

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Civil War Newspapers at Chronicling America

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Feature Essay

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All Americans, in one way or another, felt the effects of the Civil War. Relatively few, however, experienced battles firsthand. For most, the war was something they read about in the newspaper.

Scholars interested in studying how the public's knowledge and perception of the war changed as it unfolded now have a valuable electronic resource literally at their fingertips. Launched in 2004, the National Digital Newspaper Program, sponsored by the Library of Congress and the National Endowment for the Humanities, provides grants to cultural heritage institutions to digitize microfilm of historic American newspapers. The images are then made freely available on the project website, *Chronicling America* (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov>). As of 2012, more than 650 newspapers from 25 states and the District of Columbia have been digitized. These include approximately fifty from the Civil War era.

Grant recipients were asked to select papers from every corner of their state. As a result, many small town or "country" newspapers have been included in the project. One of the difficulties in using such sources, as many researchers know, has been the lack of indexes. Now, however, more than four million newspaper pages may be searched electronically by keyword, all in a matter of seconds. The *Chronicling America* project also includes brief histories of each newspaper.

Louisiana State University received its first NDNP grant in 2009. Its choice of Civil War-era newspapers includes titles from New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Alexandria, Plaquemines, Carrollton, and Shreveport, the last capital of the Confederacy. The papers are especially useful for studying Unionist sentiment (and its decline) in Louisiana on the eve of the Civil War. The *Alexandria Constitutional*, in fact, was originally a campaign paper for John Bell of Tennessee, the Constitutional Union Party candidate in 1860. In addition to

military affairs, the papers also shed light on social and cultural life during the war. The *Shreveport News*, for example, contained announcements of concerts, plays, minstrel shows, and other public entertainments. Its “Ladies’ Corner,” which carried recipes, household tips, and fashion advice, may be used to study domestic life on the home front.

In 2011, LSU received a second two-year grant that will support the digitization of 100,000 additional newspaper pages, including papers from the antebellum period. These will be a welcome addition to the many Civil War and Reconstruction-era newspapers already available in *Chronicling America*, helping to provide a full picture not only of the war, but also its causes.