

Research Surprises: Examining the Local Press, 1861-1865

One semester, I taught an undergraduate media history course at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Our research project focused on newspapers and the print culture of this area, 1861-1865. The students had been looking at various facets of area newspapers' content, news gathering, production, and readership. The research included primary sources, newspapers in the special collections at the university's Wilson Library.

After they had been at it a while, I asked the students to tell me – briefly – what they found most interesting or surprising in their research. Here are some of their responses.

– Frank Fee

“One interesting piece of information I found was that many editions of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* that I studied included local news about the Pennsylvania Battalion serving in the Civil War. They published specific news about the casualties and movement of this group. Early local news, perhaps?”

“Looking at the newspapers, I found news that supported the Union even though they were inside the Confederate region. Furthermore, in the *Semi-Weekly Raleigh Register* I found an article talking about how the Confederacy got to steal one newspaper from the Union and tried to criticize what it published and compared to the Confederacy press policies.”

“It was very interesting to find that one of the *Hillsborough Recorder* articles was written by P.W.A., a well-known Southern correspondent during the Civil War (according to the textbook.) P.W.A wrote that it was Gen. Lee's superiority that helped win the battle. (He briefly explains the battle and goes on to focus the story on Lee's character as a model general and gentleman.)” [“P.W.A.” was Peter W. Alexander, a lawyer turned reporter who covered nearly all of the major battles.¹]

“I'm focusing on the technological aspect of the press, so part of that has to do with how the news was delivered. I learned that society in the 1860s was becoming a constantly moving population, where people packed up and moved all over the U.S. The way they kept track of their old homes was through letters, and these letters were published in newspapers all around the states as they were forwarded to people. Letters often appear in the old newspapers and they were a way to know what was going on in all regions of the country.”

¹ See, for instance, J. Cutler Andrews, *The South Reports the Civil War* (1970; repr., Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 1985); J. Ford Risley, “Georgia's Civil War Newspapers: Partisan, Sanguine, Enterprising,” (PhD diss., University of Florida, 1996), 68-69.

“In January 1864, the *Hillsborough Recorder* announced the implementation of a new wartime bartering system in order to offer an alternative means of payment for its subscribers. In addition to a single dollar, readers could also add ‘wood, corn, wheat or flour, or butter, eggs, or potatoes, or any article of the kind used in a family.’ This was first discovered in Debra Reddin van Tuyl’s article “Knights of the Quill,” which I read in my book review of *Words at War: American Journalism and the Civil War*.² I commented on the find in the following review and the *Recorder* entry was also confirmed in the microfilms of Wilson Library.”

“One interesting characteristic I found regarding the *New York Herald* is the extensive amount of maps they published on their front pages. I’m still trying to figure out how they got such data and determine its accuracy. Also, it was interesting that some of the news of the war was pushed off the front page for articles about St. Patty’s Day, the date of one of the issue’s publication!”

“It has been interesting to note that some of the predictions made by *NYT* correspondents days in advance of the supposed action actually came to pass. One of these dispatches, dated Wednesday, Dec. 10 (but printed Dec. 13, 1862), predicted that a “bold and vigorous effort will be made to enter the rebel capital.” The invasion of Fredericksburg began the next day. This correspondent, from the Centro Grand Division, must have known when the invasion would begin. How did he get this information? Was it held and not published until the 13th for fear of it reaching the enemy? This is important/dangerous information for a reporter to possess. He went on to speculate and wrote: ‘Who knows but that ere the ushering in of 1863 the doom of rebellion will be sealed, and our army exulting in triumph over a fallen foe? WHIT.’ His prediction here was wrong, but he does place high importance to the outcome of this battle in determining the outcome of the war. I tried to find out what ‘WHIT’ meant. I thought it might be a name, but I found no names for civil war reporters at the *NYT* named Whit.”³

“Looking at the *Semi-Weekly Raleigh Register*, I found a lot dealing with government threat against personal property of Southerners who did not support the Confederacy. It correlates a lot to the book I read for the book report, where Kenneth Noe⁴ discussed how soldiers were forced to fight in the war solely to

² David B. Sachsman, S. Kittrell Rushing, and Roy Morris Jr., *Words at War: The Civil War and American Journalism* (Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008).

³ “WHIT was the pen name of a *New York Times* correspondent whose full name remains a mystery. In an era of few bylines, correspondents who were allowed to identify themselves in print often chose initials or whimsical names that masked their identity. See, for instance, Richard A. Martin, “The New York Times Views Civil War Jacksonville,” *Florida Historical Journal* 53, no. 4 (April 1975): 409-427, at 413-415.

⁴ Kenneth Noe, *Reluctant Rebels: The Confederates Who Joined the Army after 1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

protect their own personal property rather than ideological call to arms or trying to protect the institutions”

“The most interesting thing I have started to look at in the area of advertising is the presence of advertisements for ‘valuable negroes’ I saw a few of these in the years leading up to the war. However, I had planned to investigate today whether or not they continued to be printed during the war.”

“In researching dissent on the home front, I have found it interesting that the published opinion was neither predominately pro-Confederacy nor pro-Unionist. It seems that there was a pretty balanced mix of pro-Confederate and pro-Unionist news. The two newspapers that I have looked at, the *Hillsborough Recorder* and the *Raleigh Standard*, represent this dichotomy with the *Recorder* appearing to be more pro-Confederacy and the *Standard* appearing to be more Unionist. The arguments made against conscription in the *Standard* have been especially helpful in researching and understanding dissent.”

“An interesting fact that I discovered in my research was the existence of the North Carolina University magazine, and the fact that it was forced to halt its production during the war because virtually its entire student staff had left to participate in the war effort.”

“Even when slavery was legal in North Carolina there was a sizable free black population in the state. More than 20,000 of the free blacks even had the right to vote until 1835. <http://docsouth.unc.edu> (UNC’s documentation of the Civil War South).”

“In most of the *Hillsborough Recorders* that I have seen, there seems to be a section designated – whether in the middle or the end – to address its subscribers. Most of the time it is asking for people to subscribe: ‘but we should like to make improvements to our paper, in its appearance and matters; and to enables us to do so, we must have considerable addition to our subscription list.’ I noticed that as you get further on into the war, they have a more urgent tone with people bringing in money, and they justify why they are asking for it: ‘But we have to pay cash for paper and everything we use, and in many cases two or three prices, and shall therefore consider ourselves justly entitled to the three dollars a year from all those who suffer the overages of two or three years to accumulate.’”

“My primary research has been in looking at the news of the Battle of Fredericksburg in Raleigh papers. One thing I was struck by was how dialed in to military strategy some reporters were. According to my team members, when Union forces took the town, Northern newspapers celebrated the battle as a victory, meanwhile an article republished from Richmond states, ‘The occupation of Frederiksberg, obtained with merely nominal opposition on our part, gives a questionable advantage to the enemy – we believe the Rappahannock will yet be more to our advantage behind the enemy than when it was in their front.’”

“I learned the women of Orange County formed the ‘Soldiers Aid Society,’ which met weekly and helped the soldiers and their families. More specifically, a committee in this society organized food to be given to soldiers as they passed through the Hillsboro train station.”

“In *Kinship and Neighborhood in a Southern Community: Orange County, North Carolina, 1849-1881*,⁵ I found about the economy in Orange County during the Civil War was that during the war the economy was largely based on farming but with the emergence of a tobacco factory in Durham after the war the economy somewhat shifted off of the farm and into the factory.”

“The most interesting thing I’ve found so far is that the *Carolina Magazine* before the war (March and April 1861) printed both Unionist and Secessionist writing, unlike area newspapers, which chose sides.”

“When I was looking through the papers, I thought it was interesting that the papers used the telegraph reports a lot and made telegraph reports very important and prominent on the page.”

⁵ Robert Charles Kenzer, *Portrait of a Southern Community, 1849-1881: Family, Kinship, and Neighborhood in Orange County, North Carolina* (PhD diss, Harvard University, 1982).