles, Ill., after a short wedding trip.

Mr. and Mrs. Johnie W. Wilson of Gainesville are parents of the bride, who is a former student of Austin College and a member of Alpha Delta Chi.

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The bride was given in marriage by her father, and honor attendants were Miss Jean Wilson of Gainesville, sister of the bride, and the bridegroom's father.

We learn:

- Names of the bride and groom
- Name and location of the church
- Date of the wedding
- Reference to where the couple will live
- Names of the parents of the bride
- Biographical information about the bride: she attended college and was a member of a sorority
- Biographical information about the groom: he attended college and was a member of a fraternity

## Marriage Records

- This announcement provides an interesting piece of family history: the same minister that married this couple also married “the bride’s parents 33 years ago.” It is common for a bride to be married in the church that she and her family have attended—a good clue to where church records may be found of the family’s history
- Members of the wedding party are named
- The notice also presents a picture of the bride that may be the only picture you can find of her at this age

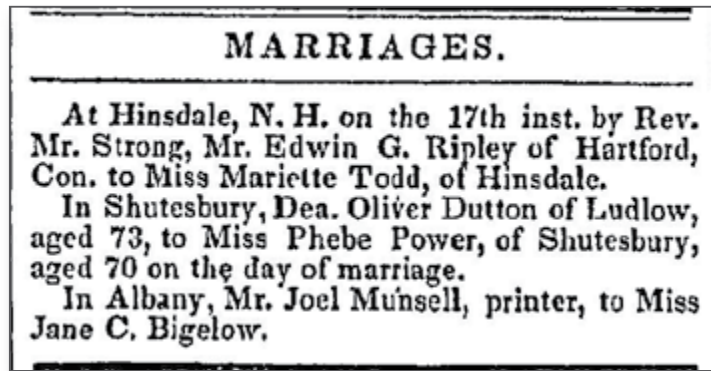
It is not just young people who get married, of course. It is common for individuals to remarry following the death of a spouse or a divorce. Middle-aged couples—and senior citizens—also tie the knot. Notice that marriage announcements sometimes give background information about previous marriages, giving us important family history clues. Here is an example from 1742, printed by the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) on 25 November 1742, page 2:

**We hear from Stoneham, that Mr. Peter Hays of that Town, aged 85 Years, was married to an ancient Widow, aged 82: This is the old Gentleman’s sixth Wife, and her fifth Husband.**

That’s quite a bit of family history we learn from one brief marriage notice. If Peter Hays of Stoneham, Pennsylvania, is your ancestor, you have a lot of follow-up searching to do, since you now know that in this 1742 marriage, Peter gained his sixth wife—and she her fifth husband!

Look for marriages to occur for young and old alike. Take this example, printed by the *Independent Inquirer* (Brattleboro, Vermont) on 28 June 1834, page 3:

## Marriage Records



- In the middle example of this marriage notice, Deacon Oliver Dutton of Ludlow (Vermont), age 73, is marrying Miss Phebe Power of Shutesbury (Massachusetts), age 70
- Notice the phrase: “Miss Phebe Power, of Shutesbury, aged 70 on the day of marriage”; is this a clue that they were married on her birthday?

This wedding announcement is also a good reminder that newspapers routinely published marriage information from a wide surrounding area. In this example printed by a Vermont paper, all three of the marriages were performed in other states: Hinsdale, New Hampshire; Shutesbury, Massachusetts; and Albany, New York. Why news from such a wide area? The answer is quite simple: remember, editors are in the business of selling newspapers, and the larger the area that they provide “local” coverage for, the larger their subscriber base will be.

This is a good tip when doing your family history research: if the geographically-limited, narrow search you first tried turned up few or zero results, expand the area of your search—newspaper articles about your ancestors may have been printed in newspapers you would never have thought of or expected.

### **Anniversaries**

Just like engagements and marriages, the news of anniversary celebrations are joyous events, and the community is happy years later to celebrate with them. Recognizing this community interest, newspapers often publish news of couples celebrating milestone anniversaries—especially their 50th or 75th wedding anniversary.

Here’s a good example, printed by the *Dallas Morning News* (Texas) on 19 January 1948, section 2, page 13:

## Marriage Records



There is a lot of family history contained in this anniversary notice. Let's enlarge the text and see what we learn:

**WHITNEY, Texas, Jan. 18 (AP).**  
—Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Elihue Rose joined hands Sunday and reviewed their marriage vows they had taken seventy-five years ago, Jan. 16, 1873.

Uncle Tom, 95, and Aunt Easter, 93, sat in white draped chairs in a hall above the bank in this small town while the young pastor of the Baptist Church read the ceremony in which they pledged again their loyalty and love until their life shall end.

"They are a wonderful old couple," was the comment most often heard among the 100 relatives and friends who came to congratulate the two.

## Marriage Records

- The names of the couple: Thomas Elihue Rose and Easter Rose
- Their wedding date: 16 January 1873
- Their ages: Thomas is 95, Easter is 93
- The anniversary: their 75th
- The event: the couple renewed the vows they took 75 years ago; “they pledged again their loyalty and love until their life shall end”
- The celebration: 100 relatives and friends “came to congratulate the two”
- The place: Whitney, Texas

The next two paragraphs are loaded with family details:

**The couple have 104 living direct descendants, including nine children, thirty-nine grandchildren, forty - seven great - grandchildren and nine great-great-grandchildren. The youngest who came Sunday was Anthony Steen of Morgan, Texas, who was five years old on the day his great-great-grandparents celebrated their diamond wedding anniversary. The oldest was their son, H. E. Rose, 72, of Whitney.**

- 104 living direct descendants (There: the challenge has been given! If Mr. and Mrs. Rose are your ancestors, then you have at least 104 descendants to track down)
- 9 children
- 39 grandchildren
- 47 great-grandchildren
- 9 great-great-grandchildren
- Youngest family member attending: great-great-grandson Anthony Steen of Morgan, Texas, five years old
- Oldest family member attending: son H. E. Rose of Whitney, Texas, 72 years old



## Marriage Records

Two other paragraphs offer more valuable family information:

**Their son, C. F. Rose, 52, Roscoe, Texas, was his father's best man, and their daughter, Mrs. Joe Connolly, 55, was her mather's attendant.**

**The children here Sunday were Mrs. Connolly, W. T. Rose, 60, Whitney; Mrs. T. A. Hendrix, 69, Houston; Homer Rose, 65, Morgan; Mrs. J. W. Jackson, 74, Stamford; H. E. Rose and C. F. Rose.**

We learn the names and places of residence of seven of their children:

- C. F. Rose, 52, of Roscoe, Texas
- Mrs. Joe Connolly, 55, of Whitney, Texas
- W. T. Rose, 60, of Whitney, Texas
- Homer Rose, 65, of Morgan, Texas
- Mrs. T. A. Hendrix, 69, of Houston, Texas
- H. E. Rose, 72, of Whitney, Texas
- Mrs. J. W. Jackson, 74, of Stamford, Texas

Along with such vital family information as names, ages, relationships, and places of residence, anniversary notices often provide family stories and details that may be hard to find elsewhere, such as these paragraphs:

**Uncle Tom and Aunt Easter were born only five miles apart in Tennessee. They met for the first time at church and were married two years later. The two came to Texas in covered wagons in 1877 and moved to the Huron community near here in 1894.**

**Rose was a farmer. The 95-year-old man attributes his long life to his fondness for buttermilk and drinking no intoxicants. His wife attributes hers to "raising children and working hard."**

## Marriage Records

This is good information, the sort of thing you won't find in a census or other government record, but will find in a newspaper. You can't travel back in a time machine to attend the Rose's 75th Wedding Anniversary—but thanks to this newspaper article about their anniversary it's as if you were there, sitting by their side, asking them questions about their long life together.

These newspaper accounts of anniversaries can bring alive a precious moment in your ancestors' lives. You weren't at the anniversary celebration, but these descriptions almost make the event part of your own memories:

**Aunt Easter wore a new blue crepe dress with a white carnation corsage. Her soft white hair was a halo around her face. Uncle Tom was dignified in a dark suit and wore a bright figured tie and white carnation boutonniere.**

**A few tears gleamed in their eyes while the soloist sang "Silver Threads Among the Gold," and the preacher, the Rev. Fred Devaney, of Whitney read the ceremony.**

**On a table nearby were gifts friends had brought and letters of congratulations from the President of the United States and the Governor of Texas.**

**"It gives me pleasure to join with your group of friends in solicitating you on this memorable occasion and to wish you every happiness in the days ahead," President Truman wrote.**

**"I am sure you find comfort and cheer in the reminiscences of many years of companionship."**

Clearly, finding an anniversary notice for one of your ancestors can be a real bonanza to your family history research.

# Marriage Records

## Divorces

As we're all too aware, not all marriages last.

The collage features several overlapping text elements from historical newspapers:

- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A large, bold, diagonal headline.
- AS Usual, Docket Will Be Taken Up First Day of Court Monday, May 8th.**: A notice about court proceedings.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A smaller version of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: Another instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A fourth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A fifth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A sixth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A seventh instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: An eighth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A ninth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A tenth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: An eleventh instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A twelfth instance of the headline.
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- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: An eighteenth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A nineteenth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A twentieth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A twenty-first instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A twenty-second instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A twenty-third instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A twenty-fourth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A twenty-fifth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A twenty-sixth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A twenty-seventh instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A twenty-eighth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A twenty-ninth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A thirtieth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A thirty-first instance of the headline.
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- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A seventieth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A seventy-first instance of the headline.
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- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: An eighty-eighth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: An eighty-ninth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A ninetieth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A ninety-first instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A ninety-second instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A ninety-third instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A ninety-fourth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A ninety-fifth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A ninety-sixth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A ninety-seventh instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A ninety-eighth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A ninety-ninth instance of the headline.
- SEVENTY-EIGHT DIVORCE CASES**: A hundredth instance of the headline.

For the past 300 years, newspapers have been printing news of divorce cases that have been filed and/or granted. Here's an example, printed by the *Boston Post Boy* (Massachusetts) on 22 July 1751, page 2:

**A** Petition having been prefer'd to the Lieutenant-Governour, and Council, by *Hannah Rolfe*, complaining of her Husband *Ezra Rolfe* for Violation of the Marriage Covenant, and praying for a Divorce; Order was pass'd, that a Hearing be had thereon, before the Board upon Thursday the Tenth Day of *October* next, at Ten a Clock in the Forenoon, and that Notice thereof be given in the Publick Prints, that so the said *Ezra* may appear before the Board at the Time above-mentioned, to make Answer thereto.

Attest *Sam'l Holbrook*, D<sup>y</sup> Secr<sup>y</sup>.



## Marriage Records

Divorce was a very public and complicated procedure in our nation's early history; divorce requests involved a hearing that was publicly announced, seeking public input. In many states the final divorce had to be approved by the governor or the state legislature. The process was far more complicated back then than it is today. From this public notice we learn:

- The wife's name: Hannah Rolfe
- The husband's name: Ezra Rolfe
- Date of the hearing: 10 October 1751

Divorce is a court action. Some states required plaintiffs to publish their actual divorce petition as a legal notice/advertisement in the local newspaper. This example was printed as a front-page advertisement in the 25 January 1862 issue of the *Commercial Daily Register* (Sandusky, Ohio):

**NOTICE.**

**Rachel Ann Birch**  
vs.  
**William Henry Birch.** } **Divorce.**

**THE** said **William Henry Birch**, whose residence is supposed to be at **Monroeville**, in the county of **Huron**, Ohio, will take notice, that **Rachel Ann Birch** has filed her petition in the office of the **Clerk of Common Pleas of Erie county, Ohio**, charging the said **William Henry Birch** with gross neglect of duty. The prayer of said petition is, that she may be divorced from the said defendant, and that the same will be for hearing at the next term of said Court.

**BACHEL ANN BIRCH.**  
**By F. Potter, her Attorney.**

**January 10, 1862.** 64-69

From this public notice we learn:

- The wife's full name: Rachel Ann Birch
- The husband's full name: William Henry Birch
- The husband's place of residence: Monroeville, Huron County, Ohio
- Place divorce petition was filed: Erie County, Ohio
- Date petition was filed: 10 January 1862

## Marriage Records

- Name of plaintiff's attorney: "F. Potter, her attorney"
- Date of the hearing: next term of the Court of Common Pleas of Erie County, Ohio

From these two examples we see that divorce notices can provide full names, places of residence, dates, venue where hearing or court action occurred (and where legal records may be found), and a brief peek into a troubled marriage.

### **Newspapers: Great Source for Matrimonial Records**

As the examples have shown, newspapers from their very earliest days have published all four types of matrimonial records (engagement, marriage, anniversary, and divorce). GenealogyBank.com has more than 7,000 digitized newspapers ([click here](#) to see the complete title list). These newspaper articles will give you names and dates to help fill in your family tree, as well as clues to guide your family research in new directions.

## Marriage Records