Reviews

American Broadsides and Ephemera, Series I, 1760-1900. Chester, VT: Readex, 2005-2006. **For more information, contact a NewsBank representative by calling 800.762.8182 or emailing sales@newsbank.com.**

Introduction

The Readex Company (a division of NewsBank) has in the past few years become one of the library community's primary vendors for searchable, full-text databases of Americana. Of course it helps to be a partner with one of the best collections of this type in the country – The American Antiquarian Society (AAS). Still, having a rich source of primary documents is only half the process and Readex, by bringing together a talented group of editors, indexers, web designers and document conversion specialists has proven itself an equal partner in their arrangement with the AAS.[1]

Readex's most recent offering – the *American Broadsides and Ephemera, Series I, 1760-1900* – fits neatly into their overall product line for the Archive of Americana.[2] This particular collection of near 30,000 individual items was scanned directly from the materials of the AAS – rather than from microfilm as has been done in some other "big box" products. Thus the documents that Readex offers in this database are a much cleaner, full-color representation of the item. Certainly this difference between the *American Broadsides and Ephemera* product and databases from other vendors is invaluable for the historian or researcher where the clarity of the image is essential.

The content of the collection includes trade cards, type samples, letterheads, stock certificates, newspaper announcements, advertising placards, invitations, menus, rewards of merit, ballads (including several on my favorite subject on the perception of lawyers) and a great deal more.

Site Design/Searching

The site is well designed with a clear and simple typeface – a design that incidentally lent itself to an easy translation into machine readable text on my library's ADA machine. At the top of the screen users are presented with a search box and a pull down menu of search options (title, author, date, subject, genre, full-text, citation text, publisher, document number, place of publication). One tricky aspect of the search screen that may take researchers time to get used to is that the search box defaults back to the Citation Text option even within results. Although not a problem it was a bit confusing at first when I mistyped a 19th Century Baltimore publishers name and, when re-entered, did not notice that the search box was no longer set to Publisher.

Immediately below the search box there is an option for Advanced searching which combines Boolean operators and offers several well-written search tips to improve the overall precision.

Next, the screen presents a series of pre-set tabs, those familiar with other Readex products should recognize the layout, designed to allow browsing of the collection. The tabs include Genre (broadly defined as types of publications such as menus, gazetteers or

playbills), Subjects, Author, History of Printing, Place of Publication, and Language. Within each of the tabs there are additional links that will lead the researcher to more specific documents. For instance under language there is a link to a number of languages including Hawaiian (four documents) and Italian (three documents) but intriguingly, there were no entries for Native American language groups. It may be that these languages simply are not represented in this collection of the AAS or that this content will be presented in the next series of the product.

The "History of Printing" tab is an interesting one - divided alphabetically, researchers can use this focused tab to browse a range of materials pre-selected by Readex. Unfortunately, the tab is, at this time, a default. I suspect that Readex considers this a core use within the Special Collections community but a promising improvement might be for Readex to allow a subscribing institution to set this tab to whatever subject or genre might be most helpful in a particular environment. For example, I would much rather see a set of law and crime links than the "History of Printing," tab which has little relevance in my user community.

Finally, the site offers a help file on word variants – ever problematic in searching eighteenth and nineteenth century items - as well as a more extensive help file on how to use and search the *American Broadsides and Ephemera* product.

Search Results

While the difference between a full text search and citations search is fairly obvious to most librarians (although usually not to our users) it bears mentioning that the citation

search is based upon the data associated with the item in the files of the AAS. In fact, the original index card itself is scanned and presented with the item. Librarians will want to advise their researchers to not rely on just one search option but to check both citation text and full text searches to ensure that relevant material is not overlooked. For example, when searching *Ojibwa* in citation text the search returned three items but in full text *Ojibwa* returned only one item. As two of the items in the citation text result do not mention the word *Ojibwa* in the text – only in the AAS description of the piece – relying just on full text searching would have missed these relevant documents.

Alternatively, when searching on the word *lawyer*, the citation text search turned up only 46 items while the same word in the full text search returned 417 matches. While many of the 46 items returned in the citation search were relevant, without the excellent full text searching capability of this product I would have missed some very valuable materials about the perception of lawyers in early America. For example, the second result in my full text search is a poem by Whitman Chapman on training to be a minister. By using the embedded feature to highlight the search term within document I was able to find that this poem also included comments on other professions. To wit –

"If I am a lawyer I must lie and cheat - For honest lawyers have not bread to eat"

The search results in both citation and full text are presented in chronological order which makes scrolling through the results fairly easy. At this time there is no option to change the order that the search results are presented.

Within the results researchers have the option of viewing the document or the original citation file card. Presented as PDFs both of these views can be highlighted so as to focus on a particular area. One aspect of the PDFs that may prove problematic is the decision to present each page – when multiple pages are present – as individual PDFs rather than a single PDF that presents all of the pages. An example of this can be found in *The Great Stone & Murray Circus the crowning sensation of 1871* a brief two page card that for some reason is presented as two separate PDFs.

One feature that is lacking but that Readex has indicated it is working on is the ability for subscribers of more than one Readex product to conduct a single search across all products. Hopefully this feature will added soon.

Finally, a nice feature at the top portion of the screen when viewing an individual piece is the full citation information which can be printed (separately from the document) or downloaded as needed.

Printing/Downloading

The printing options and downloading are straight forward and what one would expect from any major database product. One nice feature that Readex does provide is the open URL – clearly labeled – in the print citation option. This will certainly help facilitate linking in course management systems and in citing a document in online publications. Other prompts on the screen include "view my collection" and "view my searches" while both are useful when working with an elaborate research effort subscribers cannot save

results from session to session. This is an enhancement that Readex should consider making to the product.

Subscription Costs

For a product this rich in content one might assume that the cost is going to be too great for all but the most well-heeled of institutions. This is not the case though; the product is reasonably priced for what it is. In fact, for smaller institutions looking to maximize their access to original content this product is really quite a bargain. According to Readex staff, sample pricing options for most situations are:

Institution whose library is a member of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) -- $41,100 one-time fee; annual $1,000 Readex ETC (Enhancements, Training and Content) fee

Ph.D.-granting institution whose library is not a member of the ARL -- $32,280 one-time fee; annual $800 Readex ETC fee

Institutions whose libraries are not members of the ARL and which do not grant Ph.D.s, assuming for illustration purposes a full-time enrollment of 20,000 -- $15,800 one-time fee; annual $500 Readex ETC fee

Institutions whose libraries are not members of the ARL and which do not grant Ph.D.s, assuming for illustration purposes a full-time enrollment of 3,000 -- $7,815 one-time fee; annual $500 Readex ETC fee

Law Library only -- $11,075 one time; $500 Readex ETC fee

Summary

American Broadsides and Ephemera, Series I, 1760-1900 by Readex is a very well designed, content-rich product. The searching and downloading/printing options are simple and easy to use; a big plus when trying to get students to become familiar with and comfortable using primary sources. While it might be possible to quibble with some minor points the overall presentation of the content and search results is well thought out. Pricing, as it is for most "big box" databases, is not inexpensive but it won't break an institution's budget either. This product is recommended for any institution with an interest in American history.

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Notes

[1] Full disclosure – I have worked closely with one of the Readex editors, although he is not associated with this particular product, for several years through my activities in the ALA/Government Documents Roundtable.

[2] For a complete list of the titles included in this series see http://www.readex.com.