

# Finding and Using African American Newspapers

Timothy N. Pinnick  
pinnick.aabooks@gmail.com  
<http://blackcoalminerheritage.net/>

## INTRODUCTION

African American researchers will find black newspapers an extremely valuable part of their search strategy. Although mainstream newspapers should always be consulted, African American newspapers will provide nuggets of information that can be found nowhere else.

Although the first African American newspaper was established in 1827, it is in the post Civil War period that the black press experienced tremendous growth. Hundreds of newspapers appeared to quench the thirst for knowledge in the newly freed slaves, and to provide an accurate and positive image of the race.

Clint C. Wilson took the incomplete manuscript of the foremost historian of the African American press, Armistead Pride and produced *A History of the Black Press* in 1997. It is a great source of information on black newspapers. Another worthwhile source can be found online at the public television website of PBS. They produced the documentary film, "The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords" in 1999, and their website is rich in reference material.  
<http://www.pbs.org/blackpress/index.html>

## VALUE OF BLACK NEWSPAPERS

Aside from the most obvious benefit of locating obituaries, researchers can discover:

- an exact or nearly exact event date (birth, death, or marriage) of an ancestor, therefore enhancing the odds of a successful outcome when the eventual request for the vital record is made. *Remember, some places will only search a short span of years in their index, and charge you whether they find the record or not.*
- additional information on the event that will not be found on the vital record.
- the names and locations of immediate family members, including the married names of daughters/sisters.

Another very valuable advantage to using these papers in tracking down vital statistics data is the ability to counterbalance the time periods when vital records were not kept. There will be many cases where the newspaper will be the only source of this information.

A very important aspect of black newspaper research is the potential discovery/confirmation of a slave owner through:

- ☑ printing an article that associates an ancestor with a specific white family, thus giving you a solid lead.
- ☑ giving the name of an owner in an obituary for a deceased former slave. This occurrence is more common than most would think.
- ☑ the publishing of a notice by an slave ancestor seeking information on family member(s) from which they were separated by sale, or the turmoil generated by the Civil War. These announcements appeared in papers after the war and well into Reconstruction.

However, newspaper social columns hold probably the most promise for genealogists. Many newspapers carried these community news columns, which greatly enhances the possibility of finding one for the town or village of your ancestor. Social columns for Champaign, Illinois, for example were located in 5 different papers: *Chicago Defender*, *Chicago Whip*, *Indianapolis Freeman*, and two papers published in Springfield, Illinois, the *State Capital* and the *Illinois Record*.

## LOCATING BLACK NEWSPAPERS

As a general rule, finding out if a black newspaper was published for a particular town or area, then finding the location of any existing copies is not a very complicated process.

### Printed Sources

*African-American Newspapers and Periodicals: A National Bibliography*, James P. Danky editor, Maureen Hady associate editor. Ten years in the making, this book contains 6,562 entries. Aside from the primary alphabetical listing, the book also has several indexes in the back including a geographic one.

*Bibliographic Checklist of African American Newspapers*, Barbara Henritze. Although the title of the book does not indicate it, there are a number of periodicals interspersed among the 5,539 titles present in this publication. It is arranged alphabetically by state, then city, then title, and in the rear of the book is an extensive bibliography along with a title index.

*Extant Collections of Early Black Newspapers: A Research Guide to the Black Press, 1880-1915 With an Index to the Boston Guardian, 1902-1904*, Georgetta Merritt Campbell. The listing of the newspapers is arranged by state, beginning with Alabama. Under the states are their cities with an alphabetical inventory of surviving papers and the repositories where they can be found. The really unique feature of this book is that it comes with an index of the *Boston Guardian*, which was one of the most influential black papers on the East Coast. Indexes to African American newspapers post Civil War up through the mid-1970s are rare.

## Internet Sources

“Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers,” is a massive database situated at the website of the Library of Congress. The easiest way to locate it is to simply key in “chronicling america”, into a search engine. It is a great source to find out which black newspapers are in existence, and there are also a few that are digitized on the site. When conducting searches, there is an option for African American papers on the drop down menu.

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

The Ancestor Hunt is a robust site created by Kenneth Marks. He has put together what is probably the richest free collection of links to historic newspaper material on the internet. Marks scours the web and links genealogists to resources for every state, and in addition has created tutorials for them; the site has other useful newspaper research related articles as well. The site has a special summary of online African American newspaper resources.

<http://www.theancestorhunt.com/>

GenealogyBank.com is a subscription website that contains the largest African American newspaper collection on the internet. They have been adding to the collection steadily, and have digitized the *Indianapolis Freeman* and the *Savannah Tribute*, two major black newspapers.

<https://www.genealogybank.com/>

ProQuest corporation has one of the most extensive and impressive collections of black newspapers online. However, it is difficult to locate and gain access to the collection, and it does not accept individual subscribers. Some of the most prominent and recognizable 20th century newspapers have been digitized by the company.

- Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003)
- Baltimore Afro-American (1893-1988)
- Chicago Defender (1910-1975)
- Cleveland Call and Post (1934-1991)
- Los Angeles Sentinel (1934-2005)
- New York Amsterdam News (1922-1993)
- Norfolk Journal and Guide (1921-2003)
- Philadelphia Tribune (1912-2001)
- Pittsburgh Courier (1911-2002)

For more details on these newspapers, you can go to the ProQuest website:

<http://www.proquest.com/products-services/histnews-bn.html>

\*\*Read a chapter of my book, *Finding and Using African American Newspapers* here:

[http://blackcoalminerheritage.net/aanewspaper\\_book.html](http://blackcoalminerheritage.net/aanewspaper_book.html)

**© 2017 by Timothy Pinnick. Not to be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission.**