

DIANE L. RICHARD LOOKS AT ONLINE RESOURCES FOR RESEARCHING YOUR AFRICAN-AMERICAN ROOTS

# Digitized African-American Newspapers

WE ARE ALL AWARE how much the digitization of newspapers has helped us both learn more about ancestors and add a richness to our understanding of their lives and the narratives we write to reflect that.

Until recently though, those researching African-American ancestors have not been able to readily access or explore digitized newspapers with the same success. Part of this is that for about 100 years, from the Civil War until the 1960s, for the most part, you had newspapers that catered to the "white" population and those that catered to the "African-American" population. And most smaller communities only had one newspaper — try to look for a death notice for an African-American citizen in these newspapers and odds are, that you will not be successful. The other part is that many of the larger cities/communities did have newspapers dedicated to the regional or national African-American community, though these were few and far between and not part of the initial pushes to get newspapers digitized and available with online access.

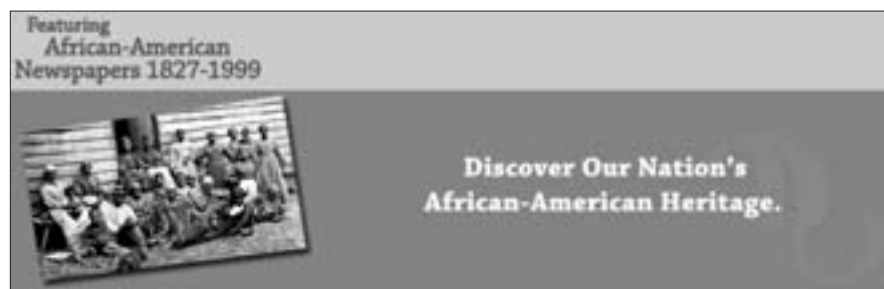
And, I am happy to report, that has now changed. Two collections of African-American digitized newspapers are now available: GenealogyBank (African American newspapers 1827-1999) and ProQuest (Historical Black Newspapers). Let's talk about each of these collections separately.

## GenealogyBank

This collection, [www.genealogybank.com/static/african-american-heritage.html](http://www.genealogybank.com/static/african-american-heritage.html), encompasses over 280 African-American newspapers, spanning 1827-1999, from over 20 states. Besides containing such older newspapers as the *Savannah (GA) Tribune* (1875-1922),



This article, found on GenealogyBank.com, was published in the 16 August 1912 edition of the Plaindealer (Kansas) and it's a fascinating glimpse at the early 20th impact of African-Americans on the area's history.



the *Advocate* (1904-26) and the *Plaindealer* (1912-21), both from Kansas, and the *Advocate* (WV)(1904-26), it also contains some runs of newspapers that, until now, I was unaware of, such as the *Alaska Spotlight* (1956-68); *Florida Tattler* (1934-45); *Bags and Baggage* (IL) (1937-43) and many more titles. These collections range from one year of a publication to a run of several years to decades of coverage.

While looking around, I came across an article titled "The Negro Race History Hereabouts!" about some of the local African-American history of Missouri and Kansas (*Plaindealer*, 16 August 1912) — if you are an ancestor of Hiram Young or Jim Shepherd or

your family was part of the "Negro Exodus to Kansas", traveled the Underground Railroad in the area, etc., you will want to read this article.

As with any newspaper on the website, you can search on surname, forename, "include" certain keywords, "exclude" certain keywords, set a date or date range and limit yourself to one newspaper, the newspapers of a particular town, particular state or particular country.

GenealogyBank is a subscription service available to individuals.

## ProQuest

Unlike the GenealogyBank collection which focuses more on the

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newspapers of smaller communities and/or regionally-focused newspapers (with a few large cities included), this collection encompasses newspapers from larger cities and includes: *Atlanta Daily World* (1931-2003), *Baltimore Afro-American* (1893-1988), *Los Angeles Sentinel* (1934-2005), *New York Amsterdam News* (1922-93), *Norfolk Journal and Guide* (1921-2003), *Philadelphia Tribune* (1912-2001), *Pittsburgh Courier* (1911-2001), *The Call and Post* (1934-91) and the *Chicago Defender* (1910-75).

As someone who, two years ago, got some microfilmed copies of several years worth of the *New York Amsterdam News* that I then had to go through page by page (ultimately with no success), it is very exciting to now see this newspaper digitized and searchable. Although, I still didn't find any entries for the Finner/Fenner family, at least suggesting that my manual search didn't overlook anything obvious! And, part of that is explainable in that the *New York Amsterdam News* was covering a very large population and was also very much a newspaper devoted to the arts in Harlem, which were very vibrant — as a result, not much space was given to death notices (in fact, I noticed that only one funeral home consistently had death notices included).

I currently have a long-term project tracing an African-American family who had branches that migrated to NYC from NC, with a clue that one of the individuals spent some time in Portsmouth, VA. Well, Portsmouth is across the river from Norfolk and so this collection of digitized newspapers gave me an opportunity to see if I could learn what happened to Rosa Mason, first found in NYC as an informant at her mother's 1941 death, and last found in a Portsmouth directory dated 1952. A search on Rosa Mason yielded the obituary shown here, which revealed who her husband was, the names of her surviving children and that she had three brothers and a sister surviving her! Ultimately, this obituary led us back to NC (her husband

**MRS. ROSA MASON**  
*New Journal and Guide* (1916-2003); Jun 7, 1952;  
 ProQuest Historical Newspapers Norfolk Journal and Guide (1921-2003)  
 pg. E3

## Portsmouth Deaths

**MRS. ROSA MASON**  
 Funeral services for Mrs. Rosa Mason, of 1207 Chestnut street, who died May 29 in a local hospital, were held Sunday afternoon at Fourth Baptist Church, with the pastor, Dr. S. L. Scott Sr., officiating. Interment took place in Lincoln cemetery. Reid's Funeral Home was in charge of arrangements.

Mrs. Mason is survived by her husband, Zollie Mason; four sons, William, Zollie, Edward and Leon Mason; seven daughters, Mrs. Katie Carlisle; Misses Justine, Anna, Juanita, Olivia, Lauretta and Lorraine Mason; five grandchildren, three brothers, a sister and other relatives.

Circle, who died Wednesday, May 28, at his residence, were Saturday, May 31, at Prit Funeral Chapel. The Rev. Lassiter officiated.

Condolences from Douglas School and the community's family paper were read by Juanita Johnson. Interment place in Lincoln cemetery. were many beautiful floral tributes. In addition to his parents, survivors are, a brother, sisters, grandfather, two mothers, a great-grandmother, two aunts, an uncle and other relatives.

**MRS. ALICE REID**  
 Funeral services for Mrs. Reid, who died Sunday,

Death notice for Rosa Mason as published in the *New Journal and Guide*, 7 June 1952.

returned there and remarried before moving back to the NYC area) — a trail that I am still pursuing.

When searching for an entry, you can search on a name, place, etc., you can search on one or more of the newspapers, you can designate a specific date or date range and other options are also available. For example, I also searched on Tillery (the community from which Rosa (Fenner) Mason was originally from in NC) and found 2,517 articles referenced this term as a surname or place. As one would expect with any newspaper, articles were found pertaining to marriages, deaths, business dealings, social news, politics and so much more! In contrast, the *New York Amsterdam News* had only 46 entries, though I found a 31 August 1940 article about a flood that affected more than "40 farmers, their wives and children, residents of the Roanoke Farm Development of the Farm Security Administration" — very

interesting!

ProQuest is a subscription service available to universities and other large research institutions. Check your local college, university or other nearby large library to see if they subscribe to this database.

For those researching African-American ancestry and/or history, these now available collections of digitized African-American newspapers have really opened some previously hard-to-open doors into doing newspaper research and the richness of the material that can be found is well worth your trying to access these wonderful collections.

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*Diane L. Richard has been doing genealogy research for over 23 years. She currently does professional research into African-American, NC immigrant and migratory families and she can be found online at [www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy](http://www.mosaicrpm.com/Genealogy).*