

#### ***Part Four: The Press in Colonial America***

The first printing press in North America was brought to Mexico City from Spain in 1539<sup>1</sup>. Archbishop Zummaraga of Mexico had ordered a native-language catechism from Juan Cromberger, the leading printer of Seville, and encouraged Cromberger to open a branch in Mexico City. Seeing opportunity, Cromberger agreed, and appointed as his branch manager an Italian printer whose name was Giovanni Paoli—Juan Pablos in Spanish. (McMurtrie, 390f)

In addition to bilingual catechisms, the new American press printed proclamations and notices from the government, and material for the church such as primers and breviaries. The oldest surviving products of the Mexican press are pages from the *Manual de adultos*, dated 1540. By 1600 more than 200 books had been printed in Mexico. (McMurtrie, 390f ; Wilson, 175)<sup>2</sup>

The Spanish administration put great effort into evangelism, printing several instructional booklets in which religious texts were printed in one column in Spanish or Latin, with the same passage in a native language, such as Nahuatl or Tarascan, in a second column beside it. (Wilson, 174)

The earliest publication of news in America reported a Guatemalan earthquake in 1541. On the cover of an eight-page booklet printed by Pablos, the first headline created in the New World read, “Report of the Terrifying Earthquake Which Has Reoccurred in the Indies in a City Called Guatemala.” The story was filed from the scene by a notary named Juan Rodriguez. (Wilson, 175)

Reporting on important events as they occurred became the model for distributing news in the Spanish colonies. Bulletins, called *hojas volantes* (“flying pages”), and reports, called *relaciones*, covered wars, coronations, and other noteworthy incidents, and were published irregularly rather than on a fixed frequency. (Wilson, 175)

The first American ongoing periodical was the *Mercurio Volante*, produced in Mexico City beginning in 1693. Using a booklet format, the *Mercurio Volante* reported on local as well as international issues. One issue recounted an unsuccessful attempt to colonize areas of present New Mexico—the very first news to be reported from what is now the United States and printed in the New World. (Wilson, 175)

The first printer in the British American colonies was Stephen Day (also spelled Daye), who opened his shop at Harvard College, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1639, a century after the press was established in Mexico City. (McMurtrie, 404)

Significantly, Day’s first work was the *Oath of a Free Man*. The colonies’ first printed document reflected a spirit of American independence and, 137 years before the Declaration of Independence, foreshadowed later momentous developments. (McMurtrie, 404)

Eminently characteristic of a Republic—the Oath of a Free Man stands alone. The literature of no other Nation parallels it. It is at once the expression of a free people ; a charter of human liberty ; the declaration of a right ; the seal of a covenant. (Evans viii)

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<sup>1</sup> Some sources put the date at 1535 (cf. Wilson, 174)

<sup>2</sup> A printer named Ricardo opened a shop in Lima in 1584, making Peru the second American country to have a press. (McMurtrie, 400)

No original copies of the *Oath of a Free Man* are known to exist, but there are about a dozen surviving copies of Day's second work, the *Whole Book of Psalmes*, generally referred to as the *Bay Psalm Book*, which was produced in 1640, twenty years after the arrival of the *Mayflower*, and nine years after the founding of the colony of Massachusetts. (McMurtrie, 404)

From its origins in Massachusetts, printing expanded slowly but steadily throughout British North America.

As we've seen, printing was first established in 1639 in Massachusetts (in Cambridge, by Stephen Day). It then spread in 1685 to Pennsylvania (in Philadelphia, by William Bradford), in 1693 to New York (in New York City, also by William Bradford), and in 1686 to Maryland (in Annapolis, by William Nuthead)<sup>3</sup> In 1762, James Johnston established a press in Savannah, Georgia, the last of the original 13 colonies to acquire a printer. By 1775 there were about 50 presses in the colonies. It took a century and a quarter for the press to spread across 13 colonies, and almost a century and a half to reach a total of 50. But there is no disputing how meaningful the arrival of a press could be in a city or region.<sup>4</sup> (Bleyer, 43 ; Chappell, 138)

Related crafts grew at a similar pace. Papermaking began in 1690, in Germantown, outside Philadelphia, at a mill run by William Rittenhouse, who immigrated to Pennsylvania from Holland. A type foundry was launched in Connecticut in 1769 by Abel Buell, who was—like Gutenberg—a metal smith. This was followed by a foundry in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1772, established by Christopher Sower (also spelled Saur), whose grand plan, later realized by his son, was to produce a German bible.<sup>5</sup> (Thomas ; Richardson 141)

Throughout the 18th century, American printers remained heavily dependent on imported supplies from Europe. Paper in particular was always in short supply. England provided most of America's presses and type as well.

Official censorship remained heavier in the colonies than in Britain after the 1694 repeal of the Licensing Act. Massachusetts first appointed licensers of the press in 1662, and licensing continued in Massachusetts until about 1755—a generation after it ended in Britain. Printing was forbidden outright in Virginia between 1682 and 1729.

In the 17th century many American colonists received their news from Britain via packets of newspapers bundled and sent to coffeehouses and taverns, where they could be shared. Reprinting was common and unrestrained: the officially-sanctioned *London Gazette* was reprinted in America on several occasions for broader distribution within the colonies.

The first American newspaper was produced in Boston in September, 1690. This four-page digest-sized journal, *Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestic*, had its short life ended after one issue, when

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<sup>3</sup> A press was established in Virginia by William Nuthead in 1681 but closed by the government in 1682. (Thomas, 551 ; Chappell, 138)

<sup>4</sup> The first printing shop in Canada appears to have opened in Quebec in 1765. (McMurtrie, 445)

<sup>5</sup> In 1775, Benjamin Franklin and his grandson B.F. Bache established a foundry, but grew dissatisfied with the quality of their type. In the hope of improving it they indentured a German expert named Frederick Geiger. Geiger was a man of varied interests. After his indenturement he worked hard to build a perpetual motion machine, and then began to work on determining longitude by lunar observation. Thomas writes, "Unfortunately, perpetual motion caused an irregular motion of his brains, and his observations of the moon caused lunacy." [32] He was confined to the Philadelphia almshouse.

the governor and council declared it unauthorized with “high resentment” and a warning that it was forbidden for “any person or persons to set forth anything in Print without License first obtained.”

Its publisher, Benjamin Harris, had launched a newspaper in London in 1679, but fell afoul of the authorities—for virtually the same offenses he later repeated in Boston—and had emigrated to the colonies to escape arrest. (Bleyer, 15) In Boston he achieved some success with the first Colonial primer, from which many generations of New England children learned the alphabet, beginning with:

**A.**

In Adam's fall we sinned all. (Mott J)

The first newspaper in the British colonies that produced more than one issue was the Boston *News-Letter*, launched in 1704 by John Campbell, the local postmaster. Campbell had been sending written newsletters to officials in the other New England colonies, and to expand his efforts into print was a logical step. The *News-Letter's* success, however, was dependent on a subsidy from the colonial government and on Campbell's position—his mail riders carried it free. (Bleyer, 47 ; Lee, 50)

In addition to being the first ongoing periodical in the British American colonies, the Boston *News-Letter* boasts two enduring distinctions. First, it contained the first print advertisement in America, a house ad extolling the paper's value to advertisers and to subscribers. Second, Campbell ran the first illustration in an American newspaper, a woodcut of the new flag to be used by the United Kingdom of England and Scotland. (Lee, 51)

Boston's next postmaster, William Brooker, also produced a newspaper, the Boston *Gazette*, which was not subsidized, and is therefore America's earliest self-sustaining periodical. It was first published on December 21, 1719, and continued under the editorial direction of Boston's next five successive postmasters.

The day after the Boston *Gazette* first appeared, Philadelphia's first newspaper, *The American Weekly Mercury*, was launched.

Back in Boston, James Franklin, Benjamin's elder brother, launched a competitor to the *Gazette* and the *News-Letter* in 1721: the *New England Courant*. Young Benjamin cut his teeth at the *Courant*, learning the craft of printing while apprenticed to his brother. He gained his start as a writer at the *Courant* as well, at the age of 16, slipping submissions under the door signed with the nom de plume Silence Dogood.

Other early newspapers in the northeastern colonies included the *New York Gazette*, launched by William Bradford in 1725, and the *Pennsylvania Journal* founded in Philadelphia by his grandson, also named William Bradford—the Bradfords and Franklins, like several other colonial families, forming something of a printers dynasty

In 1729 Benjamin Franklin purchased the *Pennsylvania Gazette* from its founder, Samuel Keimer, using it as a base from which he expanded into other periodicals and other locations.

The *Maryland Gazette* (1727), published by William Parks, was the first newspaper outside the Northeast and one of the first to publish regular essays. Parks went on to found Virginia's first newspaper, Williamsburg's *Virginia Gazette*, in 1736.

Farther south, the *South-Carolina Gazette* was launched in 1732, with Benjamin Franklin as a principal investor. He sent the *Gazette's* first editor, Thomas Whitmarsh, to Charleston in response to the General Assembly's advertisement for a printer. Whitmarsh died within two years, and was

succeeded by another Franklin protégée from Philadelphia, Louis Timothee, who had edited a German-language newspaper for Franklin and served as librarian at America's first public library... yet another Franklin enterprise.

On Timothee's death in 1738, his wife Elizabeth continued the business, becoming British America's first female editor, publisher, and journalist.<sup>6</sup> Many other printers' wives assumed management of the business following their husbands' deaths, among them James Franklin's widow, Ann ; Andrew Bradford's widow, Cornelia ; and John Peter Zenger's widow, Cathrine. William Goddard's mother, Sarah, ably managed the Providence, RI *Gazette* for three years. (Legacy ; Mott J, 41 ; Brigham II 890, 997)

As the population expanded and printing spread, so did newspapers. By 1800, the press had worked its way as far south as Florida and Louisiana and west into what are now Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Plotting their progress on a modern map, we see that newspapers were first established...

- In 1690 in Massachusetts (*Publick Occurrences*, by Benjamin Harris)
- In 1719 in Pennsylvania (*American Mercury Weekly*, by Andrew Bradford)
- In 1725 in New York (*New York Gazette*, by William Bradford)
- In 1727 in Maryland (*Maryland Gazette*, by William Parks)
- In 1732 in South Carolina (*South-Carolina Gazette*, by Thomas Whitmarsh)
- In 1732 in Rhode Island (*Rhode-Island Gazette*, by James Franklin)
- In 1736 in Virginia (*Virginia Gazette*, by William Parks)
- In 1751 in North Carolina (*North-Carolina Gazette*, by James Davis)
- In 1755 in Connecticut (*Connecticut Gazette*, by James Parker)
- In 1756 in New Hampshire (*New Hampshire Gazette*, by Daniel Fowle)
- In 1762 in Delaware (*Wilmington Courant* by James Adams)
- In 1763 in Georgia (*Georgia Gazette*, by James Johnston)
- In 1776 in New Jersey (*New York Mercury*, by Hugh Gaine)
- In 1780 in Vermont (*Vermont Gazette and Green Mountain Postboy*, by T. Green and J. Spooner)
- In 1783 in Florida (*East-Florida Gazette*, by William and John Wells)
- In 1785 in Maine (*Falmouth Gazette*, by B. Titcomb and T. Wait)
- In 1786 west of the Appalachians (*Pittsburgh Gazette* by John Scull and Joseph Hall)
- In 1787 in Kentucky (*Kentucky Gazette* by John Bradford)
- In 1789 in Washington, DC (*Georgetown Times* by C. Fierer and C. Kramer)
- In 1790 in West Virginia (*Potomac Guardian* by Nathaniel Willis)
- In 1791 in Tennessee (*Knoxville Gazette* by George Roulstone and Robert Ferguson)
- In 1793 in Ohio (*Centinel of the North-Western Territory* by William Maxwell)
- In 1794 in Louisiana (*Moniteur de la Louisiane* by Louis Duclot)
- In 1799 in Mississippi (*Mississippi Gazette* by Benjamin Stokes)

(Mott J, Brigham)

The first newspaper in a given location was often named *Gazette* in emulation of the *London Gazette*—the title implied that the newspaper was sanctioned by the government. Often the printer who published a *Gazette* would hold government printing contracts, lending credence to the claim of authority.

[See separate document: *Table of Colonial American Newspapers*]

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<sup>6</sup> A woman named Dona Francisca Flores opened a press in Oaxaca, Mexico in 1720 (McMurtrie, 398)

Although newspaper publishing in British America started slowly, the business gathered momentum as time passed. About nine newspapers were launched in the four decades between 1690 and 1730. As many were launched in the single decade between 1730 and 1739.

By the start of the Revolution in 1775, about 75 newspapers had been launched in the colonies. Of these, 37 were active when the war began, and 20 survived to the end of the war. Thirty-three newspapers were launched *during* the Revolution, and fifteen of these survived to the war's end. Thus, 35 American newspapers were in business at the end of the Revolution—indicating that approximately one in three newspapers launched in the colonial period or during the Revolution was able to report the outset of American independence. Shortage of paper was a common reason for papers' failure—likewise, as enlistment rose, a shortage of printers and of readers. Bad political choices also played a role: most Tory papers did not survive the war. (Mott J, 95 ; Burns, 192)

After the Revolution, growth resumed at a redoubled pace, though the survival rate probably did not improve. Between the end of the Revolution and the turn of the 19th century, about 450 newspapers were launched, though many failed after a few issues. About half lived to see their second birthdays. One out of five made it to the fifth. (Mott J, 113 ; Gilbert-Lehne)

On January 1, 1801, 202 papers were active. By comparison, in 1810 360 newspapers were active. (Mott J, 113 ; Thomas, 17)