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Contrary to popular and professional belief, historians have collected and have used the American newspaper as prime historical source material since the birth of our nation. Early historical societies, in particular, energetically searched for files. In its first twenty years of existence, the Rhode Island Historical Society procured an almost perfect file of every paper published in that state. William Staples’ “An Account of the Rhode Island Historical Society” in the American Quarterly Register of May 1839 described how the issues of the Providence Gazette, the earliest paper in that city, were obtained only “. . . with great labor and at great expense.” 1 And in the Midwest, as early as 1856, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin regularly received fifty-two publications issued in that state; pride was expressed in the fact that no other society exerted equal effort to secure a complete series of local newspapers. 2 However, three years later the State Historical Society of Iowa received almost twice the number of local papers acquired by Wisconsin in 1856. These papers were presented by Iowa editors and publishers in response to a special appeal of the organization. The Iowa society considered its collection of papers of great importance, because “. . . in it is contained almost a complete history of the State. . . .” 3 The ties of the Kansas State Historical Society were even more simple and more direct. The founders of this organization were the newspaper editors and publishers of the state, who thought it appropriate to supply the Society with copies of the newspapers published. 4

The collection of newspaper files had an early beginning even in those institutions where history was not the sole interest. The Charleston Library Society in South Carolina was founded in 1748 and started collecting material immediately. According to Walter Muir Whitehill the Society’s “. . . great resource to the historian is its files of early

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Charleston newspapers" which such scholars as Charles M. Andrews used and praised highly.5

Many of the early attempts at newspaper collecting could be attributed to the zealous efforts of individuals who foresaw the great use to which this source later would be put. This was particularly true of Isaiah Thomas and Christopher Columbus Baldwin, both of the American Antiquarian Society. Thomas, who had become the chief printer-publisher-bookseller of the United States, petitioned the Massachusetts legislature for permission to transfer his library to a historical educational institution. Thus on October 24, 1812, the American Antiquarian Society was incorporated. Thomas' gifts included a half dozen long files of eighteenth-century newspapers and many single issues of papers from the Atlantic States and the Middle West. This was in keeping with his belief that the objects of collection should include files of newspapers of former times and the present day. Baldwin, who became librarian on April 1, 1832, was a zealous collector of newspapers; he arranged with more than forty persons from different sections of the country to procure newspapers for his library. When in Boston on December 28, 1831, before formally taking office, Baldwin tried to persuade the proprietor of the Tremont House to turn over his files of current newspapers to the American Antiquarian Society. The newspaper collection became one of his passions for he noted in his diary on July 10, 1832:

This day I have shelves erected in the chamber of the north wing of Antiquarian Hall for the reception of newspapers. The shelves are put up, and I load them with six hundred volumes of papers, which comprise about half of our collection of that kind of reading.

It is one of the chief sources of my trouble (being happy enough in all other respects) that only a part of the members of the Council of the Society are willing to increase the numbers of our newspapers. Since I have been here, I have been unwearied in my pains to get good files of papers from all parts of the country. I have made arrangements with some forty or fifty individuals from different sections of the U.S. to procure for me ancient as well as modern sets and to preserve all those they now subscribe for. In this way the collection must become exceedingly valuable. I suffer no traveller to visit me without enlisting him in my cause, and giving him directions how to find them and how to send them to me. Though I may fail of getting as many as I wish, I am sure that I shall entitle myself to the gratitude of future antiquaries.6

Henry Stevens, founder in 1838 of the Vermont Historical and Anti-
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quarian Society, now the Vermont Historical Society, resolved on his seventeenth birthday to collect 1,000 volumes of newspapers before he reached the age of sixty. "By carefully preserving the files of about ten weekly newspapers, he had acquired nearly seven hundred volumes by 1846, when he had five years, 'God willing,' in which to achieve his goal. To accomplish this, he had 'spared no pains, lived poor and worked hard.'" 7

These collections once accumulated were not all consigned to oblivion or obscurity. The New-York Historical Society printed on February 13, 1805, an appeal for needed material including newspapers, especially those prior to 1783. In a catalog prepared in 1814 for the Society, the Reverend Timothy Alden listed the numerous files which had been collected. Alden had performed a similar service for the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1808-1809, thereby informing the public of the existence of its collection of papers. Throughout the nineteenth century the Massachusetts organization, founded in 1791 and the first of its kind in the United States, continued to make a constant, determined effort to obtain such printed matter.

Despite the exertions of such men as Thomas, Baldwin, and Stevens to collect and to preserve papers, detailed use was not made of them in the preparation of early American histories. Allan Nevins, former Columbia University history professor, Pulitzer Prize winner, and newspaperman from 1913-1927, pointed out that a strong prejudice existed among historians against newspapers as sources. "It rested on a feeling that the press was so full of hasty material hastily compiled that it was treacherous—inaccurate, superficial, partisan, and hence slanted in news as well as opinion." 8 Many historians believed that what was printed was intended to ensure the owner's profit, or social status, or political ambitions, not the public interest or public knowledge. Perhaps, too, as described by Icko Iben in the October 1955 issue of Library Trends, it was "... not only its form, its mass, its rate of growth ..." 9 that caused problems, but its internal character, its contents. Iben stated that the general attitude toward the newspaper, shared by many librarians and historians, was traceable to the nature of the printed word, "... with its gossip large and small, its sensational news and its sensational advertising, and to the casual way in which it is used." 9

James Ford Rhodes, the noted nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historian of the United States, broke precedent and triumphantly proved the value of the newspaper as historical source ma-
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terial. His history was written on a dignified, scholarly plane, yet he
utilized newspapers extensively. When, around 1890, he began his
studies of the period immediately preceding the Civil War, he found
little to enhance his story with the "flesh and blood" information so
badly needed for good narrative. Nevins described Rhodes as re-
membering how people had eagerly read Greeley's Tribune and Bry-
ant's Evening Post and the Cleveland Leader. Nobody could possibly
understand the history of the time without them, and thus Rhodes
found the files of the newspapers invaluable. He discovered in the
press an enormous amount of material he could not have found else-
where. "Why was Webster defeated for the Whig presidential nomi-
ation in 1852? Why was Winfield Scott nominated instead? He found
the whole inside story in the Boston Courier, written by a Massachu-
setts delegate." 8

After Rhodes, all reputable historians began using newspapers, and
books were soon appearing based almost exclusively on the daily and
weekly press. "No one would now write history without access to a file
of newspapers. They were unrivalled sources, especially after 1840,
for news and opinion, and for insight into the spirit of the age." 8

Rhodes' theories were later enhanced by the works of Lucy M.
Salmon, who in The Newspaper and the Historian, 10 attempted to indi-
cate the great value of the use of the press in compiling and writing
American history.

Thus it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that a more
definitive use of newspapers was made. Quite often, before that period,
papers were left to disintegrate or were disposed of as useless. With
the turn of the century and with the realization of the need of and
interest in papers, a number of catalogs of newspaper holdings were
prepared by institutions possessing the most noteworthy historical
material.

It was this deep interest in and desire to secure information regard-
ing the newspaper collections which had been gathered over the
course of the nineteenth century that caused a plethora of printed
catalogs. For the first two decades of the twentieth century, in rapid-
fire succession, such institutions as the Alabama Department of Ar-
chives and History, American Antiquarian Society, Leland Stanford
Junior University, Library of Congress, Indiana State Library, Illinois
State Historical Library, Kansas State Historical Society, Colonial So-
ciety of Massachusetts, Boston Public Library, Rochester (N.Y.) Pub-
lic Library, New-York Historical Society, Ohio State Library, Pennsyl-

Professional historical recognition was slowly but surely being achieved during this period. The *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1905* reported the findings of a survey taken of collections in state and local libraries and historical societies. Question thirteen in the questionnaire had asked “To what extent do you collect and preserve newspapers?” Only in rare instances was the answer negative. Some replies were awesome, such as the report from the Wyoming Historical and Geological Society (Wilkes-Barre, Pa.) which listed holdings of 1,200 volumes of local newspapers, or from the Essex Institute in Salem, Massachusetts, which had 3,800 bound volumes, especially strong for the period after 1800. For the first time, the *Annual Report of the Association* admonished state, sectional, and local historical organizations and others to seek out, collect, and preserve files. The recommendations were succinct, “Local newspaper files are an important source of information, and should assiduously be collected and preserved.”

By 1908, James Ford Rhodes, William Nelson (corresponding secretary of the New Jersey Historical Society), Talcott Williams of the Philadelphia Press, and Melville E. Stone (general manager of the Associated Press) were invited to address a luncheon at the twenty-fourth annual meeting of the American Historical Association. Covering the period from 1850 to 1877, Rhodes emphasized the value of newspapers, pointing out that such a source can be readily tested and that it supplies a great amount of detail, color, and circumstantial evidence that is difficult, if not impossible, to find elsewhere. Nelson described in great detail the information which could be gleaned from newspapers in his address entitled “The American Newspapers of the Eighteenth Century as Sources of History.” Nelson had previously published, from 1894-1897, a work dealing with American newspapers and the depositories in which they might be found. In 1918 this same work was reissued under the title *Notes Toward a History of the American Newspaper*, containing a substantial 644 pages.

Interest in the cataloging and the use of files continued during the
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period of the 1920's with the publication of such works as George W. Purcell's "Survey of Early Newspapers in the Middle Western States"; Yale O. Millington's, "A List of Newspapers Published in the District of Columbia, 1820-1850"; and James O. Knauss' *Territorial Florida Journalism*. Even the omnipresent Civil War was represented in R. Lee Brantley's *Georgia Journalism of the Civil War Period*, while David C. Mott concerned himself with the ante-bellum period in his "Early Iowa Newspapers; A Contribution toward a Bibliography of the Newspapers Established in Iowa before the Civil War."

But it was not until the 1930's that a renewed fervor and interest brought about a resurgence in the number of printed or mimeographed catalogs as well as articles and books dealing with or utilizing greatly the vast files which had been accumulated up to that time. There was, in addition, a factor which added further stimulus to these efforts, the result of relief projects during the depression. Newspapers were seized upon as being all that Rhodes, Nelson, and Salmon had indicated. Because of this crystallization of outlook and purpose, much classifying and indexing of historical data resulted from the listing of available newspaper files by the Historical Records Survey in many states. The actual physical preservation of newspapers also became a matter of great concern, and there were initiated newspaper binding and microfilming programs designed to preserve, to protect, and to make permanent the known issues. The U.S. Government Printing Office in 1934 published Bourdon Walter Scribner's *Preservation of Newspaper Records*. In 1937, under Winifred Gregory's editorial supervision, the monumental, though obviously incomplete, *American Newspapers, 1821-1936; A Union List of Files Available in the United States and Canada* was published. The Library of Congress which in 1912 had published *A Check List of American Eighteenth Century Newspapers in the Library of Congress* issued a new edition of this work in 1936. Interest in newspapers had reached the point where, in 1931, the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* listed alphabetically by cities a series of American newspaper reprints located in libraries throughout the country. During this period Douglas Crawford McMurtrie busied himself with various works dealing with the history of printing and the press in such places as Michigan, Wisconsin, and Utah, providing invaluable bibliographies and check-lists. Obviously, the newspaper had now "arrived" and was fully appreciated and respected not only for its aid in other areas of research, but for its own study as well.
Interest has not abated in the past generation, but actually has generally increased. More and more frequently the non-academic segments of the community as well as academicians in all fields are making use of the newspaper files in each and every depository, be it library, historical society, or newspaper office. Clarence Saunders Brigham's *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820* and the Library of Congress' *Newspapers on Microfilm* (various editions) have made known the files and the locations of many of the extant issues in the United States. Coupled with the catalogs issued by state organizations, the articles in various publications, and the sales catalogs of several microfilming companies, it is becoming more and more possible to determine quickly, efficiently, and accurately the files which may be used for historical purposes and the institutions in which such files are available.

As a rule most institutions will provide for the reproduction of newspapers desired for examination. In cases where microfilm negatives already exist, usually only the cost of a positive film copy is charged; sometimes an additional fee is added to cover part of the cost of the original filming. Prices may vary therefore from $6.50 to $14 for a positive roll of film. In those cases where no negative exists, it is the usual practice for the institution owning the original to have a negative and positive copy made, with the negative remaining in its permanent possession and the positive sent to the applicant who pays for both copies.

An example of the largesse for which librarians must be grateful is the decision of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania to make available on microfilm such outstanding files as the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 1720-1789, and a broken run from 1790-1815; *Pennsylvania Journal*, 1742-1793; *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, 1767-1774; *Pennsylvania Packet*, 1771-1790; *New York Journal*, 1766-1776; and several German papers of the colonial period. The Rhode Island Historical Society has microfilmed and widely distributed the files of the *Providence Gazette* begun in 1762.

Although reproduction facilities are readily available, the practice of utilizing interlibrary loan requests is usually followed in the case of libraries adhering to the ALA Inter-Library Loan Code. Such a procedure involves only the cost of mailing and insurance for microfilm reels. There are several exceptions to this relatively universal practice of lending microfilm copies. The North Carolina Department of Archives and History does not engage in such loans inasmuch as it...
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provides, at reasonable cost, positive microfilm copies of all of the
newspapers which it has filmed. The Georgia Historical Society news-
paper file is not open to non-members, while the Long Island (N.Y.)
Historical Society charges non-members for the use of newspapers
and microfilm.

On the other hand, there has been the recent announcement of a
step toward close cooperation in acquisitions and service by five major
research libraries in Delaware. A Union List of Newspapers in Micro-
form is to be published containing holdings of 106 newspaper titles for
the Eleutherian Mills Historical Library, Henry Francis du Pont
Winterthur Museum, Historical Society of Delaware, the Wilmington
Institute Free Library, and the University of Delaware Library. The
participating institutions are planning to make an annual revision of
this list.

That other forms of copying have been utilized greatly in the past
is evidenced by the number of printed reproduction copies of the
Ulster Co. Gazette announcing Washington's death, or of the New
York Herald proclaiming Lincoln's assassination. Between 1915 and
1933, the Massachusetts Historical Society reproduced through the
photostat process five colonial newspapers, the Georgia Gazette for
1763-1773, The Domestic Intelligence for 1679-1680, The Boston News
Letter for 1704-1776, The New England Courant for 1721-1726, and,
in collaboration with the Virginia Historical Society, The Virginia
Gazette for 1736-1780. The last title went to twenty-three subscribing
libraries. An unusual but stimulating and informative variant of this
has been the presentation of Ohio, Iowa, and Kansas state history
through the use of full-page facsimile reproductions of newspapers
with additional pages of commentary.26

A fairly recent innovation has been the use of microcards which
utilize the principle of microprint publication. Early American News-
papers in Microprint produces microcards at prices that make them
available to individuals as well as libraries. The American Antiquarian
Society is now issuing runs of colonial newspapers for particularly
important periods which may be purchased in small and relatively
inexpensive groups.

Under the direction of Ebenezer Gay, Executive Officer of the
Boston Athenæum, papers are assembled, collated, and prepared for
filming. The Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and Wisconsin
Historical societies, the Boston Public Library, the Boston Athenæum,
the Harvard College Library, and the Library of Congress have lent
originals or furnished photographic copies of newspapers needed to complete files. Gay and his business associates have formed the Micro-Research Corporation to handle the details of printing and distributing the microcards. But it appears highly unlikely that this form of reproduction will replace the microfilm reel because of the convenience in handling, saving of storage space, and lower reproduction costs of the latter.

The following is a listing of newspaper catalogs, compilations, and checklists, which should be readily available to the librarian:

**Articles Relating to General Listings of Newspapers**


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Books and Sales Catalogs of General Listings of Newspapers


Minnesota, University of, Library. American Newspapers in the University of Minnesota Library, 1719-1938. [Minneapolis, 1939.]


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Listing of Articles and Books Arranged Alphabetically by State


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"Newspaper Files in the Emory University Library." Atlanta, The Library, 1959. [Processed.]

Idaho, University of. "Check List of Idaho Newspapers." Moscow, Idaho, Department of Journalism, [1945]. [Mimeographed.]


Chicago, Public Library Omnibus Project. *Bibliography of Foreign Language Newspapers and Periodicals Published in Chicago*. Chicago, Chicago Public Library Omnibus Project, 1942.


"Newspapers in Libraries of Chicago, a Joint Check-List." Chicago, University of Chicago Libraries, Documents Section, 1936. [Mimeographed.]


Kansas State Historical Society. *A List of Kansas Newspapers and Periodicals Received by the Kansas State Historical Society*. Topeka, State Printer, 1948.

Kansas State Historical Society. *History of Kansas Newspapers; A History of the Newspapers and Magazines Published in Kansas from the Organization of*
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Louisiana Historical Records Survey. "Louisiana Newspapers, 1794-1940; A Union List of Louisiana Newspaper Files Available in Offices of Publishers, Libraries, and Private Collections in Louisiana." Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 1941. [Mimeographed.]


A List of Periodicals, Newspapers, Transactions and Other Serial Publications Currently Received in the Principal Libraries of Boston and Vicinity. Boston, The Trustees of the Public Library, 1897.


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New Mexico, University, Library. A Check List of New Mexico Newspapers. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1935.


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Western Reserve Historical Society. *Ohio Newspapers in the Western Reserve Historical Library*. Cleveland, 1944.


Bergman, R. E. “Printing in South Dakota during the Territorial Period, with a Check List of Newspapers and Periodicals from the Beginning through 1889.” Unpublished M.A. thesis, prepared for the Graduate School of Library Science, University of Illinois, 1936.


Texas, University of, Library. *Texas Newspapers in the University of Texas Library [1829-1846]*. Austin? n.d.
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Utah Historical Records Survey. Check List of Newspapers and Magazines Published in Ogden. Ogden, Historical Records Survey, 1938.


Unfortunately not all institutions have prepared lists indicating holdings. Some relatively rich collections go unnoticed and unused because of this lack of bibliographic material.

For example, the Arizona Pioneers' Historical Society collections should be consulted when research on the Southwest is being done. The Society has the largest collection of Arizona state papers including files from cities such as Yuma, Flagstaff, St. Johns, Tombstone, Tucson, and Phoenix. One file, The Weekly Arizonian from Tubac, begins in 1859.

Moving geographically from west to east we find that small Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, boasts over 1,000 volumes of Norwegian-American newspapers, indispensable in the study of Scandinavian immigration and assimilation in the United States.

Farther east, the Connecticut State Library lists large holdings of
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newspaper files from Connecticut while the Forbes Library in Northampton, Massachusetts, claims an extensive file of Connecticut Valley papers. In the small state of Rhode Island, the Harris Collection of the Providence Public Library has an excellent collection of Civil War and slavery papers, while the Rhode Island Historical Society has managed to collect and to preserve an outstanding statewide newspaper file.

The vastness and scope of files located in some states almost defy description. In New York, for example, the State Library collects chiefly state papers, particularly for the upstate area. Much of the collection is of issues from pre-Civil War days although many are now being currently received and bound or microfilmed. In the New York City Public Library over 50,000 volumes and 15,000 reels of film are maintained in a superb collection, strong in New York City papers as well as those representative of diverse sections of the United States and principal foreign countries. The New-York Historical Society maintains a collection of over 12,000 volumes, particularly comprehensive in coverage of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while the Staten Island Historical Society collects both New York City and Staten Island papers. Over eighty long local files form the significant part of the holdings of the Long Island Historical Society. Numerous special collections also abound in the state, such as the Tamiment Institute Library with its holdings of nineteenth and twentieth century communist, socialist, and labor newspapers. And these are but a few examples of outstanding collections which exist in only one state!

In short, it is absolutely imperative that all available bibliographical resources be consulted in order to determine what files exist, where they are located, and how they might be consulted. But even these noteworthy and necessary guides are not enough since they are incomplete and outdated shortly after preparation. In addition there is a noticeable lack or incompleteness of information received from the newspapers and collecting agencies; both often have extensive files at their disposal but either refuse to provide information or are not capable of doing so. Despite all the guides, one must continue to use the talents of a Sherlock Homes, the doggedness of a Dr. Watson, and the wiles of a James Bond to achieve anything remotely resembling completeness in this field.

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References


5. Ibid., p. 457.


12. Ibid., pp. 323, 310.

13. Ibid., p. 265.


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