Freedom buys Milton newspaper
Louis Cooper

Freedom Communications, which owns the Northwest Florida Daily News in Fort Walton Beach, has bought four nondaily newspapers in Northwest Florida, including the Santa Rosa Press Gazette in Milton.

The transaction was announced Tuesday.

"These are fine community newspapers and we are glad to have them in our portfolio of products and services," Karen Hanes, vice president of Florida Freedom Newspapers, said in a news release. "They are a natural extension of our existing operations, both in print and online."

In addition to the Press Gazette, published Wednesdays and Saturdays, Irvine, Calif.-based Freedom bought the Crestview News Bulletin; the Washington County News, based in Chipley; and the Holmes County Times-Advertiser in Bonifay.

"There will be no immediate change," said Jim Fletcher, publisher of the Press Gazette. "Freedom is vowing to continue with the commitment the Press Gazette has always had to the community."

The Press Gazette was owned by Milton Publishing Co., whose major shareholder was J. Thomas Ricketson. Ricketson also was the majority shareholder in Okaloosa Publishing Co., which published the News Bulletin.

Chipley Newspapers, a subsidiary of Louisiana-based Specht Newspapers, had owned the News and the Times-Advertiser.

Donna Tucker, executive director of the Santa Rosa County Chamber of Commerce, became acquainted with Freedom Communications when she ran a hotel in Fort Walton Beach.

"One of the things I'm most excited about in hearing this news is the people at the Fort Walton paper were heavily involved in their community," she said. "You like to see any company that comes in get involved in the community."

In addition to the Northwest Florida Daily News, Freedom also owns the daily Panama City News Herald, as well as the nondaily Destin Log and Walton Sun in Okaloosa and Walton counties.

Freedom publishes 28 daily newspapers and 37 weekly publications. The newspapers' combined daily circulation is slightly more than 1.2 million.
Freedom's flagship newspaper is the Orange County (Calif.) Register with a circulation of 360,000.