

Community Newspaper is an Invaluable Historical Resource

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East Aurorans rely on the *Advertiser* for local news. But in the Town Historian's Office we rely on it for local history. The *Advertiser* is nearly always the first stop on any research journey in the Historian's Office.

Here are just a few reasons why:

—Past issues of most community newspapers, but especially of the *Advertiser*, contain probably the most comprehensive record of local births, marriages and deaths. New York State did not require official government Vital Statistics records until the 1880s, and in many cases these official records of births, marriage and deaths are light on details. Church records are either non-existent or hard to come by. However, many newspaper obituaries provide biographical details that death certificates do not. Marriage announcements provide information about the wedding day—even details about what the bride wore—that a genealogical marriage certificate does not.

—The local newspaper provides important context for major events. Want to know what everyday life was like in East Aurora during the Great Depression or World War II? Take a read through a vintage issue of the *East Aurora Advertiser*. In many instances, the information on the inside pages is just as important to understanding history as the major headlines on the front page. In our technologically advanced world today, sometimes it's easy to forget that folks lived through World War II without television. The radio advertisements on the *Advertiser's* inside pages during the 1940s remind us of this.

—For 150 years, the *Advertiser* has carried news of village, town and school meetings, as well as legal notices. But, perhaps just as important, are the editorials and letters to the editor that offer insight into what people were thinking.

—The *Advertiser* is a valuable historical resource not just for the Village of East Aurora and Town of Aurora; because the newspaper has covered the entire region, the past 150 years of events in surrounding towns also can be found among the newspaper’s pages.

—The advertisements, including the tiniest classified ads, offer insight into the history of our business community. The newspapers tell us how much things used to cost and where businesses were located.

—The newspaper’s “Personals” column was the Facebook and Instagram of its time. For decades, these one-line announcements told readers who was visiting whom, where folks were traveling and the topic of the sermon at a local church. Inquiring readers relished this kind of news back then. Likewise, we relish this kind of history today! Understanding the comings and goings of our community at any given time can often be better found in the Personals column than under a large front-page headline.

—Although the newspaper is not the only resource for researching local history, it’s difficult to imagine researching and writing local history without the benefit of 150 years of the *East Aurora Advertiser* and East Aurora’s other community newspapers. As just one example, for the monthly “Historian’s Corner” newspaper column in December 2021, and to answer several inquiries made to the Historian’s Office, I investigated the last time the Aurora Town Board had more Democrats than Republicans. By far, the easiest—and perhaps only—way to find out the answer was to take a look through the *Advertiser*’s coverage of every town election since 1880, using the digital and microfilmed archives of the *East Aurora Advertiser* in the Aurora Town Historian’s Office. As a result of this information, I was able to discover that the 1888-1889 term was the last during which Democrats held a majority.

It’s no exaggeration to assert that without the local newspaper—and the subsequent preservation of each issue—many details of our community’s past would be lost. Collaborative efforts over the past half-century have ensured the continued preservation of this history.

Beginning in 1975, an effort was launched to microfilm all the existing physical editions of the *Advertiser* dating back to the first issue in 1872.

In 2011, with significant initial contributions from the Aurora Historical Society and Badger & Gunner Insurance, the Historian’s Office began converting these microfilms to a digital format. With additional contributions, the digitization project is ongoing, and includes plans to complete the entire run of the *Advertiser*, as well as other short-lived newspapers, including the *Aurora Standard* of the 1830s, *The Weekly Times* of the early 1880s and *The Orbit* of the 1960s. In addition to digitizing more newspapers, the Historian’s Office is also making plans to provide greater accessibility to the digital collection.

Newspapers are now digitally searchable on a computer rather than a tedious microfilm machine; and individual articles can be shared with the click of a mouse.

East Aurora and its surrounding towns are fortunate to have an uninterrupted history of community journalism. Preserving that history—either in paper or digital form—ensures that we preserve information that not only tells us what happened, but why it happened. Perhaps more than any other resource, the local community newspaper helps us not only confirm history but also helps us create an evolutionary timeline to put history in context. A consistent, uninterrupted recording of our history helps those of us living in East Aurora today understand, one week at a time, how the community has grown.

My opinion might be a bit biased; I love newspapers. I've loved newspapers since as a bored 11-year-old I launched a one-page neighborhood newspaper, *Goller's Gazette*. Over the next seven years, with support and a bit of patience from more than 250 neighbors in the Hamlin Park neighborhood, the physical size of the *Gazette* and my love for newspapers continued to grow. After college, I went I to become editor of other community newspapers, including the *East Aurora Advertiser*. I have the fortune of seeing both sides of the newspaper: as editor; and as reader and historian.

However, as historian I've grown to more fully understand something that I didn't fully appreciate as editor: The newspaper's role in recording the history of a community not only for its present-day readers, but also for future generations.

Robert Lowell Goller is the eighth Aurora town and East Aurora village historian since the office was created in 1919. The archives of the Historian's Office—including the collection of newspapers—are open for research Wednesdays and Thursdays from 1-4 p.m., and by appointment.