

Accessing Primary Sources through Archival Databases: A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Accessible Archives was founded in 1990 with the goal of utilizing sophisticated computer technology to make available vast quantities of archived historical information. *Accessible Archives'* databases contain the rich, comprehensive material found in leading historic newspapers, periodicals and books. Eyewitness accounts of historical events, vivid descriptions of daily life, editorial observations, commerce as seen through advertisements and genealogical records are made available in a user-friendly ON-LINE environment that allows users to search and manipulate information from historical full text sources and digital imaging in ways never before possible. In viewing the original document image users can gain the full flavor of the times.

Lynn DiMaggio is an online graduate student at the University of Alabama, School of Library and Information Studies. Her review of *Accessible Archives'* database *African-American Newspapers: The 19th Century* was part of an assigned class project. Her report begins:

"*African-American Newspapers: The 19th Century* is a product of *Accessible Archives*. Its website, www.accessible.com, reports that *Accessible Archives* was founded in 1990 with the goal of utilizing computer technology to make available vast quantities of archived historical information, previously furnished only on microfilm. The website also mentions that it was developed by dedicated instructors and students of American history. *Accessible Archives* is affiliated with *Unlimited Priorities Corporation*[®], a company specializing in support for organizations within the information industry. According to *Unlimited Priorities'* website, the company works with *Accessible Archives* to provide sales, marketing and technical support services. *Accessible Archives* has been online since 1995."

Ms DiMaggio offers quotations from two journalists: "A newspaper is a circulating library with high blood pressure." Arthur Baer. "A library, to modify the famous metaphor of Socrates, should be the delivery room for the birth of ideas – a place where history comes to life." Norman Cousins. She then goes on:

"The database, *African-American Newspapers: The 19th Century*, seems to embody and blend a bit of both. History seems to come alive in the articles about people's lives, what was important to them and what was not. *The style of writing reflects a different time – maybe a more casual view of facts, but a more personal view of readers.* ... This database offers a peek into the past that is intriguing."

Since it is an online database, Ms. DiMaggio also evaluated the support and ease of use of the service. "A 19-page easy-to-use manual can be either downloaded or scrolled through for help in using the database. A help button offers a "quick fix" to problems as well. The database offers a thesaurus in which the user puts in a word, and variants of the word and an alphabetical list of search

terms that follow are listed. This is helpful if the searcher is not exactly sure what to use. Support is available by telephone or email, and responses will be returned within 24 hours. In regard to other educational activities, webinars and on-site tutorials are available upon request. What was a plus is the quick response and personal touch I received in response to my inquiries. It impressed upon me that the company more than likely provides good service to its users, which would seem to be a necessity in today's world."

She concluded with: "This database has a good core of important primary source materials and if service is a concern, this may be your choice. It seems to be affordable enough for a school, public or a small academic library that wants to expand its online collections and offer a valuable research tool to its community. Unless a patron or student is doing extensive research, this may be the answer to filling in the gaps in a collection, especially when the other databases in the package are considered (including the Civil War collection, American County Histories to 1900, The Liberator 1831-1865)."

Ms DiMaggio's paper included three reviews of *Accessible Archives* databases:

Bina Williams recommended *Accessible Archives* for middle- and high-school use: "Text from original documents offers students a chance to read the florid prose of the 19th century and to understand the concerns of the day." Bina Williams. *Accessible Archives: A Celebration of American history. School Library Journal*; Aug 2001; 47, 8; Research Library pg. 73

Gail Golderman and Bruce Connolly wrote of *African-American Newspapers: The 19th Century*: "This is a vital resource for the exploration of firsthand accounts of cultural life and history during the 1800s from an African American viewpoint." *Africana studies. Other sources. netConnect*. Fall 2005 p. 28

J A Reuscher in "Accessible Archives: Primary Source Material from 18th & 19th Century Periodical" recommended "AA [as] an affordable alternative for all libraries that need access to the critical periodicals of early American History." *Choice*; June 2009; 46, 10

Complete information about all *Accessible Archives'* databases is available at www.accessible.com.