

Nystrom HIST338

"A Community at War" Newspaper Research Assignment

This semester you will engage in original research that traces the unfolding of the Civil War in a single community through the pages of its local newspaper. This assignment has been facilitated by the Library of Congress' digitization of newspapers that it now makes available to the public free of charge through its Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers web portal.

In years past, scholars wanting to peruse small town newspapers had to visit libraries that held the microfilm rolls containing back issues. (Before microfilm, libraries kept bound copies of original paper newspapers!) If we were doing this assignment before 2005, I might have sent you over to Tulane to what was an excellent collection of microfilmed newspapers from small town Louisiana. Tulane stored these films, however, in the library's basement where floodwaters from Hurricane Katrina destroyed them. (The Main Branch of the City Library still retains a good collection of Louisiana newspapers on microfilm, but fewer than what Tulane once held. Scholars interested in viewing more obscure papers must now travel to LSU.) Enter the digital collections offered by LSU, which include some small town Louisiana papers.

By going to the link that I have supplied on the course blog, you may begin to peruse and get the feel for the Historic American Newspapers site. For the purposes of this assignment, however, you need to select a newspaper that the digital collection possesses in the proper date range. Ideally, you will find a paper that covers the time period between 1850 and 1877, but you will soon discover that most papers only cover a portion of this time frame. The minimum chronological coverage that I want you to engage will include some of the war years of 1861-1865. It is possible to write a research paper entirely based in the Reconstruction period, but I encourage you to meet with me before doing so.

To investigate the list of newspapers available and their date ranges, click on the tab that says "All Digitized Newspapers, 1836-1922." Next, click on the link "Show all Digitized Newspapers (737)." This will bring up a list of papers ordered by state (mostly) and the date range available. NOTE: You will notice a date range underneath the title of each newspaper – but you must make sure that it is available online in that date range by looking at the range of issues held in the two right-hand columns on the page. You will quickly notice that the vast majority of the newspapers held in this collection are from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and, as a consequence, no use to you. But some states enjoy greater representation in Civil War Era newspapers than others. Louisiana has several, including a collection of papers from Shreveport as well as Alexandria's *The Louisiana Democrat*. You can piece together several related papers (newspapers often change their name over time) such as the Glasgow, Missouri *Glasgow Weekly Times* and the *Howard Union*. If you click on a newspaper, it will bring up a reference

page that will indicate whether or not it has a preceding and succeeding title. Please note that here are many suitable newspapers from Ohio in this collection.

Once you have found a paper, you need to begin reading it. It is best to do this a little at a time, and ideally you will read the paper for the time period we are currently covering in class. Thus, if we are discussing the battles of 1862, it would be beneficial to read the paper from that period as it will help you contextualize what you read.

I expect you to print and/or digitally save every article that you think might be useful in constructing your paper. You may keep these printouts in a folder or electronically in an iPad/Laptop. At certain points in the semester I will want to meet individually with you to discuss your progress and approach to completing this project. I will want to see the printed or otherwise saved articles at these meetings. Part of your grade hinges on meeting these deadlines.

The greater objective for this assignment is for you to tell one story from the Civil War from the perspective of people who lived in the town where the newspaper was published. It doesn't have to be a comprehensive tale, but it should be as compelling one as you can sustain for the length of a research paper. For instance, maybe you will find articles that deal with an Ohio regiment's campaign through Georgia or another chronicle another town's reaction to the racial transformations brought by the Civil War. In other words, you are searching for some theme that emerges in the paper that you are reading that has a local connection. Note that many of these papers carried national news stories, much like today's Associated Press articles. This is not what you are looking for. You want articles that report on local or locally important news.

Once you have researched fully in the newspaper and have collected a range of articles, you will search for secondary sources that lend substance to your paper's argument. In other words, if you end up writing a paper about the fates of soldiers from one Pennsylvania town in the campaigns of 1864, you will need to read up on the particular battles in which the town's men fought. By definition, everyone will have to do a little bit of research about the people who published your newspaper and the town in which they lived.

The finished research paper will be a target length of ten pages. It will need to be fully footnoted using the Chicago Manual of Style. The reasoning behind the paper's length is that it may provide you with a piece of scholarship appropriate for submission to an academic conference.

Note on the syllabus that I will be reviewing rough drafts approximately two weeks before the end of the semester. This is a firm deadline as I consider review and revision an important step in the process.

Key Deadlines:

9/17 (Monday) Inform instructor of newspaper(s) that you have selected

Week of 10/22 (Monday) Schedule and complete meeting with instructor showing your newspaper research file

11/21 (Wednesday) Rough draft of research paper due (on paper).

12/12 (Final Exam Day) Final paper due at time of exam (on paper).

Grading Rubric:

Meeting deadlines: 20% (5% for each of the four deadlines, all or nothing)

Depth and quality of primary research: 20%

Depth and quality of secondary research: 20%

Quality of writing and argument in final paper: 40%