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FLORIDA NEWSPAPERS AND THEIR VALUE TO HISTORIANS

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To write history one must have source material. This is a ridiculous truism, but is sometimes overlooked by would-be writers of history. A man cannot write history by reconstructing the past from his own imagination. Such a process produces fiction, not history. Probably the feature most unattractive to the majority of writers is the gathering of the source material from which history is to be written. This collecting of material often does not fire the imagination, and is considered, I am afraid, by many sheer drudgery. The work of the bibliographer does not appeal to those who desire instant popular acclaim and fame, for bibliography, no matter how essential to the writing of history, never attracts popular attention.

Newspapers are among the most important of source materials. While their reliability may at times be subject to grave doubts, they nevertheless give a real picture of the times when they were published. A file of newspapers which contains issues published during the course of five or ten years should show the development of the community in which the paper was published. If we could locate and read a complete or almost complete file of Florida newspapers published between 1821, when the United States took possession of the territory, and 1876, the end of the reconstruction era, we would have undoubtedly an accurate impression of the development of Florida during that time.

Feeling that it is necessary to have a list of the copies of early Florida newspapers now in existence, the writer has spent much of his spare time during the last three years in ferreting out the location of papers published

prior to July, 1845, and in reading the issues located in the hope of finding references to papers, copies of which have not been preserved. The results of the investigation are interesting. It is estimated that 6800 numbers were issued before July, 1845. Copies of about 3500 numbers have been located. These are found in nine or ten libraries all the way from Massachusetts to Florida. Of the forty-four papers published in this period no copies of sixteen have been found. It must be added, however, that fortunately only two of these sixteen were of great importance historically. The Advertiser, of Apalachicola, which was published between 1833 and 1835, undoubtedly would give us information about the commercial beginnings of the town that was Florida's commercial metropolis about 1840. The Tropical Plant, published in Jacksonville between 1842 and 1844, would show us the early struggles of the present day metropolis of Florida. Special mention should be made of one other paper, some extremely important numbers of which have apparently not been preserved. This paper, the St. Joseph Times, gave detailed accounts of the first Florida constitutional convention, which was held in St. Joseph in December, 1838, and January, 1839. Unfortunately, more than half of the issues giving an account of the convention cannot be located.

While the newspapers of the territorial period of Florida history are important to the historian, those of the period between 1845 and 1876 are much more so. Here we see the growth of the secession movement, the gigantic struggle between the North and the South, and the nightmare known as reconstruction. Somebody should list the Florida papers of this period.