

In the Digital Age, Preserving the Print of the Past

by John Connolly

For the past 20 years, a project at the Library of Virginia in Richmond has been laboring to find and preserve a form of media communication that has been waning: Virginia's newspapers. Under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Virginia Newspaper Project (VNP) was established at the Library of Virginia in 1993 and continues its work today though it has evolved in order to take full advantage of the latest technology.

Starting with the collection of newspapers in the Library of Virginia, the University of Virginia, and the College of William and Mary, VNP set out to replace what was known as the Union Listing—a long list of libraries and the newspapers they had on file. Project employees set out to visit every county in Virginia, gathering as much information as possible on newspapers at local libraries.

"We thought the Union Listing was probably not the best use of resources," said Errol Somay, the Director of VNP. "We felt the best way to approach the preservation of Virginia's newspapers was to find as many newspapers as we can that we don't have and to add them to an online database."

VNP borrowed newspapers from the local libraries, historical societies, museums, and publishing offices. The microfilmed newspapers were added to the Library of Virginia, and a copy was sent to the local libraries with the catalog

records to provide better access to patrons.

"This was the old-fashioned, analog process," said Somay. "It was a win-win for everybody. We were able to grow the collection at the Library of Virginia, to increase

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access to the patrons at the local libraries, and we were able to catalog literally thousands of newspapers for the United States Newspaper Program."

Before the initial phase of the program ended, VNP had microfilmed well over 1 million pages and cataloged over 7,000 newspaper titles, 4,000 of which were Virginia imprints.

In recent years, the project has made a natural progression by focusing more on the digitization of microfilm. In many cases, the microfilm of the newspapers is far easier to scan into a digital format than the original newsprint. When NEH introduced its National Digital Newspaper Program (NDNP), Virginia was one of the six original

states to join. The digital scans from the Federal program are available through the Chronicling America database.

Many of the scans from the original United States Newspaper Program, however, were restricted to a specific historical and topical scope. The term "historical newspapers" only applies to newspapers printed before 1923, as scanning printed papers after that date might infringe on copyright. Further, initial focus was on newspapers from 1900 to 1910, an era that has proven less popular to Virginia historical interest than the 18th and 19th centuries. The VNP is currently delving into the rich historical material available through 19th Century newspapers and making them available to the NDNP but also through the LVA's own unique repository, Virginia Chronicle.

"We're playing catch-up right now in some ways," said Somay. "It's just now that we're digitizing the Civil War and Reconstruction and moving to antebellum Virginia. While we continue to contribute to the NDNP, Virginia Chronicle allows us the opportunity to add many newspapers that otherwise might be considered out of scope. We're doing as much microfilming and scanning today as we've ever done, with the

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understanding that much of the microfilm is really a cost-effective step in the digital process.”

To facilitate participation from as many states as possible, the NEH program has cycles for funding, and states take it in turns to apply. Currently, the VNP is not being funded by the NEH grant. Nevertheless, the program has received strong support from the Library of Virginia, and has seen a growing demand for online access to its work. The digital content VNP produces is full text with over 300,000 pages contributed to both the NDNP and to the in-house Virginia Chronicle.

“We’ve seen a steady increase in the numbers of searches and referrals,” said Somay. “In many ways, we are Virginia. The interest in newspapers and original historical documentation is going to be very high, especially for events 150 years ago. We get a lot of questions from researchers and genealogists about whether or not specific titles are digitized yet.”

Part of the challenge for the VNP is responding to the demand and letting would-be users know where the materials are. In many ways, VNP has had to prove flexible in bringing new tools to bear in getting out the message, including founding a blog, called “Fit

For Print,” that highlights gems from the repositories of scans. Once users experience the wealth of historical information available through the VNP repositories, they usually respond quite positively.

“We see a lot of researchers come back and remark on some of

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the wonderful stuff they found,” said Somay. “We’re sort of in competition for people’s time. There’s so much out there. Once they find it, they say, this is great. But it’s key to get them introduced to the collection. The blog is a tool to help with that.”

During his time at VNP, Somay says that he has been struck by the deep historical reality through his work with Virginia’s newspapers.

“It really comes to life for you,” he said. “You have newspapers that record big, important events. We have a newspaper that has the first printing in a Virginia gazette of the Declaration of Independence.

There it is. Someone picked up the paper that day and read it. I’m thinking, ‘Wow, that really happened!’ It makes it all a little more real.”

On the top of Somay’s list of remarkable treasures in the collection is a lot of the yellow journalism about Thomas Jefferson’s alleged relationship with Sally Hemmings, a slave. The collection also has many copies of the *Richmond Planet*, an African-American newspaper from the late 19th Century whose publisher was John Mitchell, Jr. Mitchell, “The Fighting Editor,” used the paper to fight vociferously for racial equality, and would regularly use the back page of the paper to list the names of the victims of lynching.

“He was born into slavery and became a teacher and then a publisher,” said Somay. “If you distilled the elements of his life, nobody would believe it. Through it all, he was tireless. Copies of the *Richmond Planet* were in very bad condition when we found them, and now it’s been physically preserved, microfilmed and digitized so everybody can access it. Learning about John Mitchell, Jr. is one of the most beneficial things that has happened to me since I started working on the Virginia Newspaper Project.” **VI**