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Old news - The Louisville Leader's genealogical gems.

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GENEALOGY GEMS: OLD NEWS – THE *LOUISVILLE LEADER'S* GENEALOGICAL GEMS

BY RACHEL HOWARD

DIGITAL INITIATIVES LIBRARIAN, UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE LIBRARIES

When the University of Louisville Archives and Special Collections decided to digitize its entire run of microfilmed *Louisville Leader* newspapers, and make the scans freely available on its Digital Collections website (<http://digital.library.louisville.edu>), the newspaper's value to genealogists was not at the forefront of our minds. This African-American community newspaper, published weekly in Louisville from 1917 to 1950, offered a perspective on local and national events not available in the mainstream (white-run) media at the time, and we wanted to provide broader access to those stories.

While the *Leader's* coverage of such topics as political campaigns, the Great Depression, World War II, the ongoing scourge of lynching, and the inequity of segregated facilities will not disappoint researchers looking for the African-American perspective on those topics, the newspaper's weekly columns highlighting community members' life events and activities may be of greater interest to social historians and genealogists.

In a history of the *Louisville Leader* published in the December 4, 1937 issue on the occasion of its 20th anniversary, Mrs. Patsy Sloan notes that there were two types of newspaper readers: those who find their own lives interesting and those who find their own lives dull. She continues, "The *Louisville Leader* publishes records of weddings, funerals, lodge meetings, oyster suppers, silver teas and such 'small town' news to satisfy the first type..."¹

Neither Mrs. Sloan nor founding publisher I. Willis Cole may have anticipated the potential long-term interest in such small-town news for genealogists pursuing traces of their ancestors and for researchers attempting to flesh out the details of daily life in particular

communities and eras. The types of records in which community members' names (and, often, addresses) are reported in the *Leader* include listings of births, deaths, hospitalizations, marriages, vacations, visits, and visitors; professional achievements; club, church, fraternal organization, business, and school activities; and athletic and theatrical events. This rich vein of information often appeared in regular columns, the titles and location of which varied somewhat throughout the paper's decades-long run but remained fairly predictable. *Society and Clubs*, or some variation of that heading, often dominated Page two of the paper, with columns such as *Births – Deaths – Marriages* or *Vital Statistics and Personals*. Religion and Education schedules and news appeared alongside the society news or on a separate page. Classified advertisements typically included "In Memoriam" and "Card of Thanks" messages from the families of deceased community members. Most issues included two pages from "Correspondents" in other communities in Kentucky, southern Indiana, and sometimes further afield (such as Clarksville, Tennessee and Northport, Alabama), documenting milestones and events from those locations.

Unfortunately, for many weeks of the *Leader's* 33-year run, this wealth of information is not available. Several months after the death of I. Willis Cole in March 1950 (an event thoroughly chronicled in the newspaper's pages), the *Leader* ceased publication, and back issues stored in the Cole Publishing Building were badly damaged by a fire in 1954. The Cole family donated the surviving copies, some of which were smoke, water, and fire-damaged, to Kentucky State University, who loaned them to the University of Louisville Archives and Records Center in 1978 for microfilming before the acidic newsprint completely disin-

EDITOR'S NOTE

As noted in the first Genealogy Gems column (*Kentucky Libraries* 74.4), this space is devoted to the subject of genealogy, and we welcome submissions on any related topic. Please see that first column for a list of specialized topics which we plan to cover. No column in this series is meant to be a comprehensive look at the specific subject discussed. Submitted manuscripts will be edited by the *Kentucky Libraries* editorial board.

Please direct questions or submissions to Katherine Pennavaria, column editor, at k.pennavaria@wku.edu

tegrated. Thus we are missing the issue in January 1942 that may have reported on the birth of Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali); the winter 1937 issues that may have documented how the African-American community fared during the Ohio River flooding; and much more. Torn portions of issues we do have render some stories incomplete or illegible.

The University of Louisville's microfilm copies (seven reels' worth) were scanned in 2011, and further disappointment ensued when we noticed that the poor condition of the micro-filmed pages affected the legibility of the text for automated optical-character recognition (OCR). OCR is used to make digitized texts searchable. Where automation fails, though, human intervention can succeed. Using the Scripto plug-in to the open-source Omeka software, we established a crowdsourcing initiative to enlist the community's assistance in transcribing articles. In February 2013, we launched a website providing free online access to PDFs of the 898 extant issues at digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/leader, and solicited assistance with their transcription. Well over 5,000 have been transcribed to date, but many remain, and it is our hope that those who use the site for genealogical or historical research can contribute to the resource by transcribing. Each person's contribution to making the text more searchable will benefit future researchers. In fact, it was in selecting articles to be transcribed that we recognized the value of the more mundane news to genealogists. Some volunteer transcribers avoid the articles laden with names, but others relish the opportunity; one frequent contributor has reported feeling like she's actually getting to know the people she reads and types about.

The *Leader* can be browsed by date or searched by keyword (with the caveat, as noted above, that the transcription of text is not yet complete). While the search box above the graphic on the collection's home page works well for single-word searching, we recommend the Advanced Search interface (accessed via the link to the right of the box) for more finely tuned searches, including exact phrases. Choose "Full text" from the drop-down within Advanced Search to search the transcribed text. In either simple or advanced search, the asterisk (*) can be used to truncate a term; this is useful if, for example, you're looking for someone with the first name William who may have been listed as "Will." Keep in mind that you should also search under the first initial alone and under the common abbreviation "Wm."

Once the search results come up, click on the issue and either look for the red asterisk underneath the thumbnail image of the page at right to determine which page the search term appeared on, or switch to the "Text" tab (above the larger image of the page) to navigate directly to the search term. Once your initial search has brought you to a particular issue, you can also refine your search term using the Text Search box.

Whether you are interested in a particular person or family or more generally in local African-American history from the first half of the twentieth century, the *Louisville Leader* may be well worth mining for gems.

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FOOTNOTE

1 Accessible at <http://digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/ref/collection/leader/id/7233>