

The Value of Historical Obituaries in Family Research

By Linda Wood Freeman

Though often somber in tone, obituaries are invaluable historical records, offering unique insights into the lives, families, and communities of those who came before us. For family historians, a well-written, detail-rich obituary can be a treasure trove—revealing stories, connections, and facts that may never appear in any other record.

When examining historical obituaries, it can be helpful to look for certain key elements, each offering distinct clues about an ancestor's life:

- Documentation of Life and Death: Confirms vital facts such as dates and locations.
- Family Connections: Mentions of relatives can help establish or confirm family relationships.
- Biographical Information: Provides insight into occupations, education, and accomplishments.
- Confirmation of Facts: Supports or clarifies information found in other records.
- Cultural and Social Context: Reflects the individual's community role, faith, and social standing.
- Burial Details: Notes the cemetery, funeral customs, or religious affiliations.
- Uncovering Unknown Relatives: May reveal previously unknown family members or connections.

Historical obituaries are indispensable resources that capture more than just dates and names—they reveal the character, relationships, and communities that shaped an individual's life. Reviewing and recording this information not only enriches a family's history but can also lead researchers to other valuable records such as wills, probate files, land deeds, or military service documents.

To illustrate the kind of insights an obituary can offer, here is my transcription of the obituary of my second great-grandmother, Mrs. Sarah Madole, which appeared in *The Democratic Press* (Ravenna, Ohio) on November 5, 1890 (image 3:4). This remarkable find not only answered several long-standing questions about her life but also opened new avenues for further research.

Discovering Sarah's obituary reminded me of how a single document can deepen our understanding of our ancestors—not only confirming what we already know but also inviting us to explore the many untold stories that lie between the lines of history.

OBITUARY

Mrs. S. Madole. Even in the stillness of the early morning, when men, refreshed by sleep, turn their attentions once more to Worldly avocations, the dismal news came upon us that Mrs. Madole was dead. Her many friends in Kent, Ravenna, and the intervening and adjoining country were indeed saddened to learn on Wednesday morning that she had passed to her eternal reward. Sarah Byrne, alias Mrs. S. Madole, was born in Lebanon county, Pa., in May 1824. Oh, how pains to think of it. That dear little innocent, only six weeks old, is already deprived of the loving care of her fond parents, and left adrift in the cold, cold world, helpless and alone. But kind Providence whose ways are inscrutable and who ordains all things for the best, soon provided for her. Prompted by Christian charity, Mr. and Mrs. Morara at once adopted her. They, accompanied by their adopted daughter, moved to Ohio and located midway between Kent and Ravenna, when she was but 11 years old. Here she resided until a year ago last May. Her health failing, she then moved to Kent where she has lived since, if we except an

extended trip through the South for the benefit of her health. Whilst there she seemed to gain rapidly, so that on her return her health was apparently much improved. But alas, it was only apparent, for she soon commenced to fail and continued so to do till death. She was married to George Madole, Sept. 2nd, 1841. They then clasped hands before the Altar of God and promised each other to abide as faithful companions, fellow-wayfarers along the path of life. For the period of 36 years the promise was faithfully fulfilled, till the one (the husband) was stricken by death, Jan. 1st. 1877, and the other, solitary and alone, proceeded along the path, even to the grave. Of a retiring disposition, she devoted herself almost exclusively to the important duties of a wife and mother. Her many noble traits of character can be felt rather than expressed, She had an extensive acquaintance, and her friends were numbered by the score. Seven loving children (three boys and four girls), viz: J. G. Madole, Mrs. M. K. Risk. W. M. Madole. Ida S. Madole, Mrs. I. J. Kelso, B. M. Madole and Mrs. F. C. Park, with their children (nineteen living), who one and all loved 'grand-ma" survive to mourn her loss. The funeral services took place at 10 a m on Saturday, the 25th ult. , at St. Patrick's Church at Kent, and were solemn and impressive. Father Graham, the pastor, sang the solemn Mass and preached an impressive sermon. He spoke briefly of the death of the just as possessing the qualities of willingness, peace and joy, and stated that the death of the deceased had without doubt these qualities. Fr. Farrell of Ravenna, was present in the Sanctuary. The music was finely rendered by Miss Kinney, of Ravenna, who was ably assisted by the Misses M Brennan, of Cleveland, and L. Walter of Ravenna. Many beautiful flowers were donated. Among them were two crosses, two sickles, a pillow, a wreath, baskets. &c. The donors were Misses Engels, Horn, Long, and Leonard, of Canton, Mrs. Summers [Sommers], and Mrs. Horn, of Wooster, Miss Kinney and Messrs, Geo. Cook, II. C. Merts and W. H. Marsh, of Ravenna, Miss Henton and Mrs. Leonard, of Kent, and others. The remains were placed in the vault in Kent and will be finally laid beside those of her deceased husband.

Based upon the incredibly detailed information provided in Sarah's obituary, I decided to ask the AI chatbot, ChatGPT, to devise a research plan. The following was the result based entirely on the information supplied by the obituary.

Research Plan: Mrs. Sarah (Byrne) Madole (1824 – 1890)

Compiled from obituary published in *The Democratic Press* (Ravenna, Ohio), 5 Nov 1890

1. Birth & Parentage

- ☐ Confirm birth in May 1824, Lebanon Co., PA
- ☐ Identify biological parents — search church baptism, probate, or orphan court records
- ☐ Verify surname variations (Byrne/Burn/Bern/Beirne)
- ☐ Determine family's religion in Pennsylvania (possible Catholic link?)

2. Adoption & Early Life

- ☐ Research Mr. and Mrs. Morara (adoptive parents) — name variants, origins, religion
- ☐ Locate Morara household in 1830 or 1840 PA censuses
- ☐ Trace move to Portage Co., OH (~1835) via land or migration records

3. Marriage & Family

- ☐ Obtain marriage record: 2 Sep 1841 – George Madole
- ☐ Identify church/parish (possibly St. Patrick's, Kent)

- ☐ Research husband's origins, occupation, parents
- ☐ Document seven children & their descendants

4. Residence & Property

- ☐ Locate homestead "between Kent and Ravenna" on land/tax maps
- ☐ Track property ownership in Portage Co. records
- ☐ Check 1850–1880 censuses for Madole household

5. Religion & Community

- ☐ Review St. Patrick's Church registers for baptisms, marriages, burials
- ☐ Identify Father Graham and Father Farrell in diocesan archives
- ☐ Investigate donor names (Engels, Horn, Kinney, Leonard, etc.) for family ties

6. Death & Burial

- ☐ Verify exact death date (early Nov 1890, Kent OH)
- ☐ Obtain civil death record or church burial entry
- ☐ Locate grave; photograph marker; confirm final interment beside husband
- ☐ Search for probate or estate file (Portage Co., 1877 & 1890)

7. Obituary & Additional Sources

- ☐ Check other local papers (Kent, Portage Co.) for reprints or notices
- ☐ Compare with husband's & children's obituaries
- ☐ Look for church or community memorials

8. Follow-Up / Next Steps

- ☐ Build timeline with verified records
- ☐ Correlate findings with parish and census data
- ☐ Write short biographical sketch for family archive

Overall Research Goal: Document Sarah (Byrne) Madole's life using primary sources—birth, marriage, property, parish, and probate—to confirm family connections and migration from PA to OH.