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Digitised Historical Newspapers: Chronicling America

Introduction

Historical newspapers, often referred to as “the first draft of history”, are among the richest primary sources available for research into virtually aspect of the life of a nation, whether in the cultural, social, and political or economic sphere. They offer not only information about events in the past, but give us a window into how these were reported and packaged as news. Up till recently, to access these materials, a researcher had to be determined enough to make his way through either aged, often fragile, originals, or reels of microfilm, often difficult to locate and without the benefit of any index. This has now changed fundamentally with the advent of digitization, which has made newspapers both readily available *and* searchable. The digitization of American newspapers has been undertaken over the last 15 or 20 so years both by commercial companies, where access is charged for, and by various bodies and institutions making their material freely available. Within the first category, there are now a number of companies offering access to a vast range of titles, with sophisticated searching and viewing tools, but these come at a price: resources like *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*; *Gale 19th Century US Newspapers*; *America’s Historical Newspapers* from Readex (a division of Newsbank) are normally only available via a select number of institutions such as academic libraries that are able to afford the subscriptions. The alternative option of taking out a personal subscription to the back files of titles such as *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* is unlikely to appeal to any but the best-heeled researcher.

Chronicling America

The screenshot shows the Chronicling America website. At the top, it features the logos for 'The LIBRARY of CONGRESS' and 'NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES'. Below this is a navigation bar with 'The Library of Congress > Chronicling America'. The main content area is titled 'Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers'. It includes a welcome message, a 'VIEW' section for newspaper pages (1860-1922), and a 'FIND' section for newspaper information (1690-present). A sidebar on the left contains navigation links like 'Chronicling America Home', 'See All Available Newspapers', and 'Search Newspaper Pages'. At the bottom, there is a 'Working With Chronicling America' section with links to topics, Flickr Commons, and the API.

Freely available digitised newspapers began to become available for US titles from the late 1990 onwards, but often this was a case of either one specific title, or at best a range of titles from an individual state, often with quite a short time span covered. This was a worthy effort, but what was needed was a collection which would span a large number of titles covering as many states as possible and as wide a date range as possible: enter [Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/)¹. This is a website involving a partnership between the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Library of Congress, which has digitised content from a number of American newspapers and made them freely available to anyone who has an internet connection to search or browse. As presently constituted, the period covered is from 1860 to 1922, with titles from 22 states (and the District of Columbia), the point to note here being that this coverage is constantly expanding – when it first appeared back in 2007, the prototype site contained runs of only two dozen titles, and covered only the years 1900-1910. Eighteen months ago, coverage was only from 1880 to 1910, with titles from only 10 states. The ultimate intention is to give coverage from 1836 to 1922, and to include at least one title from every state.

One of its great strengths is that the collection includes major papers, state newspapers, and small-town weeklies, as well as the ethnic press and papers with specific interests and agendas. To take just one example of the latter, the Salt Lake City paper, the *Salt Lake Herald*, dutifully reprinted all the debates around polygamy to an extent that was not replicated in other titles.

Tools and Features

As well as the actual newspapers themselves, the site also offers a number of tools and features that are well worth exploring. From the Home Page, there is a link [**Topics in Chronicling America**] which takes you to a list of significant events covered by the resource, eg the Nineteenth Amendment (votes for women); the Spanish American War; the Haymarket Affair etc. All these headings are clickable and for each event you get a list of the important dates associated with it, some helpful suggestions for search strategies to use to locate articles on that event and then some direct links to sample articles to get you started. This can be a good way to give you a flavour of the site. Inevitably with a list of this nature there will be omissions, eg one might of thought of William Jennings Bryan, who is not included, but new topics are added on a regular basis and additionally there is an option to suggest any topic you would like to see appear on the list.

Another helpful feature is a list of the titles included in the resource, together with information about each one. From the Home Page, the [**see all available newspapers**] link offers an A-Z title browse where for every title you will get basic information like the state of publication and the earliest and latest issues that are available. But even better than this, for a number of titles you will see a [**more info**] link which takes you to an essay about the history and editorial policy of the paper, full of incredibly useful information and interesting little nuggets. For the *Washington Bee*, for example, it notes

¹ <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>

that the initial motto of the paper was “*Sting for Our Enemies—Honey for Our Friends.*” The *Akron Daily Democrat*, founded by two brothers, the Dobson brothers, William and Russell had as its partisan slogan “*turn the rascals out!*”: within a year of publication the paper’s support for the county’s Democratic candidates had helped all of them all get elected to office. The *Christian Herald*, from Portsmouth, New Hampshire was “*A religious periodical containing biographies, anecdotes, poetry, essays, literary notices, extracts of articles from other magazines, records of conversions and revivals, and missionary efforts in Europe, Asia, Africa and Russia as well as among the North American Indians.*”



For those interested in illustrations a useful feature is a link from the Home Page labelled [**Historic Newspapers on Flickr**]. This will take you to a collection of over 400 illustrations, taken from cover pages of the *New York Tribune*, (beginning from 1909) which capture all aspects of, to quote from the webpage itself, “*daily life, art, entertainment, politics, and world events*”. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, new techniques for reproducing photographs allowed newspapers to feature much more pictorial content, including cartoons, advertising etc. and this provided a great opportunity to attract new customers. The Flickr set is an excellent way to start exploring these images.

Searching

When you search, there are options for keyword searching; phrase searching; proximity searching; date range selecting etc. Your results are initially sorted by relevance, with options to resort by state; title or date. Results are presented in the form of a thumbnail of the relevant page where your search terms are highlighted in red to allow you identify any occurrences of your search terms. You can select the stories you want to view. Some of the viewing options include zooming; drawing a zoom box; viewing the OCR

text (which is uncorrected, and which the resource providers themselves admit has errors); viewing as a pdf; printing. Some aspects of viewing and printing results in ***Chronicling America*** may be unfamiliar to some users, and there has been some criticism of this aspect of the resource. However, whilst it may take some time getting used to initially, the rewards are substantial, and in any case the online help files are generally of a high standard, (although there is no help directly available when you are viewing a particular result) The rewards come in the form of the sheer volume of material that is available to you. As noted above, you can access coverage of all the major events and personalities of the period, and see how these are reported. But perhaps as interesting as stories the covering the famous is the glimpses you can get into the lives of individuals who will never be remembered but whose lives can offer a window into a range of lifestyles and living conditions we can only imagine. Perhaps the following story, of 16 year old Jennie Lovell, taken from the *Los Angeles Herald* for September 29, 1906 can serve as an example:

Tears and repentance came to girl led away from home only 16, but she drank the dregs.....

Parents Separate, Married Sister Loses Control of Her, and After Pitiful Experience Is Glad to Go to 'Reformatory. With eyes downcast and brimming with tears and with repentance showing in every convulsed line of her pretty face, 'little 16-year-old Jennie Lovell yesterday faced Judge Wilbur in the juvenile court and pleaded guilty to having been an inmate of a house of ill repute. The story told by the girl in the court room was only one of hundreds of similar ones reviewed in that department every year, but the sorrow with which she told it brought tears to the eyes of many of those who heard it. For Jennie Lovell is just 16 years of age and has passed through experiences too terrible to relate, and yesterday Judge Wilbur decided that the best place for the girl was the "Whittler reform school, and there Jennie was sent to remain until she is 20 years of age. According to the statement of the girl yesterday her mother and father separated some months ago and she was left in Los Angeles with her married sister to care for her. .

All did not go well and the girl left home. She told the court how she had frequented the various wine halls of downtown districts until the sights to be seen there had become common and she hunted even worse resorts. Then she said she had met a young man of leisure who had sent her to Ventura and once there had put her in a house of ill repute. She managed to get away and came to Los Angeles, where she had met another young and good looking youth who had placed her in another house in order to live off the money she could give him. 'She was discovered by officers and arrested and held for trials before Judge Wilbur. Yesterday when the girl appeared in court she was a pitiful sight. She wore the faded gaudy trappings which had seemed so pretty to her when she had seen other women wear them. A faded and soiled cloak hung about her shoulders. It was of a dark terra cotta colour and had once been nearly velvet but the napp had worn away and the coat did not look well. The other garments of the girl's costume corresponded to the cloak, but she had made an attempt to make a good appearance, and the staid members of the juvenile committee fairly gasped when they saw the girl's makeup.

She had coiled her hair and stuffed it with a "rat" until it was a mass of curls. With the aid of a little rouge and powder, borrowed from the matron of the Jail, she had so painted her face that she resembled some footlight beauty. But poor little girl. Her attempt to appear well failed miserably when two great tears started from her eyes and washed down. In little trickles through the rouge and powder, and she tearfully admitted that Whittler Reform School would not be such a

bad place after all she had suffered and had been compelled to endure.

After the commitment had been made out she secured what few little belongings she possessed, and packing them into a dress suit case accompanied the officer to the county jail to await transportation to Whittler."

Conclusion

Chronicling America is a very worthy addition to the growing collection of websites offering free access to collections of historic newspapers online. Taken together with Google News Archive Search, and the individual titles and state wide collections mentioned above, (many of which are listed at the very useful website from the University of Pennsylvania, [Historical Newspapers Online](#))², it amounts to a substantial body of free material from which academic historians, students and "citizen historians" alike can all profit.

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² <http://gethelp.library.upenn.edu/guides/hist/onlinenewspapers.html>