

But I Don't Know German!

Deciphering Death Notices in German-American Newspapers

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You don't know German?

With a little knowledge and the right tools, you can still successfully find and decipher death notices in German-language newspapers.

The development of newspaper death notices

Classified ads in American newspapers date from 1704 in the Boston News-Letter¹. Before the mid-19th century, deaths of notable residents or those who died through tragedy were commonly reported as news items. By the mid-19th century, newspapers began publishing notices of death for a fee charged by word or line.

Finding German-language newspapers

German immigrants published local newspapers wherever they settled, and many religious, social, and labor organizations published their own. Bibliographies are helpful for locating them. *American Newspapers, 1821–1936: A Union List of Files Available in the United States and Canada* and *German-American Newspapers and Periodicals, 1732–1955: History and Bibliography*, are two in print. Both identify the repositories where newspapers can be found. “U.S. Newspaper Directory, 1690–Present” on the Library of Congress website is also useful for finding newspaper titles the institutions that have them.

Once you find a newspaper of interest, contact the repository listed in the bibliography or search for the title in *WorldCat*. Search results will list libraries that have the newspaper and available formats. Once you locate the newspaper, you can often request it on microfilm through interlibrary loan or request a lookup.

If you are lucky, the newspaper will be available digitally. *Historic German Newspapers Online* provides a list of digitized German newspapers. Commercial databases, such as *Newspapers.com*, and the Library of Congress's “Chronicling America” project offers a growing collection of digitized papers.

Locating a death notice in a newspaper

Unless an index is available, you will need at least an approximate date of death of the person you are researching. Begin by searching the newspaper on the day of death and at least four days afterwards.

Where death notices appeared within the publication depends on the time period and the publication. You will usually find them adjacent to or within the classified ad section. Look for visual clues. The death notice section was commonly defined by a heading in large, bold type, such as *Todesanzeigen* or *Neue Anzeigen* (“death notices” and “new notices,” respectively). Individual notices were set off by thick, black horizontal bars, which differentiated them from surrounding content. Names might be in bold type and the text might use drop caps.

If you don't find a death notice, remember that they were common but not universal. Cost could be a prohib-

1. “History of Classified Ads,” FiWi Classifieds, August 10, 2013, <https://www.fiwiclassifieds.com/blog/the-history-of-classified-ads>.

iting factor. For example, a death notice published in the St. Louis *Westliche Post* cost \$1.65 in 1883 when a laborer's wage about was about \$1.30 per day.

Deciphering death notices

information supplied by death notices varied by time period and publication, but a standard format developed: name of the deceased (with women's maiden names); day and time of death; burial day, time, and place; address where the body lay in state (commonly the family home); and list of survivors and their relationships to the deceased. Familiarizing yourself with the format will make deciphering easier. A typical notice reads as translated:

Friedrich W. Osterholt, our beloved husband, father, and father-in-law, died Monday at 4:30 p.m. after a short illness at the age of 63 years. The funeral procession will take place on Thursday, 8:30 a.m. from the home of the bereaved, 1400 Clark Ave. to St. Mary's Church for the funeral service and from there to Calvary Cemetery. The presence of relatives and friends is requested. [a list of survivors and their relationships then follows].²

A deceased immigrant's village of origin, a prized piece of information, is not always mentioned.

Related notices

Lodges and social organizations commonly published brief notices when members died. The family sometimes published a *Nachruf*, (obituary) on the anniversary of death. These commonly included the deceased's name, date of death, and a tribute, such as a poem. *Danksagungen* (notices of thanks) were sometimes published after the funeral.

Beyond death notices

If the person you are researching was notable in the community, look for an article. This might be published on a different date or in a different section of the newspaper than the death notice.

Fraktur, alphabet & vocabulary

German publications used a typeface style called *Fraktur*, which is similar to what we call "Old English" but based on German handwriting forms. The German alphabet itself is identical to English except for the addition of three umlauted vowels (Ä/ä, ö/Ö, and Ü/ü), and a consonant called the *Eszet* (ß) representing "ss." The letter "s" can take two forms depending on whether it occurs at the beginning, middle, or end of a syllable. Learning to recognize letter forms and key words and phrases will make deciphering easier. A *Fraktur* chart appears on the next page and a German word list and other aids are available on the St. Louis County Library website.

Tips for deciphering Fraktur

Create a visual reference by typing out the name of the person your are researching in *Fraktur*. Fonts are available free online from "1001 Fonts" and other sources. Keeping the example at hand while you look through the publication will help you identify the name. Use online translation aids to help decipher a text. Type the text in *Fraktur* and change it to a Latin font on your computer. For example:

2. "Friedrich W. Osterholt," *Anzeiger des Westens*, Oct. 19, 1887, p. 5.

! Pflüchtlicher Tod. Herr Koel
Sierette, ein Schweizer und Eigenthümer
des unter dem Namen „Dents Exchange“
bekanntes Bier- und Kaffee-Hauses an der
Levee, zwischen Plum- und Poplar Straße,
begab sich gestern Vormittag in das Dach-
zimmer des Hauses, um seine dort befind-
lichen Tauben zu füttern. Er stieg auf
einen Kasten, als er plötzlich einen Anfall
von Apoplexie erlitt und auf den Fußbo-
den stürzte. Ehe ein herbeigerufener Arzt
ihm zu Hülfe kommen konnte, war er bereits
gestorben. Der Coroner hielt am Nach-
mittag Leichenschau über den Körper und
die Geschworenen gaben einen Ausspruch
in Uebereinstimmung mit dem Anatomen

G. A. R.
Chas. Smith Kamerad vom Chas. Demney Hofen
No. 341, starb am Samstag Morgen 4 Uhr. Die
Beerdigung findet am Montag, den 8. April, um 2
Uhr von 2751 Arignat Straße aus statt und sind alle
Beamten eingeladen, am Begräbnis theilzunehmen.
Wm. G. Mohling, Adjutant.
August Meyer, Commandeur.

Examples of death information found in St. Louis
German newspapers. Clockwise from far top left:
news report, lodge notice, *Nachruf*, notice for Frie-
drich Osterholt (see text), group of notices published
in *Anzeiger des Westens*, 1878.

Neue Anzeigen.

Todesanzeigen.
Friedrich W. Osterholt, unser geliebter Gatte,
Vater und Schwiegervater, starb Montag Nachmit-
tag 15 nach kurzem Leiden im Alter von 63 Jahren. Das
Leichenbegängniß findet statt am Donnerstag Morgen, 19
Uhr vom Trauerhause, 1400 Clark Ave., aus zur St.
Martin-Kirche, woselbst ein feierliches Leichenamt statt-
findet, von da aus zum Calvary-Friedhof, woyu Herr
wunke und Freunde höflich eingeladen sind. Die trau-
ernden Hinterbliebenen
Katharine Osterholt, geb. Kettler, Gattin.
Henry Osterholt, }
Fred. Osterholt, } Kinder.
Edm. Osterholt, }
Julia Osterholt, }
Frank Osterholt, }
Marj. Herrenbach, geb. Osterholt, }
John W. Seegers, } Gntel.
Edm. Herrenbach, } Schwiegersohn.
Eugen Herrenbach, } Gntel.
Thod. Herrenbach, }
Seine Blumen.

Nachruf
An meinen Gatten und Vater, Ferd. Seifmann,
gestorben den 27. Januar 1898.
Weinend legen wir dich nieder,
In dem stillen Schlafesmaße;
Niemand lechzt du zu uns wieder,
Darum weinen wir dir nach.
Doch es schlägt für uns die Stunde,
Wo wir dich einst wiederseh'n.
Wenn vereint um irdischen Bande
Wir vor Gottes Throne steh'n.
Endlich hast du überstanden
Lange schwere, harte Stunden,
Manchen Tag und manche Nacht
Hast du in Schmerzen zugebracht.
Standhaft hast du sie ertragen
Teine Schmerzen, keine Klagen,
Bis der Tod dein Auge schloß.
Doch vergessen wir dich nicht.
Elise Seifmann, Gattin.

Transcribe the text in Fraktur:

Philip Mueller geliebter Vater von Chas. und Fred Mueller, starb am Freitag, den 21. Juni 1907, um 10
Uhr Abends.

Change to a Latin font:

Philip Mueller geliebter Vater von Chas. und Fred Mueller, starb am Freitag, den 21. Juni 1907, um 10
Uhr Abends.

You can then paste the text into an online translation service, such as “Google Translate.”

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The German alphabet in *Fraktur*

ⱱ	A	ⱱ	P	a	a	q	q	1	1
Ɱ	B	Ɱ	Q	b	b	r	r	2	2
Ɀ	C	Ɀ	R	c	c	f	s	3	3
ⱪ	D	Ɀ	S	d	d	s	s	4	4
Ȿ	E	Ɀ	T	e	e	t	t	5	5
Ɱ	F	Ɱ	U	f	f	u	u	6	6
Ɱ	G	Ɱ	V	g	g	v	v	7	7
Ɱ	H	Ɱ	W	h	h	w	w	8	8
Ɱ	I	Ɀ	X	i	i	x	x	9	9
Ɱ	J	Ɱ	Y	j	j	y	y	0	0
Ɱ	K	Ɀ	Z	k	k	z	z		
Ɱ	L	Ɀ	Ä	l	l	ä	ä		
Ɱ	M	Ɀ	Ö	m	m	ö	ö		
Ɱ	N	Ɱ	Ü	n	n	ü	ü		
Ɱ	O			o	o	ß	ß		

Three letter forms used for "s"

f occurs in the middle of a syllable
zu Hause
 zu Hause

s occurs only at the end of a syllable

Hausfrau
 Hausfrau

ß equals "ss"

daß daß (dass)

Easily-confused letter forms

ⱱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ
A	U	B	V	I	J	K	R	C	E	G	S
f	fkl	ij	rx	ny	ov						
ch	ck	sch	st	ft	ss	ff	fi	tz			



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