

THE USE OF SECULAR NEWSPAPERS IN WRITING CHURCH HISTORY

Quentin Porch*

In writing church history, an author should use every source available to him that will add to the end product. One of these sources available in some degree is the secular newspaper.

In the early years of our country, most small towns had a local newspaper and, since news was scarce, most editors were anxious for any items of local interest. In many cases, the newspapermen were members of the local church and interested in its welfare. They were limited in the amount of church news by the volume of news the church made. Many of these men ran announcements of the Sunday services and were delighted with some special occasion that gave them newsworthy material. The problems confronted by these early editors are now reflected in our ability or inability to glean from their works the materials we wish we could get.

Yet, one can get much from old newspapers if he takes the time to do so. Usually there were announcements of revival meetings. Pastoral changes were written up, often listing where the pastor came from or where he was going. The pastor's past accomplishments are usually found here rather than in the church minutes. Some important information about lay people can be gleaned from newspapers. In Tuscaloosa, Richard Furman was one of the most active men of the church in pre-Civil War days. An advertisement in the local paper listed him as head of a preparatory school which he operated with his brother.¹

Special occasions sometimes attracted notice. The visit of a foreign missionary in 1846 was news, especially when the missionary brought with him one of the early Chinese converts.²

New ventures in church work were publicized. In 1857, the Tuscaloosa newspaper gave much space to the launching of a new school for women. The names and positions of the leaders of this movement given in the paper helped to relate this school to the Baptist cause.³ These examples will suffice to show some of the kinds of material available.

There are many problems encountered in the use of old newspapers. One of the first is availability. In many county-site towns, copies of old newspapers have been kept for many years. Yet, in too many instances, they have been destroyed. Samford University Library is trying to collect as many of these as time and money will allow. Libraries at the University of Alabama and Auburn University have collected many of these. Yet, the holdings are far from complete.

Another problem is the time required to search these papers. It will prove an almost endless job. Tons of material will have to be sifted to come up hopefully with the nugget needed to complete the story. Temptation also leads one to read many unrelated items, wasting valuable time. If the researcher knows the approximate date of some item of interest, and will look for specific issues of the paper, it can save much time.

Much of the material found will be on microfilm. In many cases, the readability is poor. Here one must take care not to unduly strain his eyes. A magnifying glass often comes in handy.

A problem that is not as easily handled is inaccuracy, at times, on the part of the secular writer. This is much amplified in recent years when most news is rewritten to make it more acceptable to the general public. Errors do creep in.

Most pastors have not been publicity men. They wrote very little. Yet, even Sunday announcements can be helpful. For instance, when Dr. Alva Wood, a Baptist minister, became the first president of the University of Alabama, the date of his arrival is determined by the announcement that he would preach at the Tuscaloosa church. The same paper copied an article from the *Kentucky Gazette* discussing the former work of Dr. Wood, and gave helpful biographical material.⁴

At times one will find items that need further explanation which cannot be found. Hours of searching up blind alleys will usually lead nowhere, but, still, they might. One can ill afford to stop short. Do not hurry. Take all the time needed to look everywhere. You will never know what is there until you do.

*Mr. Porch is a member of the faculty, Judson College, Marion, Alabama. This article is the substance of his address at the Workshop, 1968.

(Mr. Porch retired in 1984, spent nine months under the Foreign Mission Board in the Philippines and is now doing interim work while living in Marion, Alabama.)

¹ *Independent Monitor* (Tuscaloosa), January 7, 1846, p. 2.

² *Ibid.*, August 11, 1846, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, July 23, 1857, p. 2.

⁴ *Alabama State Intelligencer* (Tuscaloosa), March 2, 1831, p. 1.