

### ***Profits and Motivations***

A quick recapitulation shows that 94 American magazines were launched between 1741 and 1800.<sup>1</sup> Five were launched in the decade of the 1740s, seven in the 1750s, five in the 1760s, five in the 1770s, 17 in the 1780s, and 55 in the 1790s.

[See Tables of 18th-Century Magazines posted separately]

Nine lasted for only a single issue. More than half—48—lived for less than a year. Forty-six made it to their first birthdays, 36 lasted for more than a year, and 11 lasted for three years or more. The longest-lived was the *Medical Repository*, which ran from 1797 to 1824, with a couple of gaps. The second longest-lived was the *Farmer's Weekly Museum*, published from 1793 to 1810. Sauer's *Ein Geistliches Magazin* was published between 1764 and 1775 but was active during only three of those 11 years. The *Musical Magazine*, published in Cheshire, CT, ran for an estimated 10 years, *New-York Magazine* for eight, and *Massachusetts* for seven.

In any given year of its life, the average 18th-century American magazine had about a 50-50 chance of living or dying. The one-year survival rate was about 49 percent, the two-year survival rate about 23 percent, the three-year survival rate about 12 percent, and the four-year survival rate about seven percent.

All told, the average lifespan of an 18th-century American magazine was roughly 1.5 years. Leaving out the magazines that didn't survive their first month raises the average lifespan to two years. When added together the combined lifespans of all 94 18th-century American magazines total about 165 years.

By 1800 magazines had been published in 10 of the original 13 colonies as well as the District of Columbia, Maine, and Vermont. Twenty-eight were produced in Pennsylvania, 26 of these in Philadelphia. Nineteen were produced in New York State, 17 of these in New York City. Sixteen were produced in Massachusetts, 15 in Boston.

Philadelphia magazines comprised 28 percent of all 18th-century American magazine launches, New York City magazines 18 percent, and Boston magazines 16 percent. All told, 62 percent of the 18th-century American magazines were produced in the country's three largest cities, though the small town of Walpole, NH was home to one of the most successful magazines of the period—not the last time in American magazine publishing that an out-of-the-way location became a center of publishing activity.

Eight of the 94 18th-century American magazines were produced in the South, 33 were launched in New England, and 53 were products of the Middle Atlantic states.

### *Some Differences, Then and Now*

Eighteenth-century American magazines didn't look very much like the magazines of today. They were generally smaller, closer to what we think of as digest size. They had fewer illustrations: engravings were expensive to acquire and were offered as premium "embellishments." Most 18th-

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<sup>1</sup> It's estimated that approximately 300 magazines were launched in England between 1785 and 1802. (Mott I?)

century magazines were produced in octavo format, and 64 pages was a typical page count. Sometimes printers attached a cover of lighter-stock blue paper, which was used to carry advertising as well as protect the magazine. The soft rag paper of the 18th century was uncoated and a better quality than the groundwood paper in modern magazines. The quality of printing was uneven. Needless to say, there were no photographs or four-color printing.

Generally speaking, editors included material if it fit their magazine's goals and purposes, which were sometimes pretty far-reaching, or if they felt it was important as news or central to public debate. Reading magazines was not a light diversion.

In 1892 historian Albert Smyth wrote, "A striking difference between the older magazines and the recent ones is the conspicuous absence from the journal of a century ago of what is commonly called 'light literature.' Magazines were then conducted by scholars for scholars. 'Popular' essays and silly novels had not yet depraved the taste of readers." (20f)

The literate population in 18th-century America was relatively small: in 1800 about 1.8 million people out of the country's total population of 5.3 million could read, or approximately one out of every three people. It's probably safe to say that since the act of reading was less common, it was more serious in purpose when undertaken. Readers expected not only to be entertained, but also to be informed and enlightened. This is not to suggest that there wasn't a significant amount of bad writing published in 18th-century American magazines nor that entertainment was never the objective—only that magazine contents were chosen with deliberation and usually with intentions other than simple amusement.

Literacy aside, there were more physical obstacles to the act of reading in the 18th century than we encounter today. After dark, candles provided the only useful illumination.<sup>2</sup> Eyeglasses were available, but expensive.

Many magazines were edited with more enthusiasm than skill. But a few were edited by highly influential figures in 18th-century American literature, including Benjamin Franklin, Isaiah Thomas, Thomas Paine, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Mathew Carey, Noah Webster, Joseph Dennie, Philip Freneau, Samuel Latham Mitchill, William Cobbett, and Charles Brockden Brown. Paul Revere and John Trenchard were among the talented engravers who contributed to early American magazines.

Eighteenth-century readers expected their magazines to contain material republished from other sources, and even the best editors would occasionally reach for the scissors when they needed content. Often there wasn't any choice. The complaint that contributions had been promised but not sent was common. Of course, the notion that contributors should be paid was unheard of. Not even attribution was assured, and attribution wasn't always sought: many submissions were published anonymously or under a nom de plume.

Before the 19th century there weren't any magazine writers—no author specialized that narrowly. For that matter, the profession of journalism itself was still gestating. Although the word *journal* dates from the 14th century, *journalist* didn't appear until 1693, and *journalism* was not used before 1833. (cf. OED)

Successful British magazines of the mid-18th century like the *Gentleman's Magazine* or the *London Magazine*, provided assorted contents on a range of subjects. With these as models, the first two American magazines, Bradford's and Franklin's, also covered a variety of topics. But five of the next

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<sup>2</sup> It's interesting to reflect on the symbolic connection between Benjamin Franklin's legacy as a voice of the Enlightenment and a printer of great influence, and his father's profession of chandler.

ten American magazines were devoted to specialized subject matter: the Great Awakening, the role of church and state, and British claims prior to the French and Indian War. About two thirds of all 18th-century American magazines covered topics of general interest, with the remainder dedicated to special interests such as religion, content for women, military history, music, and politics.

Most magazines did not enjoy broad distribution and as a rule their readers lived near the town of publication. The post office was never friendly to magazines and was occasionally hostile. At times local postmasters had sole discretion as to whether magazines would be accepted into the mails or not, and rates were high: the 1794 Post Office Act set rates at four cents per copy for a sixty-four-page magazine sent less than fifty miles; six cents per copy between fifty and one hundred miles; and eight cents per copy over one hundred miles. Many 18th-century publishers appreciated the need for a magazine addressing the country at large: 23 18th-century magazines used words like *American*, *Columbian*, *United States*, or *National* in their titles. But almost an equal number—22—took the name of their state, city, or region.

Well into the 19th century, publishers required subscribers to pay for delivery. If anything, this provided incentive not to pay for subscriptions. Publishers complained constantly and vociferously of subscribers' unwillingness to pay their bills, yet hesitated to discontinue subscriptions, knowing that delinquent readers were even less likely to pay if they were cut off.

There's no evidence that any American magazine of the 18th century achieved more than 1,600 subscribers. The break-even point seems to have been around 400; many would have been happy to reach circulations of three figures. *American Museum* launched with 20 subscribers. Carey, its editor, wrote of the shoals on which other periodicals had been wrecked:

I am in dread of only one –which I am almost afraid to intimate. This shoal is a want of due punctuality in paying the subscriptions. These being small, each individual is but too apt to suppose it a matter of great indifference whether he pays his quota at the time appointed or in six or twelve months afterward. This is a great mistake. It is further to be observed that the expence of sending twice or thrice, or, as is often the case, four times for the amount of a subscription, bears no small proportion to the sum received. (Mott I, 19f)

We should add in fairness to his audience that the cost of subscriptions in the 18th century was *not* small in an age when cash was scarce and reading materials were luxuries. A summary in Mott's *History of American Magazines* (I, 33f) lists subscriptions for the *Columbian* at \$2.66 per year, *American Museum* at \$3.33, both Webster's *American Magazine* and Thomas's *Massachusetts Magazine* at \$2.50, and *New-York Magazine* at \$2.25.

In round figures, these costs were the equivalent of three or four days' wages for a laborer, or two days' salary for a clergyman. (Mott I, 33f) It's no wonder that paying subscribers were hard to find. Thomas was willing to accept "Butter, Cheese, Beef, Pork, Wheat Flour by the Barrel, Rye and Indian Corn, Wheat, and Flax Seed" in trade for subscriptions, and advertised to that effect when his family ran short, saying "Please to read it! Somehow or other, many persons who subscribe to newspapers and magazines never bother themselves to make payment." (Tassin, 22)

Lack of disposable income was not the only thing that prevented more people from subscribing to magazines: lack of leisure time in which to read them may have been has high a barrier to magazines' success.

Single copies of magazines were sold at bookstores and stationers, but publishers were on their own when it came to finding retailers: there were no such things as distributors or wholesalers.

Nevertheless, some magazines were available far afield. *New-York Magazine* had agents in Goshen, Poughkeepsie and Albany, NY ; Elizabethtown and Newark, NJ ; Philadelphia ; Boston ; Danbury, CT ; and Charlestown, SC. (Mott I, 19) We noted earlier that Carey's *American Museum* had 39 agents between Boston and Charlestown.

The high cost of magazine subscriptions and postage helps explain why pass-along rates were so impressive. It was a given that publications would be shared liberally. Magazines were also meant to be kept and referred to. The idea of a magazine as a storehouse was taken more literally in those days, and more subscribers saved magazines in bound volumes ; 19 American magazines of the 18th century waited to complete an annual volume before going out of business.

Advertising in 18th-century American magazines looked more like today's classifieds than the large-format, graphic display ads that we've grown used to. The idea of using advertising to build brands was still a century away.

The original meaning of the word *advertise* was to notify or announce, and an 18th-century advertisement was usually a straightforward declaration: goods have arrived ... an apprentice has run off... quality soap is available... and so forth—advice, not admonition. (cf. OED) Readers were expected to supply their own motivation.

When paper ran short, as was the case in the years during and following the Revolution, printers compressed their contents, advertising and editorial alike. Advertisements were printed in dense, small type and stacked together, sometimes without rules to separate them. At times when space was at less of a premium, publishers would dress advertisements with borders, drop-caps, and small, stock woodcuts. (Presbrey, 138-164) Text did the work of selling ; graphics were decoration.

Circulation, not advertising, was the publisher's primary source of revenue. After the Revolution, marketing activity expanded and at some newspapers advertising became a significant revenue stream. But at most magazines it remained ancillary to income from subscriptions and single copy sales throughout the 18th century and well into the 19th.

Advertisements were usually segregated from the other contents, exiled to the covers or printed on a separate sheet slipped loose into the pages. Books and other publications were frequent subjects of advertising, as were runaway servants and merchandise. The first advertisement in an American magazine was in Franklin's *General Magazine*—an ad for a ferry. The earliest patent medicine advertisement—first trickle of a later torrent—was in the *Royal American Magazine* in March, 1775.

A magazine's printer and publisher were usually the same person, but the editor's relationship to the publisher varied. Sometimes the publisher would hire the editor, as Bradford hired Webbe ; sometimes the editor and publisher were financial partners, as was the case with Dennie and Spotswood ; sometimes the editor was printer and publisher, as was the case with Christopher Sauer and Benjamin Mecom ; and sometimes a dedicated or entrepreneurial editor would pay to have a magazine printed, as was the case with Charles Brockden Brown's *Monthly Magazine* and with many of the later religious magazines.

### *Motivations*

Many historians have looked at 18th-century American magazine publishing and remarked on what a risky business it seems to have been. Mott wrote (I, 13):

The wonder is that so many fledgling periodicals fluttered, for periods however brief,

here and there in the colonies. Surely a faith born of enthusiasm, rather than a prospect of success derived from calm calculation, presided over these early ventures.

Likewise James Playsted Wood:

It is proof of the earnestness of their publishers and editors and the eagerness of the colonial and early republican audiences that one magazine after another appeared and that many lasted as long as they did. (24)

The financial risks were no less obvious at the time. Webster's famous comment, "The expectation of failure is connected with the very name of a Magazine," proved as prophetic for him as for many others who undertook magazine publishing. (in Mott I, 13)

When Carey was preparing to launch the *American Museum*, New England writer Jeremy Belknap gave him some advice regarding magazine publishing:

Several attempts have been made within my memory both here [Boston] and at the Southward to establish such a repository of literature, but after a year or two they have uniformly failed. To what other causes the failure may be ascribed I will not say, but this appears to me to be the one, viz: the too frequent publication of them. (in Tassin, 2)

Historian Algernon Tassin described this phenomenon as "the eternal disposition to multiply faster than the traffic would stand," (2) or in other words, a surplus of titles and a shortage of demand for them. As it turned out, Carey later reported that when he was publishing the *American Museum* he never had more than \$400 cash on hand, and was at various times between \$3,000 and \$6,000 in debt. (Richardson, 316)

It may be worth noting that cost played a large role in suppressing demand. If they had been less expensive, magazines might have found more paying readers. Many publishers must have known this and looked for ways to reduce cost to the reader—Sauer certainly did—but neither the high cost of manufacturing and distribution nor the small amount of advertising available allowed much room to maneuver.

Nevertheless, many publishers launched magazines with the expectation that they would make money, as far-fetched as that may seem in hindsight. The fundamental business indicators probably looked enticing: there was a growing market for print products of all kinds in 18th-century America, and a population that increased from about one million to more than five million by the end of the century. The dramatic growth of newspaper publishing in this period indicates high demand for news—not surprising, considering the events of the day. There were successful models to emulate in Britain, and, as time went on, a few relatively successful American magazines.

However, people also publish magazines for reasons other than making money. The opportunity to influence public opinion and affect society can be stronger than the profit motive, and this was as true in the 18th century as it is today. Passion for a cause or for deeply-held beliefs is a powerful force.

Tassin wrote (9):

It is possible that each new editor, even with before him examples of constant failure, hoped to make some money (if he did, he spent it at once on enlargement), and certainly he expected to pay expenses. But chiefly he thought of himself as a torch-

bearer.

This was undoubtedly the case with the editors of religious magazines like Prince, Sauer, Sarjent, and Dickins, whose aims were different than the typical businessman's. But many editors who worked hard for commercial success also had goals beyond emolument. Their torch-bearing fell into two or three major categories.

The first was literary patriotism: what Mott (I, 22) called "the desire to show America favorably to the world," often in comparison with the British. For example, Breckenridge wrote in the *United States Magazine* that Americans had fought the British "no less successfully with the pen than with the sword. We hope to convince them yet more fully, that we are able to cultivate the *belles-lettres*..." Paine wrote in the *Pennsylvania Magazine* in January, 1775 that British magazines, once the "repositories of ingenuity," had become "retailers of tale and nonsense. From elegance they sunk to simplicity, from simplicity to folly, and from folly to voluptuousness." (Mott I, 23)

Numerous other magazines shared the goal of showcasing the best American literature, although standards varied. Brown's *Monthly Magazine* and Dennie's *Tablet* and *Farmer's Weekly Museum* set the bar especially high. Some 18th-century American magazines —such as the *Columbian*, the *American Museum*, *New-York Magazine*, and *Massachusetts Magazine*—consistently offered engaging and well-written content.

And while some publishers hoped to improve literature; others hoped to improve the English language itself. An anonymous writer (probably John Adams) wrote in the *Royal American Magazine*:

The English language has been greatly improved in Britain within a century, but its highest perfection, with every other branch of human knowledge, is perhaps reserved for this land of light and freedom. As the people through this extensive country will speak English, their advantages for polishing their language will be great, and vastly superior to what the people of England ever enjoyed. (Mencken)

William Cairns believed that magazine publishers' lack of success indicated the extent of Americans' aspirations to produce good literature. He wrote, "The many failures are reminders of the unattained intellectual activities of the nation." (160)

A second reason why publishers were willing to brave long odds to launch magazines was the desire to spread useful information. Many publishers had causes they embraced with enthusiasm, and their magazines were an expression of these special interests. Webster's devotion to education, for example, was reflected in the content of his *American Magazine*. Kollock's *Christian's, Scholar's, and Farmer's* magazine was designed to be an encyclopedic reference with a long shelf life. Mitchell and his colleagues produced the *Medical Repository* to spread and advance medicine and science.

In 1788, George Washington wrote:

For my part I entertain a high idea of the utility of periodical publications; insomuch as I could heartily desire, copies of ... magazines, as well as common Gazettes, might be spread through every city, town, and village in the United States. I consider such vehicles of knowledge more happily calculated than any other to preserve the liberty, stimulate the industry, and meliorate the morals of a free and enlightened people.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> By the same token, Washington also wrote in the same period, "I have such a number of Gazettes crowded upon me (many without orders) that they are not only Expensive, but really useless; as my other avocations will not allow me time to Read them oftentimes, and when I do attempt it I find them more troublesome, than Profitable..." (Tebbel, 87)

It was easy for publishers, who foresaw profit as the byproduct of widespread knowledge and enlightenment, to agree.

A third reason why publishers launched magazines was to support a variety of political objectives.

Some publishers promoted partisan causes. Cobbett may be an extreme example: he was exceptional in every respect. Other publishers, such as Webster, Lyons, and Haswell, weren't as acerbic as "Peter Porcupine," but were nevertheless vocal supporters of their parties.

Some publishers launched magazines to support the causes of independence or loyalism. During the Revolution, Aitken's *Pennsylvania Magazine* (with Paine in the editor's chair) and Bailey and Brackenridge's *United States Magazine* were two periodicals that promoted independence despite obvious financial risk, and, ultimately, failure. By the same token, it couldn't have been easy for Oliver to run the loyalist *Censor* in Boston in 1771 and 1772.

Many more publishers shared a broader sense of political purpose. They believed that participatory democracy required a lively public dialog—an active exchange of ideas. After all, the ideals of free speech and a free press were central to the Enlightenment, and by 1783 these freedoms had been secured for Americans at a high price.

Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Ideas should freely spread from one to another over the globe, for the moral and mutual instruction of man, and improvement of his condition." He also wrote, "We are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it." (Letter to William Roscoe, 1820)

Publishers knew that they didn't have to be partisan in order to contribute to a democracy. The act of publishing was itself a contribution.

When all is said and done, any motive other than profit that induced publishers to launch magazines—including literary patriotism, social utility, and politics—was a variation on the same theme. Each is an expression of passion or enthusiasm.

In 1803 Charles Brockden Brown, writing in the first edition of the *Literary Magazine and American Register*, said that American magazines went out of business for four reasons:

Those who managed the publication have commonly either changed their principles, remitted their zeal, or voluntarily relinquished their trade, and, like other men, have died.

Are we reading too much into Brown's comment to note that principles and zeal came first for him and that trade follows in third place?

Since the 18th century, American literacy rates have increased by a factor of at least 2.5, and the magazine industry has enjoyed countless changes that make it easier for publishers to launch magazines, print and distribute them, and market them. But the survival rate for magazines has probably not improved dramatically. There's no reliable data to turn to, but the ten year survival rate for magazines in the early 21st century has been estimated at between 10 and 20 percent. Given how many factors have changed in their favor, it's clear that publishers are still willing to enter the market with more enthusiasm than hard-headed analysis.

And for further proof that the desire to express ideas about which one is passionate or zealous can

be stronger than the desire to profit, turn to today's Internet, where millions of zealous people express their passions fervently and frequently, and pay for the privilege out of their own pockets.

The early American magazine publishers were equally passionate about informing, educating, and engaging their readers, and ultimately serving and improving their nation. And their prospective audience was no less conscious of the value of the information published in magazines.

In words later carved into the portals of the Library of Congress, Madison wrote:

A popular government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prelude to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.

Like Jefferson, who said that everyone should have not only newspapers but the ability to read them, Madison believed that both the means of acquiring information and the power of knowledge were necessary to a democracy.

In the 19th century the American magazine industry was shaped almost exclusively by changes in the production and distribution of information, and in the expansion of literacy and, consequently, people's ability to understand the output of their increasingly prolific press. The next section examines those changes in closer detail.