

# Historic Newspapers— Before Blogs, Twitter, and 24-Hour Cable News

by Mary J. Johnson

Nothing comes closer to reflecting the lives and concerns of ordinary Americans over the last 300 years than newspapers. Through historic newspapers, students can learn what their ancestors ate, what they did for entertainment, how they celebrated special occasions, how they traveled from one place to another, how they earned a living, even how they died. As sources of political history, newspapers offer essential evidence for the study of events and personalities. As sources of social history, they have no equal in the historic record.

Today's polarized media ranges widely across *FOX News*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Drudge Report*, special-interest hashtags in Twitter, and thousands of unashamedly one-issue Internet outlets. Historic newspapers also catered to a particular audience with a wide range of political preferences, social concerns, and ethnic or occupational interests. Can you guess the target audience of these newspapers?

- ▶ *Weekly Bedrock Democrat* (Oregon)
- ▶ *St. Louis Temperance Battery* (Missouri)
- ▶ *Freedom's Journal* (New York City)
- ▶ *The Daily Mining Journal* (Colorado)

It is precisely this type of opinion-centered journalism that requires critical thinking from students to distinguish truth from fiction in historic newspapers. Furthermore, attitudes toward events often change over time. Students today can analyze multiple original viewpoints as well as historical revisions because they have access to ever-expanding collections of newspapers now digitized for online research.

### Where to Find Historic Newspapers Online

The nation took an important step toward accessibility in the 1990s when the United States Newspaper Program built a database of historic newspapers. Since then, newspapers have been made increasingly available to the public online. Information about the status of newspaper programs in each state can be accessed at the United States Newspaper Program (<http://www.neh.gov/projects/usnp.html>). It is important to keep in mind, however, that newspaper digitization is in a constant state of flux, often depending upon unpredictable grant funding.

Schools can also subscribe to historic newspapers, including *TimesMachine* of the *New York Times* (1851-1922), through paid services such as ProQuest, Ancestry.com, and NewspaperARCHIVE.com. Some public libraries offer password-protected access to schools. Check with local university libraries and archives, too, as many have begun to digitize their own newspaper collections.

Teachers in Virginia, however,

shouldn't make the mistake of rejecting newspapers from Nebraska. While newspapers may have targeted the interests of local populations first, most covered national and world events as well. Both in ordinary times and in times of war and pivotal national events such as presidential elections, citizens consumed news from beyond their local communities with intense interest.

### The Problem of Historic Language in Search

Early journalists often used abbreviations and other historic language that can frustrate students used to the efficient algorithms of Google and other search engines. Here are some pointers from *Colorado's Historic Newspaper Collection* to help students avoid frustration:

- ▶ Use abbreviations: ry for railway, Bros. for Brothers, Merc. for Merchants.
- ▶ Search on specific words, not general themes—i.e., horses, wagons, Union Pacific, or Ford rather than transportation.
- ▶ Use historical terms—European war or European struggle rather than World War I. Remember, there was no World War I until there was a World War II!
- ▶ Terms unacceptable today—colored for African Americans, savages or redskins for Native Americans, Huns for Germans (see discussion below of sensitive or offensive language).
- ▶ Use husbands' first names for married

women (Mrs. J. J. Brown rather than Molly Brown); abbreviations for men's names (Wm., Geo., Thos., and Chas. for William, George, Thomas, and Charles).

## The Problem of Offensive Language

Unvarnished newspaper accounts can shock or offend today's readers far more than gingerly edited textbooks. Racist vocabulary, racial and gender stereotypes, and graphic depictions of violence were not uncommon. Skilled educators know how to turn such raw examples into powerful learning by guiding student discussions toward understanding the complexities and offenses of history. They help students focus on historic newspaper texts as mirrors of history rather than on their own outrage. The following questions about historical language can strengthen students' analytical skills:

- ▶ Who wrote the offending words?
- ▶ Did the original reading public reflect the writer's choice of words in their own lives?
- ▶ How have the meanings or acceptance of the offending words changed over time?
- ▶ Would other groups have described this version of events differently?
- ▶ Whose story is not being told?

No matter how offensive or painful, primary source texts from historic newspapers allow students to confront the "truths" of history. Certainly, educators need to use sound judgment regarding the age and maturity levels of their students, but the voices of history would lose their authentic power if teachers were to "doctor" or pre-censor them.

## Historic Newspapers Are Not Encyclopedias of History

As with other primary sources, it is important to understand the nature of historic newspaper content. No matter what the era, newspapers do not equal an encyclopedia of history. Neither do they work effectively as full-length biographies of famous people, often to the disappoint-

ment of teachers of state and local history. Instead, they dispense small doses of daily events, as in "Bert and Clyde Gibbons helped Al Robins turn a couple of hogs into pork last week." It takes a persistent student researcher to ask meaningful questions and to build knowledge from such snippets of history.

## Strategies for Teaching with Historic Newspapers

Many of the strategies for teaching with text in the November 2010 issue of *School Library Monthly* (pages 32-33) apply equally to teaching with historic newspapers. Additionally, the school librarian can improve the experience by guiding students through navigation tools, zoom functions, print options, and other operations specific to historic newspapers online.

Opportunities for integrating technology tools into historic newspaper lessons abound:

- ▶ Follow a single event chronologically. Set up a Twitter hashtag (#sandcreek-massacre, #armistice1918, #spanishinfluenza) and have students tweet daily news.

- ▶ Compare articles with online news coverage of similar topics today (fashion, natural disasters, school, elections).
- ▶ Post historic newspaper advertisements on a class blog and ask students to comment on how the products met the needs of readers.
- ▶ Use free software such as *ReadWriteThink Printing Press* (<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/student-interactives/readwritethink-printing-press-30036.html>) and have students produce their own historic newspaper based on an event in the past.

Before you leap to create your own curriculum using historic newspapers, enjoy your own search and discovery in these endlessly rich and surprising resources. Consider it my gift to you. ◀

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### Chronicling America

<http://www.loc.gov/chroniclingamerica>

This is a long-term joint project between the Library of Congress and the National Endowment for the Humanities with the goal of digitizing newspapers from all states and U. S. territories. Currently it contains nearly three million newspaper pages published between 1836 and 1922. Stay up to date through RSS feeds, email notices, pictorial pages on Flickr, and popular topics (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/news/topics/topics.html>).

### Brooklyn Daily Eagle

<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/eagle>

Once the nation's most widely read afternoon newspaper, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (published for 114 consecutive years) now has online coverage from 1841 to 1902. It is especially useful for immigrant history.

### Colorado's Historic Newspaper Collection

<http://www.coloradohistoricnewspapers.org>

Browse nearly 150 newspapers from 1859 to 1923 by issue; search by keyword. Find pre-selected general interest topics—holidays, wars, inaugurations, women's suffrage, etc. Advertisements and articles are useful for the study of westward expansion.

### Utah Digital Newspapers

<http://digitalnewspapers.org>

This has been a model for digitization since 2001. Browse by issue; search by keyword, article titles, weddings, deaths, and births.

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