

Harper's Weekly

The idea of producing a weekly to accompany the *New Monthly Magazine* must have been discussed from time to time, but the ultimate catalyst for the launch of *Harper's Weekly* seems to have been the success of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*—which itself had been inspired by the *London Illustrated News*. (HarpWeek.com)

Frank Leslie was the nom de plume of Henry Carter, a talented engraver who emigrated from Britain to the United States in 1848, worked with P. T. Barnum and at *Gleason's Pictorial* magazine, and went into business for himself in 1854. His first publication, *Frank Leslie's Ladies' Gazette of Fashion and Fancy Needlework*, was joined by the *New York Journal of Romance*, which Leslie purchased in late 1854, and by the weekly *Illustrated Newspaper*, launched on December 15, 1855. (Mott II, 452ff)

The *Illustrated Newspaper* accomplished something no other American periodical had achieved—depiction of current events while they were still current. Leslie employed a technique developed at the *London Illustrated News*. Instead of using one engraver on a large illustration, the engraving block was sawed into smaller squares, produced by multiple engravers, and reassembled for printing. (HarpWeek.com) This allowed Leslie to picture the news within two weeks, which gave the *Illustrated Newspaper* a currency unmatched among contemporary American magazines.

The *Illustrated Newspaper* was 16 pages long, and initially cost 10 cents per single copy or \$4.00 for an annual subscription, later reduced to six cents and \$2.00. The *Illustrated Newspaper* often provided pictorial bonuses, such as oversize engravings folded into its pages or lavishly-illustrated Christmas “extras.” (Mott II, 454) By 1858 the magazine had achieved circulation of 100,000, and a widely-followed murder case, reported with “shrieking pictures and sensational stories” temporarily boosted circulation to 200,000 in 1859. (Mott II, 458)

In the late 1850s the *Illustrated Newspaper* campaigned aggressively and successfully against vendors who sold tainted milk in New York City. Leslie was ahead of his time: this was one of the earliest American magazine editorial crusades. Prefiguring the so-called “muckrakers” by about 50 years, Leslie’s campaign delivered the same publicity and sales boost that benefited publishers like S. S. McClure several decades later. (Mott II, 45ff)

The *Illustrated Newspaper* propelled Leslie’s company to become a powerhouse of 19th-century publishing, publisher of several highly successful magazines in the second half of the century. In 1857 none of Leslie’s popularity and financial success was lost on the Harpers, and the *Illustrated Newspaper* became the model for their next magazine. On January 3, 1857 the debut issue of *Harper's Weekly, a Journal of Civilization* appeared. With a size of 11 x 16 inches and a 16-page folio, the *Weekly* described itself as “the best family newspaper in the world.” (Mott II, 471 ; Exman, 80) It aimed to provide something for everyone: essays on various subjects, verse, some humor, a page or two of news, serial novels and short stories, and an increasing amount of illustration, which sometimes filled full pages and two-page spreads.

The mixture proved appealing: within six months of its launch the *Weekly* had reached 60,000 circulation. This grew to 75,000 by November, 1858 (a little less than two years after its founding), and to 90,000 by October, 1859. (Mott II, 473) During the war years circulation reached 100,000 (Mott II, 475), a level it held after the war—Rowell’s *American Newspaper Directory* for 1869 credited the *Weekly* with 100,000. (Rowell’s 1869, Section V) By 1872 the *Weekly*’s circulation had grown to 160,000. (Mott II, 476)

At first the *Weekly* took a conciliatory position on slavery. In 1858 the publishers said that “the object of the magazine will be to unite rather than to separate the views and feelings of the different sections of our common country.” (in Mott II, 472) After the Civil War began, the tone changed and *Harper's Weekly* became wholeheartedly Northern and pro-Lincoln.

J. Henry Harper succinctly described the *Weekly's* unique role in reporting news during the Civil War: "What the dailies told *Harper's Weekly* pictured." (243)

Two contributors in particular are remembered for their association with *Harper's Weekly*: George W. Curtis, who became political editor in 1862, and Thomas Nast, the illustrator and cartoonist who was put under contract the same year. (Mott II, 474) Despite their interlinked careers and congruent political views, they were opposite personalities—Nast was as opinionated and self-assured as Curtis was impartial and unassuming. They were often at loggerheads. (Jarman) Nast's biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, wrote that the *Weekly* sometimes seemed to have two different policies for its editorials and its illustrations.

Nast and Curtis were allowed to fight civilization's battles each in his own way. One used a gleaming battle-ax and struck huge, slaughtering blows ; the other the rapier, with a manual of carte and tierce, of subtle feint and thrust. (in Harper, 240)

Their differences were far more stylistic than ideological. Jarman wrote that they disagreed not in their opinions but in their choice of tactics:

...It is actually the similarity, not the difference, between their political positions that is most noteworthy. Despite documented periods of hard feeling between the two men, their political stances largely coincided. Far from disagreeing over basic political tenets, Nast and Curtis shared comparable overarching agendas and a core set of beliefs that repeatedly positioned them in the same corner of the Republican camp.

Curtis had lived at Brook Farm, traveled abroad, and was one of the founding editors of *Putnam's Magazine*. He began working with Harper & Brothers in 1853 as co-author of the "Editor's Easy Chair" column in the *New Monthly Magazine*, initially sharing the job with Donald G. Mitchell and then writing it exclusively beginning in 1859. (Mott II, 389) He started to work on *Harper's Weekly* in the fall of 1857, covering art and literature in a column called "The Lounger." (Mott II, 474)

Curtis was a popular speaker at lyceums and an early supporter of the Republican party. Charles Eliot Norton wrote that "Seldom has there been so general a favorite as he, and seldom a man who received more flattery with less harm to the sincerity of his nature." (in Harper, 126) Exman said that his editorials were "articulate, carefully reasoned, and persuasive," and that, "For nearly thirty years he exerted an influence on American political thought that was probably second to none." (84) Lyman Abbott said that he managed "the most influential editorial page in the world" (306)

Curtis was offered several political nominations over the years, but declined them repeatedly, preferring the role of independent pundit. (Jarman) His particular interest, which he worked hard to advance, was reform of the civil service. President Grant made him chairman of the Civil Service Commission, and he served as president of the National Civil Service Reform League. (Exman, 83f)

William Dean Howells described Curtis:

The man who was in the last degree amiable was to the last degree unyielding where conscience was concerned ; the soul which was so tender had no weakness in it ; his lenity was the divination of a finer justice. His honesty made all men trust him when they doubted his opinions ; his good sense made them doubt their own opinions, when they had as little question of their own honesty. (110)

Curtis worked mainly from his home on Staten Island, but visited the Harper & Brothers offices one day per week. According to Exman, "He went directly to the composing room where he began writing his editorial for the week. He sat on a bench beside an old compositor who set the type as Curtis handed over copy." (86)

Nast, in contrast, was outgoing, witty, and charming. (Exman, 86) Where Curtis was genteel and restrained, Nast was exuberant and bloodthirsty in pursuit of his beliefs. (Jarman) Born in Germany in 1840, he began his career at Leslie's *Illustrated Newspaper* in 1855 and made his first contribution to *Harper's Weekly* in 1858. He left in 1860 for a European tour, but returned to the *Weekly* in 1862, where he was asked to depict scenes from the Civil War. Although they were drawn from his imagination, Nast's allegorical pictures were very evocative and popular—Abraham Lincoln once called Nast "our best recruiting sergeant."¹ (Mott II, 475)

In 1864 Nast began drawing the political cartoons for which he became famous, and he took up his campaign against New York City's Tweed ring in 1869. (Exman 86ff) William M. "Boss" Tweed was head of Tammany Hall, a political club that dominated the local Democratic party. He and his compatriots grew rich from kickbacks from city contractors. The Nast cartoons in *Harper's Weekly* that turned public opinion against Tweed were clever and beautifully drawn. Among the best were "Let Us Prey," with Tweed and his henchmen portrayed as vultures, and "Tweedledee and Sweedledum," caricaturing Tweed and city comptroller Peter B. "Brains" Sweeny. Tweed called this cartoon the "last straw." (Harper, 284, 287) He ordered "Stop them damned pictures!" (Exman, 88) Tweed was arrested in 1871, and died in New York's Ludlow Street jail in 1878. After his death a cache of Nast's cartoons, neatly packed, was found in Tweed's trunk. (Exman, 89)

Nast is responsible for the Democratic donkey, which first appeared in 1870, and the Republican elephant, which debuted in 1874. (Exman, 89) Nast also gave the world the definitive image of Santa Claus, who made his first appearance in *Harper's Weekly* in the 1862 Christmas issue, dressed in the Stars and Stripes and distributing presents not to boys and girls but to Union soldiers. For a book of children's Christmas poems the following year, Nast portrayed Santa in the fur-trimmed suit which he has worn ever since. In his biography of Nast, Paine pointed out that Nast's Santa bore a close resemblance to a folktale figure from the artist's German childhood, St. Nicholas's companion Pelz-Nicol or Pelznikel. (96)

The absence of civility in Nast's cartoons contrasted with Curtis's restrained and gentlemanly approach to politics, and after the fall of the Tweed ring, Nast often clashed with Curtis and the Harper management—not over his beliefs as much as his take-no-prisoners approach. Nast said of Curtis, "When he attacks a man with his pen it seems as if he were apologizing for the act... I try to hit the enemy between the eyes and knock him down." (in Jarman) Curtis said, "I differ, but I do not quarrel." (in Jarman)

Other artists contributed cartoons, including Abbey and Charles S. Reinhart, but their genteel caricatures aren't remembered as vividly as Nast's. (Jarman) Of course, *Harper's Weekly* published more art than just cartoons. Charles Parson's full staff of artists contributed, including Pyle, Remington, and—after the turn of the 20th century—Charles Dana Gibson. (Mott II, 477, 482)

Nor was politics the *Weekly's* only subject in prose. In its early years the *Weekly* published Wilkie Collins, Dickens, and Charles Reade, and in the later decades of the 19th century its writers included James Barrie, Richard Harding Davis, Conan Doyle, Garland, Henry James, J. K. Jerome, Rudyard Kipling, and Owen Wister. Howells's novel of the American magazine publishing business, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, was published serially in the *Weekly* in 1889. Howells said, "Of breadth and depth I still think it my best book." (in Harper, 323)

Under Curtis the *Weekly* was solidly pro-Republican, but it went Mugwump in 1884, supporting Cleveland over Blaine. According to the company, this cost Harper & Brothers more than \$100,000 in lost business. (Mott II, 481) It also cost them circulation, which by 1890 was below 100,000 (Ayers 1890, 505), and at the end of the century the *Weekly* was losing money (Exman, 93)

¹ A few years later U. S. Grant said, "Two things elected me: the sword of Sheridan and the pen of Thomas Nast." (Harper, 283)

Many readers believed that *Harper's Weekly* lost a unique voice when Curtis died in 1892. The *Century* wrote that Horace Greeley was the only editor who had more support and admiration from his audience than Curtis. (in Mott II, 484) But he wasn't a one-man band. Because Curtis spent only one day per week at the office and was responsible only for the editorial page, the *Weekly's* managing editors had always handled the magazine's day-to-day concerns, and some of the managing editors were outstanding. Henry Mills Alden served in this post from 1863 to 1869, S. S. Conant from 1869 to 1885, and Richard Harding Davis from 1890 to 1894.

Conant left his house on the morning of Saturday, January 17, 1885 and vanished from the earth. "This was one of those mysterious and heart-breaking cases which occasionally occur," J. W. Harper wrote. "Although detectives were employed and notices put in the leading papers, there was absolutely no clew to his disappearance." (257)

Nast took a leave of absence in 1884, and left *Harper's Weekly* for good after completing his annual Christmas illustrations at the end of 1886. He contributed sporadically to some other magazines, and assumed ownership of one, the *New York Gazette*, which he renamed *Nast's*. It failed soon after he acquired it. In 1902 Nast was appointed American consul in Guayaquil, Ecuador, where he died within a few months of his arrival.

Shortly after Harper & Brothers reorganized in 1899, the "vigorous and picturesque" (Mott II, 485) George Harvey became president of the company and de facto editor-in-chief of *Harper's Weekly*. Harvey and the *Weekly* were early champions of Woodrow Wilson's candidacy and played a significant role in his election. (Mott II, 485) At the same time he was running Harper & Brothers, Harvey was also publisher of the *North American Review*, and his being stretched thin may have been a factor in the company's decision to sell the *Weekly* in 1913 to S. S. McClure, who put Norman Hapgood, former editor of *Colliers*, at the helm. The *Weekly* was sold again in 1915 and finally closed in 1916.

In six decades of publication, *Harper's Weekly* chronicled the Civil War, the Reconstruction, the Gilded Age, the Spanish-American War, and the emergence of Progressivism, and it ended its days just as America was about to enter World War I. Born before the development of groundwood paper, the *Weekly* was entering middle age when the halftone was invented, lived to see the emergence of high circulation, low-cost magazines as a pervasive national mass medium, and died respected and beloved, but well past its prime.

The illustrations in *Harper's Weekly* provide an iconic picture of postbellum American life. The engravings by Theodore Davis, Winslow Homer, A. R. Waud... the cartoons and caricatures by Nast and others... the type-heavy advertisements... the ladies in hoop skirts... gentlemen in whiskers and top hats... the steamboats and locomotives... all combine to depict and evoke the period better than almost any other source. *Harper's Weekly* not only provides a richly detailed historical record, but was itself a vital part of its times.