

Part Five: Early American Journalism

Eighteenth-century American newspapers differed from today's in several respects. They were occasionally more literary, often plagiaristic (copying from one paper to another was how important news spread), and, as the century progressed, increasingly partisan.

Earliest of the more literary was the *New-England Courant* (1721), which owed a debt of similarity to contemporary British literary journals, such as the *Tatler*. Some other early American newspapers took the same path, including Samuel Kneeland's *New England Weekly Journal* (1727); the *Pennsylvania Gazette* under its second owner, Benjamin Franklin; its competitor, Andrew Bradford's *American Weekly Mercury*; the *Weekly Rehearsal*, edited by Jeremy Gridley in the style of an essay-paper; and William Parks's *Maryland Gazette*, noted for its essays. (Richardson, 12ff)

On the other hand, many 18th-century newspapers were launched and edited by printers who took up journalism simply to keep their presses busy and their cash flow positive. Almost every publisher copied from other papers. This was expected—copying from exchanged subscriptions served the same purpose as today's stringers and syndicates.¹ But some publishers relied much more heavily on scissors and paste pot than on the quill.

On at least one occasion, this tendency was used to influence public opinion. In 1768, the "Journal of Occurrences," written in Boston, became America's first "syndicated column." Its aim was to advance the Patriot cause and highlight the injustices of military occupation. It was distributed to newspapers throughout the Colonies (and in Britain) in the expectation that it would be copied—in this respect it can be thought of as an early example of political public relations as well. (Mott J)

In the first half of the century, most content came from local contributors, many of whom wrote under noms de plume. In the second half of the century professional editors became more common, and staff-written content began to supplement contributions.

News from Europe was the staple of the first American papers, and it wasn't until about 1750 that newspaper content became primarily focused on local public affairs. Before the *Pennsylvania Packet and General Advertiser* took the plunge in 1784, no American newspaper succeeded as a daily.² The original impetus for daily publication was to provide timely business reports for merchants: ship sailings and arrivals, prices, goods offered, and so on. (Mott J)

Eighteenth-century American newspapers were shorter than today's. Four pages were the norm, and trim sizes were much smaller than 21st century broadsheets. The earliest newspapers were tiny by today's standards—what we would call digest size. *Publick Occurrences* (1690) was 5 by 8.5 inches. The *Boston Gazette* (1719) was slightly larger, at 6.5 by 11.5. The *New-York Weekly Journal* (1733) fell in between, at 5.5 by 10. Later in the century, sizes of 10 by 15 or 11 by 17—approaching today's tabloid size—were common. Rivington's *New York Gazetteer* (1773) was 10 by 16.5, and Thomas's *Massachusetts Spy* was 10.5 by 17.25. The *Pittsburgh Gazette* (1786) was 15 by 20 when the publishers could find paper—at one point they were reduced to printing on cartridge paper from Fort Pitt. (Mott J)

¹ For this reason exchange copies between publishers were free in the Post Office Act of 1792. (Mott J, 160)

² The first American paper to attempt daily frequency was Benjamin Towne's *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, which converted from semiweekly to daily in May, 1783. Mott called it a "sorry-looking, poverty-stricken sheet." It folded in the face of superior competition about a month after the *Pennsylvania Packet* went daily in September, 1784. (Mott J, 115ff).

Restricted by the cost and availability of paper, publishers focused on what they considered most important, and left extended discussion to the pamphleteers.

As we noted above, 18th-century newspapers were far more partisan than modern newspapers. They reflected the political beliefs of their owners and made virtually no attempt to be objective or to present two sides of an issue. That objectivity was not the goal was obvious to everyone, including Madison when he wrote the First Amendment; readers did not expect disinterest and mistrusted claims of impartiality. Consequently, freedom of the press was written into the Constitution in an era of acerbic and contentious disputation.

In 1803, Dr. Samuel Miller wrote,

In the United States, the frequency of elections leads to a corresponding frequency of struggle between political parties; these struggles naturally engender mischievous passions, and every species of coarse invective; and, unhappily, too many of the conductors of our public prints have neither the discernment, the firmness, nor the virtue to reject from their pages the foul ebullitions of prejudice and malice. Had they more diligence, or greater talents, they might render their gazettes interesting, by filling them with materials of a more instructive and dignified kind. (in Thomas)

His sentiments were echoed by Thomas.

There are among the men who conduct the public journals of America, many, whose literary acquirements are not inferior to those of their predecessors. The great difficulty proceeds from the rage of party spirit, which is kept alive by the frequency of elections, in which the conductors of newspapers engage as partisans; and some of them, it is true, as is also the case in Great Britain, display a greater degree of asperity and opprobriousness than can be justified. (Thomas 20)

These were mild descriptions of partisan vituperation conducted at a level that might shock a Coulter or a Limbaugh today. And while partisan struggles in the late 18th and early 19th centuries may have brought journalism to the boiling point, the colonial press already had a history of warm invective.

For example, vituperation was a defining characteristic of James Franklin's *New-England Courant*. He took on the influential Mather family in a running, heated dispute over the smallpox vaccine, and alienated the government as well by criticizing its tepid response to piracy, a decision that bought him a month in jail. His contributors called themselves the Hell-Fire Club, in imitation of a London writers' group of the same name. During Franklin's jail term, his brother Benjamin ran the paper, gaining valuable experience.

John Peter Zenger's vitriolic criticism of New York's royal governor, William Cosby, led to his famous trial in 1735. Cosby earned Zenger's displeasure by stacking the courts and generally manipulating the government to his personal gain.

According to his arrest warrant, Zenger's newspaper contained

... many Things, tending to raise Factions and Tumults, among the people of this Province, inflaming their minds with contempt of His Majesty's Government and greatly disturbing the Peace thereof. (Bleyer, 65)

Defended by Andrew Hamilton, one of the colonies' most able lawyers, Zenger was declared not guilty by a jury that helped establish two important precedents for press freedom in America—first,

the principle that truth could be used as a defense against a libel action ; and second, the right of jury nullification, the prerogative of a jury to supersede the law in order to prevent oppression. (West's)

In the Revolution

In the period beginning with the Stamp Act (1765) and continuing through the Revolution (1775-1783), newspapers on both sides of the war for independence worked hard to incite their readers, sparing little in the way of abuse, hyperbole, and cant.

The Stamp Act taxed paper in books and newspapers, and consequently was strongly opposed by publishers. Some suspended publication rather than print on stamped paper—the *Pennsylvania Journal*, for example, laid out the front page of its last issue in the shape of a gravestone, and took for its subhead the notice, “EXPIRING: In Hopes of a Resurrection to LIFE again.” An announced suspension was sometimes a pretext—many papers simply dropped their titles and continued to publish, becoming “broadsides” or “handbills.” But no newspaper in the colonies ever printed on stamped paper. (Mott J, 74)

Boston was a focal point of dissent, and one of the first newspapers to advocate strongly for independence was the Boston *Gazette*, under publishers Benjamin Edes and John Gill. Edes was a member of the Sons of Liberty, and the *Gazette* was the mouthpiece of the radicals. The paper claimed to have achieved circulation of 2,000, which is high for the times but possibly true, since the governor wrote, “Seven eighths of the people read none but this infamous paper.” Its contributors included Samuel Adams, his cousin John Adams, James Otis, and John Hancock. (Mott J, 75)

The *Massachusetts Spy*, published by Isaiah Thomas, was another incendiary Whig, or Patriot, paper, whose contributors included Otis, Hancock, Joseph Greenleaf, and Paul Revere. On the night of April 16, 1775, Thomas, anticipating that matters were coming to a head, quietly shifted his presses across the river to Watertown and on to Worcester. Prior to the move, circulation stood at 3,500, close to the high-water mark for Colonial newspaper publishing. Thomas struggled financially during the Revolution, but prospered after the war, becoming the founder of the American Antiquarian Society and the first historian of American journalism. (Mott J, 77)

In Philadelphia, the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* was an early advocate of independence, publishing John Dickinson's “Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania,” a series of essays on Colonists' rights. William Bradford III's *Pennsylvania Journal*, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, and the *Pennsylvania Packet* were also strongly Patriot. All withdrew when the British occupied Philadelphia—the *Gazette* and *Packet* moved to York and Lancaster, respectively, and the *Journal* suspended publication, though not before publishing the first in Thomas Paine's series of essays, “American Crisis,” with its well-known opening, “These are the times that try men's souls...” (Mott J, 89)

On the opposite side of the war for American independence stood several very capable editors. Hugh Gainé, who initially inclined toward the Patriot cause, switched sides when he found it impossible to keep his paper, the New York *Mercury and Gazette*, in business otherwise. He tried relocating to Newark, NJ when the British occupied New York, but lack of paper and patronage drove him back to Manhattan and to the Tory politics. The *Mercury and Gazette* did not survive the Revolution.³

³ Gainé was probably the first American publisher to use newsboys to deliver papers, in 1761, so he left a small but positive legacy to counterbalance his reputation as a turncoat.

Gaine was a piker compared to New York's most notorious Royalist, James "Jemmy" Rivington. Rivington launched a newspaper in 1773 with the modest title of *Rivington's New-York Gazetteer; or the Connecticut, New-Jersey, Hudson's River, and Quebec Weekly Advertiser*. This was later shortened to *Royal Gazette*. The flamboyant Rivington was a good writer with a persuasive pen (though one historian called the *Royal Gazette's* contents "the fool's paradise of the hopeful Tory"). Rivington published "warped accounts of battles...false reports of quarrels among the American leaders... canards about immoralities and misconduct by Patriot officers... stories of the financial collapse of the rebels, and...optimistic articles about British power and prospects." Rivington suspended his paper at the end of the Revolution, but remained in New York, where he ran a bookstore until his death in 1802. Although he died from natural causes, Rivington was assaulted and beaten at least once. It was an editor's occupational hazard in those passionate times. (Mott J, 84)

Other Tory publications emerged throughout the Colonies as Patriot fortunes rose and fell. In the South the *South-Carolina Weekly Gazette* and the *Georgia Gazette* were both Tory. In New York, the *Royal American Gazette* and the *New York Mercury* (not to be confused with Gaine's *Mercury and Gazette*) added their voices to the loyalist cause. In Philadelphia, the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, the *Pennsylvania Ledger*, and the *Royal Pennsylvania Gazette* took the Tory side. The *Boston Chronicle*, *Boston Post-Boy*, *Boston News-Letter* and *Boston Evening-Post* all supported the Tories, but closed for lack of patronage during the British occupation. The *News-Letter* was the last to go. It survived into 1776, expiring at the age of 72—not a bad run for British America's first real periodical. It was the first and last successful newspaper in the colony's capital—Massachusetts was a state when newspaper publishing resumed in Boston. (Mott J, pp 83-94)

The Partisan Press

This history of billingsgate and scurrility dating back to James Franklin and the *New-England Courant* was a mere warm-up for the partisan press that began to form during the Washington administration (1788-1796). By the end of Washington's second term, newspaper readers did not need to look far to find venomous invective—it came in the mail. These were exciting days for America's newspapers, but not a golden age of civility or of objective journalism.

The country's first two parties were, of course, the Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, and the Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson. (Washington himself condemned the growth of partisan politics, though in practice he was a staunch Federalist.) Both parties were well aware of the value of a sympathetic newspaper, and while party principals tried to avoid open support of partisan journals (and sometimes lied in denial of their involvement), their support sub rosa was enthusiastic. (Tebbel, 60)

Hamilton provided both encouragement and capital to launch the Federalist *Gazette of the United States* in April, 1789, the month Washington took office, with Hamilton serving as Secretary of the Treasury. He handpicked its editor, John Fenno, making sure that Fenno received a stream of government printing contracts. Hamilton, Adams, and other leading Federalists contributed articles pseudonymously to the paper, which moved its offices from New York to Philadelphia when the government relocated in 1790. (Tebbel, 59)

Fenno's mission with the *Gazette of the United States* was not lofty. "To hold up the people's own government, in a favorable point of light and to impress just ideas of its administration... to endear the GENERAL GOVERNMENT to the people." (Bleyer 106ff)

Jefferson called it "a paper of pure Toryism, disseminating the doctrines of monarchy, aristocracy, & the exclusion of the influence of the people." (Bleyer 108)

Until 1800, Jefferson's Republicans were back benchers, facing an uphill struggle against the dominant Federalists, and heavily outnumbered by Federalist papers. Jefferson recruited a writer and editor named Philip Freneau (a Princeton classmate of Hugh Henry Brackenridge and James Madison) to run the *National Gazette*, the Republicans' first newspaper. Unlike Fenno, who was a relative unknown when the *Gazette of the United States* was launched, Freneau was an experienced poet, satirist, and propagandist. (Elliot)

At Princeton he and Brackenridge had collaborated on one of America's first novels (a comic narrative called *Father Bombo's Pilgrimage to Mecca in Arabia*), and also on an epic poem, "The Rising Glory of America," read at their 1771 commencement. Freneau continued to write patriotic poetry after graduating, and is sometimes referred to as the "Poet of the Revolution." One of his Revolutionary War poems was a blistering attack on Hugh Gaine, the turncoat New York publisher. When Jefferson came calling, Freneau was assistant editor of the New York *Daily Advertiser*. (Elliot)

The *National Gazette* launched on October 31, 1791, and hit the ground running. Kathryn VanSpanckeren called Freneau "the first powerful, crusading newspaper editor in America." Fenno called him a blackguard, bedlamite, and "fauning parasite." (VanSpanckeren) Freneau replied in verse:

One National Paper you think is enough
To flatter and lie, to pallaver and puff ;
To preach up in favor of monarchs and titles,
And garters and ribbons, to prey on our vitals...
So a spaniel, when master is angry, and kicks it,
Sneaks up to his shoe and submissively licks it.

(Lee 123-124)

When the Senate began holding closed-door sessions, Freneau saw the move as a usurpation of privilege. He wrote,

Remember, my fellow citizens, that you are still freemen ; let it be impressed upon your minds that you depend not upon your representatives, but that they depend upon you, and let this truth be ever present to you, that secrecy in your representatives is a work which will prey and fatten upon the vitals of your liberty. (Lee, 127)

When Jefferson resigned as Secretary of State in 1793, Freneau lost the position Jefferson had arranged for him as a State Department translator. Reduced income in turn contributed to the *National Gazette's* demise in October, 1793, during a yellow fever epidemic.⁴ (Mott J, 126)

Freneau's opposite number, Fenno, struggled financially as well, although Hamilton helped bail him out at least once. Fenno continued the *Gazette of the United States* as the country's leading Federalist paper until his death in 1798. His son took over, and the paper lasted until 1847, when it was absorbed into the Philadelphia *North American*. (Lee 128) (Tebbel 63)

⁴ The *National Gazette* was not Freneau's last publishing venture. In 1795 he founded the *Jersey Chronicle* in Mount Pleasant, NJ. Although the *Chronicle* lasted only a year, closing in 1796, the town of Mt. Pleasant became Freneau in 1890. Freneau is now a section of Aberdeen township. (Brigham I 504)

Freneau's withdrawal brought little lasting satisfaction to the Federalists, because the cause of Republicanism had been taken up in the press with skill and enthusiasm by Benjamin Franklin's acerbic grandson, Benjamin Franklin Bache⁵. Bache founded his newspaper, the Philadelphia *General Advertiser*, in 1790, at the age of 21. It soon became the *Aurora*, a name Bache borrowed from a popular London newspaper. (Tebbel, 63)

As far as the *Aurora* was concerned, Washington and the Federalists could do no right. This was especially clear in the matter of the Jay Treaty in 1795. Bache wrote that Washington...

...had violated the Constitution and made a treaty with a nation abhorred by our people ; that he had answered the respectful remonstrances of Boston and New York as if he were the omnipotent director of a seraglio, and had thundered contempt upon the people with as much confidence as if he had sat upon the throne of Indistan.

If we had only the *Aurora* to go by, we would believe today that Washington was "a frail mortal, whose passions and weaknesses are like those of other men, a spoiled child, a despot, an anemic imitator of English kings." (Tebbel, 64f)

At the approach of Washington's retirement—an event he had been advocating for many years—Bache wrote,

If ever a nation was debauched by a man, the American nation has been debauched by Washington. If ever a nation has suffered from the influence of a man, the American nation has suffered from the influence of Washington. If ever a nation was deceived by a man, the American nation has been deceived by Washington. Let his conduct then be an example to future ages.

And as Washington stepped down at Adams's inauguration,

...The man who is the source of all the misfortune in our country is this day reduced to a level with his fellow-citizens, and is no longer possessed of power to multiply evils upon the United States... this day ought to be a jubilee...

Bache endured several physical attacks, including a bout with John Fenno, who imprudently picked a fight one day when they encountered each another in the street. Bache responded by battering Fenno over the head with his cane. (Mott J, 128)

Both men died in 1798, not from thugee, but from yellow fever. Following Bache's death⁶ his former assistant, William Duane, took the helm, and continued the paper in as toxic a tone as before. Conveniently, Duane also married Bache's widow. (Mott J, 128)

Duane and the *Aurora* have been credited with helping to prevent a war with France—tensions rose dangerously during the John Adams administration—and with promoting the election of Jefferson in 1800. Duane has also been credited with "genius in controversy and management... courage and audacity," and with being "the most effective journalist of his time." (in Mott J, 129)

⁵ Known as "Lightning Rod Junior" in Philadelphia. (Tebbel 63)

⁶ *Russell's Gazette* said of Bache's death, "The memory of this scoundrel cannot be too highly execrated." (Mott J 146)

Duane's principal adversary wielded stinging quills. "Peter Porcupine" entered the fray in 1797, via *Porcupine's Gazette*, a Philadelphia daily whose prospectus began, "Professions of impartiality I shall make none." Peter Porcupine was William Cobbett, an Englishman who seemed to carry controversy with him wherever he went. In Britain he had exposed graft in the army, and fled to France to avoid retaliation. War with England drove him from France to Philadelphia. There he adopted Federalism with such enthusiasm that after a while even the Federalists began to mistrust him.

Cobbett set out to beat the Republican papers at their own game. He wrote, "The only method of opposition then is to meet them on their own ground ; to set foot to foot ; dispute every hair's breadth ; fight them at their own weapons, and return two blows for one." (Bleyer, 118)

This he did, with interest. He accused Bache and Duane of being in the pay of France, called the *Aurora* a "vehicle of lies and sedition," and referred to Bache's grandfather, Benjamin Franklin, as a crafty lecher. (Bleyer, 118 ; Tebbel, 69)

More restrained Federalist editors tried to put some distance between themselves and Cobbett. Benjamin Russell wrote in the *Columbian Centinel* that "Cobbett was never encouraged and supported as a solid, judicious writer in (the Federalist) cause ; but was kept merely to hunt Jacobinic *foxes*, *skunks*, and *serpents*..." "Noah Webster, a loyal Federalist, reproved him in the *American Minerva*. (Bleyer, 119)

Cobbett's downfall began when he attacked Dr. Benjamin Rush, accusing Rush of malpractice in his yellow fever treatment, which included blood-letting and something called the "mercurial purge." From the perspective of 21st-century medical science his accusation had merit, but it was seen the other way by a jury in 1799. The "fretful porcupine" was found guilty of libel, fined \$5,000, and ordered to pay \$3,000 in court costs. That was real money in those days. After a few parting shots, Cobbett returned to England where in 1802 he founded *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, which he edited for more than three decades, among other literary projects. He had his ups and downs, but died an MP in 1835. (Bleyer, 119 ; Tebbel, 69ff ; Cambridge, V11. II.13)

Mott calls Cobbett one of the half dozen best satirists of the 18th century—a "brilliant, clever, and sometimes powerful writer" (Mott J, 130). The *Cambridge History* says:

Personal ambition and public spirit had nearly equal shares in the indomitable Cobbett. Enormously and incorrigibly vain, "pragmatic, busy, bustling, bold," he loved to be, or to think himself, the centre of the stage, to lay down the law on everything, to direct, praise or censure everybody, to point out how things ought to be done, and, best of all, to spar furiously with those who held opposite opinions. (V11. II.13)

In contrast, Webster, already known as a textbook author, magazine publisher, and political writer, launched the *American Minerva* with Hamilton's support in New York in 1793, and promoted Federalism in a more civil and judicious way. Webster introduced several innovations, including a separate and consistent editorial column and a weekly summary edition for readers outside the city. His "Curtius" series in defense of the Jay Treaty was highly respected. Webster served as editor of the *Minerva* for five years before moving on, and nurtured the paper well in its formative years. It changed its name to the *Commercial Advertiser* in 1797 and published with distinction well into the 20th century. (Mott J, 133ff, 153)

The election of Jefferson in 1800 put matters into a new, if disappointing, light for the Federalists, most especially for their leader, Hamilton, who felt the need for a strong, consistent paper to rally the troops. After raising \$10,000 from a group of merchants and politicians, he launched the New York

Evening-Post in 1801 with William Coleman as editor. As he had at the *Gazette of the United States* and the *American Minerva*, Hamilton wielded strong influence behind the scenes at the *Evening-Post*. (Coleman was a strong figure on his own. He once killed a man in a duel, and was himself beaten badly at the hands of an offended reader.) (Mott J, 184ff)

Hamilton's portrait still graces the logo of the New York *Post*, which has survived many turns of fortune in more than two centuries of publication. Coleman's successor was William Cullen Bryant, whose support of Jackson turned the paper Democratic.

Shortly after the launch of the *Evening-Post*, Hamilton was hired to defend Harry Crosswell, editor of *The Wasp*, a Hudson, NY paper whose motto— "To lash the Rascals naked through the world"— reflects the strength of Crosswell's Federalist convictions. *The Wasp* accused Jefferson of paying a Virginia editor to defame several prominent Federalists. Found guilty of libel in New York trial court, Crosswell engaged Hamilton for his appeal to the state Supreme Court, which failed when an evenly-divided court upheld the original verdict.

Had the story ended there, it would have been a minor incident in Hamilton's distinguished career. As luck would have it, however, during the trial Hamilton made an offhand derogatory remark about Aaron Burr, which was overheard and published in an Albany newspaper. When Burr read it, he challenged Hamilton to their famous 1804 duel, which brought Hamilton's involvement with the press to an end.

It isn't difficult to see how the passions of the Revolution could carry forward into the important matters that occupied Americans in the years following the war, and between the end of the Revolution and the turn of the 19th century, there were many issues to stoke the fires of controversy and partisanship. Among these were the Alien and Sedition Acts, which were passed in 1798, during the Adams administration, in response to the virulence of the anti-Federalist newspapers.

The Acts comprised four laws, one of which, the Sedition Act, punished intentional defamation of the federal government. The dictionary definition of sedition is incitement or agitation against a government—in other words, encouragement of treason. The Sedition Act was somewhat broader—it made it a crime to write, print, or speak a "false, scandalous, and malicious" statement bringing the government into contempt or disrepute. In essence, the Sedition Act made harsh criticism criminal. While truth was allowed as a defense (at Hamilton's urging), the law had a chilling effect on commentary and was clearly designed to intimidate the Republican press. (Mott J, 149)

Under the Sedition Act there were 25 arrests, 15 indictments, 11 trials, and 10 convictions. Among those indicted were Duane of the *Aurora* ; the *Argus* of New York (its unfortunate journeyman printer was named as defendant) ; James Thomson Callender, the colorful, scandal-mongering Richmond, VA editor named in the Crosswell case ; Matthew Lyon, a publisher and politician known as "the roaring Lyon of Vermont ;" Anthony Haswell, editor of the *Vermont Gazette*, who wrote in support of Lyon ; Charles Holt of the New London, CT *Bee* ; Dr. Thomas Cooper of the Reading, PA *Weekly Advertiser* ; and William Durrell, of the Mt. Pleasant, NY *Register*. In some cases, indictments were brought against publishers for reprinting material originally published elsewhere. (Mott J, 149ff)

Although the Sedition Act expired in 1800 before any cases brought under it could be appealed to the Supreme Court, belief that it was unconstitutional was widespread at the time and has remained so ever since. On his election, Jefferson pardoned everyone convicted under the Act, and the House Judiciary Committee refunded all fines paid, with interest. The Alien and Sedition Acts were among the hot issues in the presidential campaign of 1800, and public aversion to them was a factor in the Federalists' defeat. (Mott J, 152)

Newspapers grew more civil as the 19th century progressed, but the effects of partisanship lingered. Throughout the century, newspapers were expected to have a party affiliation—Democratic, Whig, Republican, etc.—and party affiliation was listed along with other information in the advertisers' directories that began to appear after the Civil War.

Circulation and Advertising

Circulation development in the 18th century was limited by—among other factors—the challenge of distribution, the size of the literate population, and by press capacity and paper availability, though the first two improved dramatically between the beginning and end of the century. John Campbell, who founded the Boston *News-Letter* in 1704, complained that he couldn't sell more than 300 copies per issue. In contrast, the Connecticut *Courant* could claim circulation of 8,000 75 years later (the *Courant* was fortunate in owning a paper mill). (Mott J, 13, 104ff)

Campbell's experience was probably typical of most publishers' in the first half of the century—circulations averaging around 500 were the norm before 1750. By the Revolution, some of the more entertaining and controversial papers had reached impressive peaks. For example, Rivington's *Royal Gazette* claimed circulation of 3,600 in 1774, and Thomas (as noted) claimed 3,500 for the *Massachusetts Spy* in 1775. (Mott J, 13, 104ff) Although these were exceptions to the general rule, a few more papers managed to climb to the same level after the Revolution. The *Columbian Centinel* (New York) achieved 4,000. *Porcupine's Gazette* reached more than 2,000 in 1799. The *Aurora* at its peak achieved 1,700, and New Hampshire's *Farmer's Weekly Museum* reached 2,000. At the turn of the 19th century, however, the average newspaper's circulation was probably between 600 and 700. (Mott J, 159)

Delinquencies were common, and pass-along rates were extremely high—it was expected that each copy would reach multiple readers.

Advertising was limited by the relatively low number of advertisers and the scarcity of goods, but this didn't prevent enterprising publishers from prospering. Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* often ran six and sometimes as many as eight pages to accommodate all of its advertising. Advertising grew rapidly after the Revolution, with some commercial papers containing 75 percent advertising on a regular basis, and most papers 50 percent or more. Retail goods formed a small portion of the total. Advertisements for real estate, lotteries, ship sailings, and legal notices were common, as were ads for runaway slaves and servants, livestock, and apprentices.

Newspaper advertising was denser than we've grown accustomed to: "display," or headline type was not always employed, nor were rules separating the ads. Illustrations—stock wood cuts—were used early in the century, but as demand for advertising rose and paper supplies declined, illustrated advertisements grew rarer.

Ads were sold by the "square," usually 12 lines of type in a column, and were priced to encourage higher frequency.

News Beyond Newspapers

Obviously, newspapers were not the only medium of mass communication in 18th-century America.

Taverns and coffeehouses played an important part in spreading news. They were central

repositories of printed material—coffeehouses subscribed to English and Colonial newspapers and made them available to customers. Often coffeehouse walls were covered with notices of both news and items for sale—editorial and advertising, so to speak. (Bleyer, 15f)

The coffeehouse's central role in news distribution was carried over to the Colonies from England, where, as Humphreys wrote, "coffee-house life with its debates, news-sheets, clubs of common interests (even the common interests of oddities) and indeed its whole routine" were frequently described in the *Spectator*. (28)

A 1663 poem refers to coffee as:

A loathsome potion not yet understood—
Syrup of soot, or essence of old shoes,
Dasht with diurnals or the book of news. (Andrews I, 64)

Handbills and broadsides were popular media. Retailers often used handbills to list goods in greater length than newspaper advertising would allow. Sometimes printers would produce broadsides of important news—"extras," so to speak.

In 1774 one of the first American price sheets came off the press in South Carolina, published by a commission merchant named Jonathan Crouch. Crouch titled his publication the *South-Carolina Price Current*.

Prices current, or price sheets, were successors to the handwritten newsletters circulated by merchants in the Middle Ages. They were single sheets that listed current wholesale prices on important commodities such as lard, barley, wheat, and so on, allowing retailers the opportunity to learn the going rate for staples at a glance. Brokers like Crouch and his competitors benefited from publishing price sheets because retailers were inclined to patronize the broker who provided them with useful information.

Prices current were produced throughout the colonies, especially in larger cities. Over time price sheets were expanded by their publishers to include related content, such as shipping lists and notices of sales and auctions, and as the first business-to-business publications in the colonies, price sheets were in a real sense the forerunners of American trade journals and business periodicals. (Folio)

We noted earlier that ballads were printed and sold throughout the 18th century, and served to spread the news in a lighter and more entertaining way than newspapers provided. Many colonial printers did a brisk business producing them. (Thomas)

In the 17th and 18th centuries, almanacs were both useful and popular. The almanac provided a compendium of information that many people depended on, including farmers and sailors. One of the first products of the Massachusetts press was an almanac printed by Stephen Day's son Matthew in 1647. A popular almanac series was Nathanael Ames's *Astronomical Diary and Almanac*, which was first published in 1725 in Boston. It included tide charts, solar table calculations, eclipses, and phases of the moon. The best-known of the early almanacs was Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*, first produced in 1732. (McMurtrie, 405)

By far, pamphlets were the most popular way of expressing opinion in print on current events. About 2,000 different pamphlets were produced between 1763 and 1783 (Spiller, 131). Pamphlets played a unique role by allowing writers to comment on events at greater length than periodicals could provide. The format encouraged writers to make their case forcefully and economically, and the best authors of the time raised pamphlet-writing to an art.

Probably the most best-remembered and most effective American pamphlet of the 18th century was Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Bleyer (91) wrote, "This pamphlet, more than any other single piece of writing, crystallized in the popular mind the idea of independence in the colonies." Dr. Benjamin Rush (himself a practiced pamphleteer) said that *Common Sense* "burst from the press with an effect which has rarely been produced by types and paper in any age or country." Its remarkable impact is reflected in its popularity: *Common Sense* sold more than 120,000 copies in its first three months of publication (Mott J, 91)—this at a time when a publisher was pleased to have 300 subscribers to a newspaper. It took approximately 600 hours of total press time—the equivalent of one printer working 24 hours a day for more than three and a half months—to produce those 120,000 copies.

Numerous other writers used pamphlets to advance the Patriot cause, among them Patrick Henry, James Otis, John Dickinson, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, John Quincy, Samuel Adams, and John Adams. Among the loyalist pamphleteers, Joseph Galloway was an articulate and persuasive writer. (Spiller, 132)

The rhetorical style of political pamphleteers owed a debt to the religious pamphleteers of the Great Awakening—though anyone with a cause was likely to use a pamphlet to advance it. Pamphlets were written on social reforms, chemistry, medicine, economics, and dozens of other subjects. (Spiller, 132)

The last great flurry of pamphleteering swirled around ratification of the Constitution, the period when James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay wrote the *Federalist* series. First published in the New York *Independent Journal*, and then reprinted in many other newspapers, the essays were reprinted in two pamphlet volumes in 1788, and circulated worldwide. Adding their pens to support of ratification were, among others, Noah Webster, Edmund Randolph, and Hugh Henry Brackenridge. By the same token, several excellent writers opposed ratification, Albert Gallatin, James Monroe, and Patrick Henry among them. Richard Henry Lee's *Letters of the Federal Farmer* made a very strong case against ratification and influenced passage of the Bill of Rights in 1789. (Spiller, 143ff ; Mott J, 119)

The Constitutional debate was the swansong of American pamphleteering. Spiller (145) wrote, "The newspaper and the magazine at one level, and the printed book at the other, took the place of the pamphlet. The age of the little book, like the American revolution itself, had come to an end."

It was an end that came just as American magazines were beginning to blossom.