

Chronicling America

DIANE L. RICHARD EXPLORES A NEW DIGITAL RESOURCE THAT WILL HELP YOU FIND INFORMATION IN OLD AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS

DO YOU LOVE to read the newspaper? Are you fascinated when you find a family member's obituary? Do you like to learn about your ancestor's community? Have you found it challenging to find existing newspapers for a certain area, at a particular point in time? If you are like me and answered yes to any of these questions, check out Chronicling America, <http://www.loc.gov/chroniclingamerica/>, a free website devoted to historic newspapers.

Chronicling America provides access to information about old newspapers and select digitized newspaper pages. It is produced by the National Digital Newspaper Program (NDNP), <http://www.neh.gov/projects/ndnp.html> or <http://www.loc.gov/ndnp>, which is a partnership program between the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Library of Congress (LoC).

Over a period of approximately 20 years, NDNP will create a national, digital resource of historically significant newspapers from all the states and US territories published between 1836 and 1922. The beta version of the first project phase is currently available online. Accompanying this website is an invaluable national newspaper directory of bibliographic and holdings information which directs users to newspaper titles published between 1690 to the present, which are available in many formats.

According to Mark Sweeney, Chief of the Serial and Government Publications Division at the Library of Congress, "Newspapers are a unique resource for understanding historical people, places and events at a very fine level, in a relatively unfiltered way. Newspapers present the 'news' as it was 'read by the man in the street' and so provides a unique perspective."

It is recognized that there are great challenges to accessing newspapers. There are many newspapers that have been in existence for years, and a number of them have been microfilmed, but the information is locked in that format. Although many newspapers have been cataloged, little indexing has been performed.

This led into a discussion of the project goals, which are to:

- Enhance access to all American newspapers using digital technology;
- Direct users to the best resource for newspapers, wherever that may be — a directory or digitized pages;
- Create a platform that contains more newspapers from more places over an extended time period; and,
- Have diverse newspaper content (e.g. multiple perspectives) which may affect or change how people look at history.

Currently there is the option to read newspaper pages from 1900 to 1910 or to find information about newspapers published in

the United States from 1690 to the present. The following is some information about these two types of content and how to navigate around the website.

FIND INFORMATION ABOUT NEWSPAPERS PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES FROM 1690 TO TODAY

The Newspaper Title Directory is derived from the library catalog records created by state institutions during the NEH-sponsored United States Newspaper Program 1981-2009, <http://www.neh.gov/projects/usnp.html>. For example, these are some of the state newspaper projects that I am familiar with and have found to be great resources: North Carolina, <http://statelibrary.dcr.state.nc.us/tss/newspape.htm>, New York State, <http://www.nysl.nysed.gov/nysnp/> and Ohio, <http://www.ohiohistory.org/resource/database/news.html>.

I will admit that during my preliminary explorations of the Newspaper Title Directory, I undervalued and did not appreciate its potential. I had previously found local digitization projects very helpful, but I can now say that for future North Carolina research, I will come to the Newspaper Title Directory project first.

To illustrate some of the most helpful features of this directory, I looked at newspapers from Wake County, North Carolina. As the capitol of North Carolina, it had



many newspapers that had combined, changed names or owners, or disappeared in the late 1700s.

There are several ways to search the Newspaper Directory: State/County/City, Time Period, Keywords, Publication Frequency, Language and Type of Press (which includes Ethnicity, Labor, Library of Congress Control Number [LCCN], Material Type).

I started my search by looking for "NC, Wake, Raleigh". This identified 260 newspapers. From this page you can re-sort the results, choose how many to display on a page or click on a title.

I was intrigued by the entry entitled, "*The North-Carolina Minerva, and Raleigh Advertiser* (Raleigh, N.C.) 1799-1800", since a number of other entries also mention Minerva and/or Advertiser. By clicking on the newspaper title, I found a detailed listing of its attributes. The full listing for this newspaper is too long to cover, so I will focus on the two elements which I have found most useful.

At the top of the listing, you have the option to examine "Libraries That Have It" and "MARC Record". The former will assist you if you are planning a trip to see this newspaper on microfilm at a library or if you are interested in trying to obtain it via interlibrary loan. The latter is the coding used by libraries to identify the particular publication.

At the bottom of the record, the website lists both preceding and succeeding titles. These will link you to those newspapers which are somehow connected to

the newspaper you identified. It was not unusual for newspapers to merge, be renamed or fold. This allows you to trace its evolution and improves your ability to follow your ancestors through pages of newsprint. For this example, the newspaper that preceded the one chosen was *The North-Carolina Minerva, And Fayetteville Advertiser* (Fayetteville, N.C.) 1796-1799, which was actually a Cumberland County paper, so its utility to events in Wake County is probably limited. My chosen newspaper was succeeded by *The North-Carolina Minerva* (Raleigh, N.C.) 1800-1803 which is probably more useful since it was published in Wake County.

I suggest that whenever you begin a project on a community



where your ancestors lived, that you check out this directory to see if there are newspapers that existed and/or have survived to this day. You will find that some communities do not have any surviving newspapers until the 20th century, while others may have them dating back to the late 17th century. When I did a global search for newspapers from 1690 to 1770 (the eve of the Revolution), I learned that there were 1,532 newspapers and 22 of them were from North Carolina, which is a lot more than I expected. Upon closer examination, I found that the search also included any newspapers that list dates as "????", which means the cataloger of the title could not establish a start or end date for the

title. So, in reality, North Carolina may have only had six surviving newspapers starting c. 1751.

NEWSPAPER PAGES FROM 1900 TO 1910

The first phase of the project includes the output of six organizations that the Library of Congress has chosen to digitize about 100,000 pages each from newspapers published in California, Florida, Kentucky, New York, Utah, Virginia and a smaller collection for the District of Columbia (DC) from 1900 to 1910. Currently, there are about 226,000 pages of newspaper content on the website, and it is expected that there will be a total of 600,000 pages by the end of 2007 when this first phase is complete.

I was curious about why 1900-1910 was chosen as the initial time frame. According to Mark Sweeney, this time period was chosen for several reasons:

- The year 1908 is the year that the largest number of newspapers were published that have the elements that we are familiar with today;
- Choosing a narrow time frame would simulate the end product, where an individual can search an event and see how it was reported in several newspapers; and,
- It created a "fair playground for all" since newspapers were so prolific in this time period and so many have survived, where that may not be the case for earlier years.

The project is designed so that it starts with early 20th-century newspapers, and stops with 1927, which is the end of what is currently in the public domain. If, like me, you are wondering why six states are listed and yet there are entries from seven places, Sweeney says that LoC incorporated DC for this phase of the project so that they could understand, from a user perspective, how the technical elements of the project work.

A unique element of this project, according to Sweeney is that "each state chooses how to represent itself via an advisory commit-

tee applying broad selection criteria." This means that each grant recipient, on behalf of their state, will decide whether they digitize 100,000 pages of one newspaper or maybe 10,000 pages each of 10 newspapers, or whether they cover the newspaper of the capital city or focus on the newspapers of smaller communities.

NAVIGATING AROUND DIGITAL NEWSPAPERS

As mentioned, there are thousands of digital images of newspaper pages on the website. Before walking through an example, I want to share some of the technical features that Sweeney and I discussed:

- Search results are shown in a default manner by newspaper title, date and page or image number, but may also be displayed via a thumbnail view with hits highlighted in the image;
- Search results are ordered in terms of relevance, based on number of hits per page, then number of words per page;
- The Search function uses stemming, which means that if you search the keyword "dog", it uses this word as a root word, so you will get dog, dogs, dogwood, dogma, etc. This provides the researcher with more choices and it helps when dealing with those hard-to-spell names where the first few letters often remain unchanged while the end changes (e.g. Morris, Morres, Morriss, Morrice); and,
- Not only are the articles searched by keyword, but also advertisements and any text associated with comic strips, as long as the words are not embedded in an image on the newspaper page.

BROWSING DIGITIZED NEWSPAPERS

This first example is a search started in the Newspaper Title Directory previously discussed. First, I searched for DC newspapers published between 1900 and 1910 and learned that there were 86 newspapers in the collection. One of

these newspapers is *The Washington Bee* (Washington, D.C.) 1884-1922. Since this newspaper has issues that have been digitized, at the top, where we previously found "Libraries That Have It" and "MARC Record", there is now another option called "Browse Issues".

This feature leads to a list of the available digitized issues. You have a couple of options at this point. You can click on the issue labeled "1899-08-05", which will bring up the first page of this edition of the newspaper, or you can click on "Thumbnail View" and see thumbnails of the first page of each of the first six editions available digitally. Granted, for this newspaper, they all look similar, but more often, the front pages are



quite different, reflecting the news of the day; so this feature can be a simple way to sort through the various editions.

Clicking on any of these issues will bring up the image viewer. This viewer has the following capabilities — zoom in, zoom out, magnifying glass, navigating through the images of the pages of the newspaper and print. If you click on "More options for this page" you will be able to view text (accomplished through the use of optical character recognition [OCR] interpretation), download a high resolution JPG or view PDF.

You also have the option to look at "All Pages of this Issue" (located above the viewing window), which allows you to see



thumbnails of each page. Using this, you can quickly see what pages have articles and which are full of advertisements. This is a very simple way to focus your attention on the type of news items you seek.

SEARCHING DIGITIZED NEWSPAPERS

You are not limited to browsing through the digitized newspapers. On the main page, click on "Read" and you will see numerous search options. The options include: State, newspaper, date or date range, and the options of "any", "all", "exact phrase" or words within five words of one another.

I searched for the exact phrase "teddy bear" and was told that there were 890 hits. I quickly noticed that many of the first hits appear to be in the "comic section" of the newspaper. I clicked on one of these entries and learned that there was a comic titled "Little Johnny and the Teddy Bears". The text associated with some of the panels included the phrase "teddy bear", so this page was listed and the phrase was highlighted each time it appeared.

On a more serious search, I decided to look for information on a person or an event, such as the assassination of President McKinley in 1901. This was an event that had lots of press coverage, which makes it perfect for this type of search. There were suspicions that Emma Goldman, an anarchist, may have been involved. A search using the

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options “with all of the words” = “anarchist” and “with the exact phrase” = “Emma Goldman” produced 224 hits. Having already researched this subject in the DC and NY newspapers, my interest was in what other newspapers may have reported. Page six of the 21 October 1901 edition of the *New Enterprise* (Madison, Florida) has a full-page article titled “Plans to Stamp out Anarchy — Biographical Sketch of Emma Goldman, Rabid Teacher of Revolution.”

And, the 13 September 1901 edition of the *Bourbon News* (Kentucky) also had a lengthy article about her. A similar search into the Wright Brothers and their famous flight of 1903 and other activities produced 495 hits. So, this website allows you to see what the press in various locales printed about an individual or historic event.

Obviously, most of the ancestors we research are more obscure than a national figure, but you may be surprised to find that they, too, can be found in a newspaper.

THE FUTURE

The second phase of the project is underway. Proposals have been solicited, <http://www.neh.gov/grants/guidelines/ndnp.html>, and the selected projects will begin the summer of 2007. This next phase focuses on English-language newspapers from 1880 to 1910. NEH recently announced continued funding for existing projects in California, Kentucky, New York, Utah, Virginia; and three new projects in Minnesota, Nebraska and Texas. Digitized pages from the new awards will likely become available in 2008.

It's important to remember that this is a government-funded project (meaning that we, the taxpayers, are supporting it) and that

the LoC and NEH are in this for the long run. Instead of sprinting to the finish line, as some of the subscription services do, this project is more like a marathon — it's a long-term project that will be free to users and will maintain a website that is as useful as possible within the limits of their financial support. The program is designed to begin with the more technically advanced states, which will participate in the earlier phases, and as technical capabilities advance in other states, they will join the project. Eventually, the project will include newspapers from all 50 states and select territories.

Additionally, balancing the technical issues of sustaining content over a long period of time with lower cost, while still providing free basic access to satisfy most users, has determined much of how the website operates. With a basic access approach, high value is placed on delivering all newspaper content (articles, photos, advertisements, etc.) in the historic context of the original full-page layout.

Even with these constraints, I found that some of the technical features for viewing images, such as thumbnails showing the newspaper pages and the “search hits” found, were wonderful. You could quickly see if your search hits were in advertisements or articles and whether they were concentrated on a page with a central article or scattered around the page.

The use of MARC coding, <http://www.loc.gov/marc/>, which is the same system used by libraries, combined with local holdings records acquired from WorldCat, <http://www.worldcat.org/>, has created a powerful resource. You can quickly link to preceding and

succeeding titles and learn which libraries have the newspaper. This is great when you want to visit a library with the newspaper of interest or use interlibrary loan.

I am impressed enough with this project and its goals that I look forward to seeing how it progresses as more newspapers are added. In the meantime, I have a couple of projects involving 20th-century New York and Virginia families — maybe I will find an interesting article about one of them!

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