

Eighteenth-Century American Magazines

The market into which publishers launched the first American magazines and journals in the second half of the eighteenth century was naturally affected by the same forces which were simultaneously shaping American newspapers.

- Political, religious, and social issues were debated with unrestrained passion in the press, sometimes in direct opposition to governments' desire to limit speech, sometimes in very personal terms.
- News and other contents were shared and borrowed freely.
- The raw materials of periodical publishing—especially paper and means of distribution—were in short supply and publishing costs were high.
- Periodical circulations were generally counted in the hundreds.
- Communication among the American colonies and between America and Europe was slow.
- Readers were much more eager to receive periodicals than they were to pay for them. Advertising was limited.
- Periodical formats were still evolving. Readers were not startled to find essays in newspapers or news in handbills.

Notwithstanding the challenges of this environment, by 1800 the American magazine industry had begun to attain many of the principal characteristics it retains today. These characteristics were molded primarily through the perseverance of the country's first magazine publishers and editors. Through their struggle to find viable business models, the industry slowly grew and eventually prospered.

A closer look at the earliest American magazines shows how fundamental aspects of the business developed.

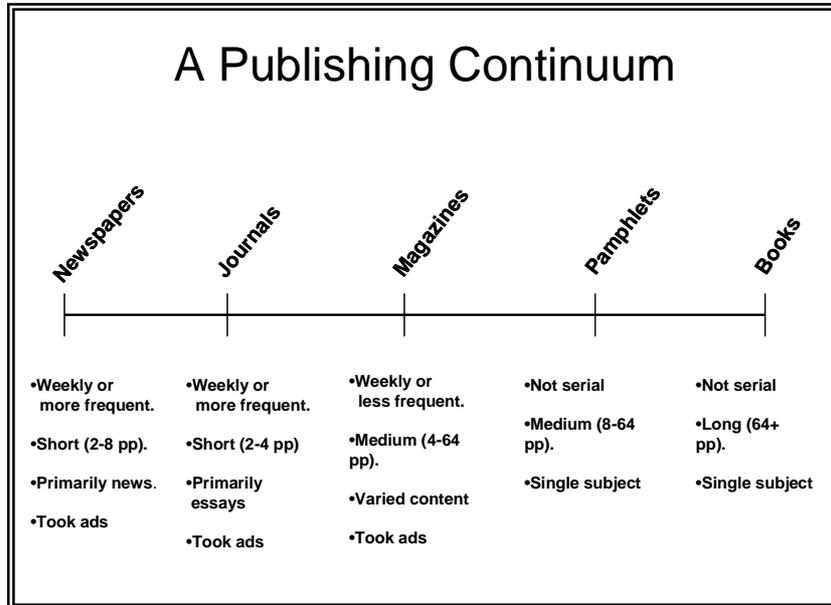
Part One: Birth of the American Magazine

As noted earlier, the first magazine, Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine*, was launched in London in 1731. In the following decade it grew increasingly successful and inspired many competitors, including the *London Magazine*, the *Grub-Street Journal*, and at least a dozen others. (Richardson, 9)

In the three decades prior to the appearance of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, journals, or essay-papers, had grown increasingly popular. Defoe's *Review*, Steele's *Tatler*, Steele and Addison's *Spectator*, and Johnson's *Idler* were among the most influential—though readers had hundreds to choose from.

The first British magazines were differentiated from journals by their length (they generally offered 40 to 80 pages as opposed to the journals' two or four), by their frequency (journals were generally published weekly, semiweekly, triweekly, or daily, while magazines came out less frequently), and by

their varied contents, which included poetry, domestic and foreign news, fiction, statistics, prices, reviews, and other material in addition to essays—variety being a cornerstone of Cave’s concept of the magazine in the first place. (Richardson, 9)



In mid-18th century Britain, readers could choose from nearly as broad a range of publication types as we have today. But the differences weren't necessarily as clear-cut as this graph implies. For example, newspapers often published essays, and magazines often published news. When publisher Isaiah Thomas decided to turn the *Massachusetts Spy* newspaper into the *Worcester Magazine* in 1785, he simply made it smaller. Magazine historian F.L. Mott wrote (I, 92f), "So close were the periodical types in the eighteenth century that the change from a four-page folio to a sixteen-page octavo was almost the only alteration required to make a magazine out of a newspaper." At least one historian of 18th-century American publishing made no distinction between journals and magazines.

By 1740, essay-papers had already influenced many American newspapers, and the *Gentleman's Magazine* and its competitors were well-known in America where they circulated at coffeehouses and were sold in bookstores.

Franklin, Bradford, and Webbe

The success of the *Gentleman's Magazine*—both literary and financial—was not lost on Benjamin Franklin, and he began preparations to launch an American magazine. Before Franklin announced his new project to the public, however, the editor with whom he hoped to start his new magazine, John Webbe—apparently dissatisfied with the proposed terms of his employment—leaked the details of Franklin’s plan to Andrew Bradford, rival publisher of the *American Weekly Mercury* newspaper. Webbe then defected to help Bradford launch a competitive magazine. (Richardson 20f ; Mott I, 73ff)

Bradford announced his *American Magazine, or a Monthly View of the Political State of the British Colonies* in the November 6, 1740 issue of the *American Weekly Mercury*. He promised that the new magazine would cover proceedings of the colonial assemblies, commerce, prices and exchange rates, extracts of laws passed, and “Party-Disputes,” or politics. (Richardson, 21)

The *American Magazine* would “inviolably observe an exact Neutrality, and *carefully* avoid mingling with the Arguments on either Side, any Reflections or Remarks of our own,” in contrast to newspapers, which “cannot without much Difficulty, be prevailed upon to publish any Thing against the Side of the Question they are of themselves”—a cogent assessment of the American newspaper business that remained accurate for more than a century. (Richardson, 21)

Franklin initially publicized his idea in the November 13, 1740 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. (Richardson, 11)

In January next will be published, (to be continued Monthly) The General Magazine and Historical Chronicle, For all the British Plantations in America: Containing (I) Extracts from the... Debates of the Parliament of Great Britain, (II) The Proclamations of Governors... (III) Extracts from, all the new Books, Pamphlets, &c. published in the Plantations, (IV) Essays, controversial, humorous, philosophical, religious, moral, or political, (V) Select Pieces of Poetry, (VI) A concise Chronicle of most remarkable Transactions... (VII) Births, Marriages, Deaths, and Promotions... (VIII) Course of Exchange...Prices of Goods, &c. (Richardson, 22f)

Franklin planned an initial press run of 1,000, with a subscription price of 15 shillings per year, and a single copy price of 15 pence, discounted to 12 shillings per dozen for retailers.¹ (Richardson 20f)

Bradford undercut Franklin's prices. He offered subscriptions to the *American Magazine* for 12 shillings per year, three pence per copy cheaper than the *General Magazine*. (Richardson, 21)

And with the head start Webbe gave him, Bradford beat Franklin to the market. On Friday, February 13, 1741,² the *American Magazine* came off the press. The following Monday, Franklin published the first issue of his *General Magazine*. (Richardson, 25)

No love was lost between Franklin and Bradford, who competed head-to-head as printers and newspaper publishers as well as magazine publishers. In fact, Franklin had played essentially the same trick as Webbe 12 years earlier, by leaving Bradford's newspaper to buy his own in 1729, and in his role as Philadelphia's postmaster, Franklin denied Bradford's publications access to the mails.

In the end Franklin, who produced six issues of the *General Magazine*, won a Pyrrhic victory against Bradford, who produced three issues of the *American Magazine*.

As each prospectus implies, there was a significant difference between Webbe's editorial vision and Franklin's. Webbe confined himself to economics and politics in the *American Magazine*. Franklin's *General Magazine* aimed for broader appeal, and followed the English model closely, as he himself admitted. (Marder, 79) The *General Magazine* included poetry, letters, essays, news, most of it extracted from American pamphlets and books—a true miscellany focused on American writing drawn from all 13 colonies. (Richardson, 26ff)

The key issues of 1741 included the War of the Austrian Succession (called King George's War in the Colonies), the “Great Awakening” religious revival, commerce and economics, and relations with the

¹ At 12 pence to the shilling, the retailer made a profit of 3 pence per copy sold—a 25% margin, though unsold copies were nonreturnable. Note that Franklin offered subscribers no discount off the single copy price: he encouraged his readers to buy retail (Mott I, 77)

² Friday the 13th—an inauspicious founding date for America's magazine industry. It was not lucky for Bradford.

Indians. All of these Franklin covered, taking care to include news from New England and the southern colonies, and to include material for women. In its six-month life the *General Magazine* produced 426 editorial pages, of which only a small portion was original material. (Richardson, 31ff) Richardson (34) wrote:

The technique of editing was quite similar to that employed in the publishing of Colonial newspapers, though more care was taken to print material of enduring value. But there was no major motive or idea back of the magazine to give it life or render it more serviceable than the weekly papers. Undoubtedly it was not a profitable venture, and so it died.

Nevertheless, the experience of Bradford and Franklin in Philadelphia did not discourage a trio of Boston publishers from launching America's next three magazines.

Boston's First Magazines

First of these was the short-lived *Boston Weekly Magazine*, which appeared on March 3, 1743 and disappeared three issues later. According to its prospectus, its editor proposed to publish "Originals, and the best Collections, upon the most entertaining and useful Subjects; Essays of Wit and Humor, Poetry and polite Learning, so as to make the whole a Piece of valuable Furniture in the Library of a Gentleman." In its three-week lifespan, the *Boston Weekly Magazine* included several essays and some poetry. Perhaps if it had lived a little longer it might have come closer to meeting its broader goals. (Richardson, 40)

Religion was the sole topic of the Colonies' next magazine, *Christian History*, a "chronicle of the Great Awakening." (Mott I, 25) Its editor, Thomas Prince Sr., was minister of Boston's Old South Church, and his goals for the *Christian History* were to explain and encourage the religious movement called the Great Awakening, America's first great wave of revivalism.³

The *Christian History's* first issue appeared on March 5, 1743, two days after the *Boston Weekly Magazine*.⁴ Prince's son Thomas Prince, Jr. was the publisher.

Starting around 1739, the Great Awakening brought worshippers into more personal involvement, both spiritually and emotionally, with their religion than had been traditional. One of its earliest leaders was Jonathan Edwards, a minister in Northampton, MA, and one of its most active proponents was George Whitefield, a British Methodist who toured the colonies. The sweeping popularity of the Great Awakening had a divisive effect, pitting religious conservatives against the revivalists, especially so in New England, and it was on these troubled waters that Prince attempted to pour oil.

Prince was a friend of Edwards and a supporter of the Great Awakening, but he sought harmony, not schism. His magazine's contents, largely historical essays, reports from various sources, and reprinted sermons, addressed only matters related to the movement. His efforts provided a two-year

³ Prince was a historian as well as a clergyman, which influenced his editorial approach. Before founding *Christian History* he had published sermons, an introduction to a life of Cotton Mather, and a history of New England. (Spiller, 36)

⁴ It's interesting to note that America's first two magazines were launched within three days of each other, and—following a hiatus of two years—the country's next two appeared two days apart.

record of the Great Awakening's origins and impact.

The *Christian History* was America's fourth magazine chronologically, but it was the first to be dedicated to a topic of special interest—in other words, the first to speak to the singular passion of a dedicated audience, which is what virtually all American magazines do today. It was also America's first purely religious magazine, the progenitor of a category which grew large, popular, and highly influential in the following century.

In October, 1743, the *Boston Weekly Magazine's* printers, Rogers and Fowles, launched its successor, the monthly *American Magazine and Historical Chronicle*. The new magazine's editor was Jeremy Gridley, a successful attorney known for erudition and egotism. From 1731 to 1732 Gridley had edited Boston's *Weekly Rehearsal*, a literary newspaper.⁵ (Richardson, 38)

Measured by longevity, the *American Magazine and Historical Chronicle* was one of the most successful of the early Colonial magazines—it lasted more than three years, with varied contents mostly reflecting Gridley's affection for the mother country. In appearance, the *American Magazine and Historical Chronicle* imitated the *London Magazine*, and for its contents Gridley borrowed from a wide range of British magazines and journals. (Richardson 46ff) Biographies, political and military news (including the siege and capture of Louisburg), moral essays, poems, and articles on religion predominated.

New York's First Magazines

Six years elapsed between the final issue of the *American Magazine and Historical Chronicle* (December, 1746) and the first issue of the Colonies' next magazine, the *Independent Reflector* (November 30, 1752). It and three more magazines emerged in New York between 1752 and 1755.

The *Independent Reflector* was a four-page weekly essay-paper edited by William Livingston, a member of a prominent family and a lawyer who later became governor of New Jersey. The *Independent Reflector* raised and covered questions of church and state related to the founding of King's College (now Columbia University), specifically, whether the new college should be governed by the established Anglican church or by the secular legislature. (Richardson, 75f)

Some of Livingston's supporters produced a journal named the *Occasional Reverberator*, New York's second magazine. The *Occasional Reverberator* published four weekly issues before closing. Its premier was on September 7, 1753, and its last issue was October 5. It was edited by William Smith, Jr., who had worked with Livingston on the *Independent Reflector*. (Richardson, 89ff)

On the opposing side of the issue, a group of clergy launched a weekly publication, called *John Englishman*, produced as a two-page broadside. Its first issue appeared on April 9, 1755, and its last, number 10, on July 5, 1755. (Richardson, 92ff)

The question of whether church or state should oversee the administration of one college in one city hardly seems to justify the high level of attention three magazines paid to it—yet the issue was in many ways a microcosm of the whole relationship between England and the American colonies. In this respect Livingston, his adherents, and his opponents, were all ahead of their time. Saying that his

⁵ Sold to Thomas Fleet in 1732, the *Weekly Rehearsal* became more news-oriented. It was renamed the *Evening-Post* in 1735.

theme was “the cause of truth and liberty,” and referring to himself in the third person, Livingston wrote:

What he intends to oppose is superstition, bigotry, priestcraft, tyranny, servitude, public mismanagement, and dishonesty in office. The things he proposes to teach are the nature and excellence of our constitution, the inestimable value of liberty, the disastrous effects of bigotry, the shame and horror of bondage... (in Spiller, p 94)

Obviously, this foreshadows similar sentiments which grew more common in the press in the next two decades. Livingston's crisp essays were much admired at Princeton, and one of the college's two literary societies took for its name Livingston's nom de plume, the American Whig. Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Philip Freneau, and James Madison were members, and many of their later sentiments echo Livingston's. (Spiller, 95)

The relationship between the British colonies and their French neighbors was often the focus of New York's fourth magazine, the *Instructor*, published and edited by Parker and Weyman. Like its three New York predecessors, the *Instructor* was produced in a short, essay-paper format: four pages per weekly issue. Subscribers were encouraged to save their copies, since the plan was to produce material that could be bound into a book at the end of the first year. (Richardson, 95)

Many of its pages were devoted to proving the legitimacy of British territorial claims in North America and the falseness of French and Spanish claims. This was the great topic of the day on the eve of the French and Indian War—the British colonists sought to gain lands to the north and west, and to preclude the French from securing those lands first. (Richardson, 95)

In addition to the political essays which formed the core of its contents, the *Instructor* also published moral essays, fables, and poems. But the journal had too little space to present truly varied contents, and it closed in May, 1755, after 10 issues. Remarkably, 31 years passed before another magazine was produced in New York. (Richardson, 96, 74)

The Eve of the French and Indian War

Meanwhile, magazine publishing returned to Philadelphia when America's next magazine, its tenth, was launched in October, 1757. It was published by William Bradford III and guided editorially by William Smith. Smith (no relation to William Smith, Jr. of the *Occasional Reverberator*) was provost of the College of Philadelphia, now the University of Pennsylvania. Mott (I, 80) said that he was a great encourager of American literature. He headed a loosely-aligned group of writers, and his magazine, the *American Magazine and Monthly Chronicle*, was produced as an outlet for their literary efforts. (Richardson, 99ff)

Smith's contributors covered a broad range of subjects, from history, politics, and war to religion, love, and manners. Essays predominated—largely expressions of opinion from pseudonymous columnists such as The Planter, The Antigallican, Timothy Timbertoe the Prattler, and The Hermit, Smith's own nom de plume. The names may seem silly, but the writing was often strong. Among the magazine's contributors were America's first secular music composer, Francis Hopkinson ; the colonies' first playwright, Thomas Godfrey ; and the renowned painter, Benjamin West. Smith included a large serving of poetry in his *American Magazine*, much in a pastoral or romantic vein with classical allusions. (Richardson, 100ff) (Spiller, 96ff)

The *American Magazine and Monthly Chronicle* lived for only 12 monthly issues and a supplement, but

between October, 1757 and October, 1758, it established a new standard as “the most original and literary periodical in colonial America.” (Spiller, 96)

While the *American Magazine and Monthly Chronicle* was focusing on literary content, a second monthly magazine emerged nearby, this one with a concentration on politics, law, and history. The *New American Magazine* was published by James Parker from his Woodbridge, NJ press.⁶ Its editor was a politician, judge, and statesman named Samuel Nevill who started the magazine at about the same time he was appointed to the colony’s Supreme Court. In his prospectus, Nevill said it was his aim to divide the magazine into two parts, one a comprehensive history of North America in serial form, the other devoted to “Amusements and Essays,” including poetry. (Richardson, 124ff)

After 12 issues, Nevill looked back and shared with his subscribers the thought that perhaps he had published “too many grave Essays” at the expense of lighter entertainment. This was ultimately the *New American Magazine’s* fatal flaw, though an understandable one, given Nevill’s background. The magazine survived from January, 1758 to March, 1760. (Richardson 125),

Its greatest lasting contribution was the “History of the Continent of America,” written by Nevill. Occupying 312 pages in total and concluding in the final issue, the “History” was probably the most far-reaching chronicle of North America produced to that point, a detailed look at the British perspective in the French and Indian War. (Richardson 123, 126)

As the Bradford family undertook its second magazine—the *American Magazine and Monthly Chronicle*, described above—the Franklin family was readying its next entry in the magazine business. Benjamin Franklin’s nephew, Benjamin Mecom, was its publisher. He was young (25) but ambitious, having recently returned from Antigua where he established a newspaper with investment from his uncle. After setting up a printing shop in Boston, Mecom launched the *New-England Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure*, a compendium of essays, dramatic prose, poetry, and fiction, all moral and instructive. (Richardson 136ff)

Mecom’s *New-England Magazine* was a unique creature, different from its predecessors in format—a small duodecimo, 60 pages long—and in contents, with material aimed at men, women, and children. Mecom did not offer subscriptions. Instead, he sold only single copies, at eight pence each. It may have been the first American magazine designed to be given as a gift—“a suitable Present for Youth,” as Mecom advertised. It was certainly the first American magazine to combine contents targeting each member of the family, and the first to mix drama with fiction, essays, and poetry. (Richardson, 136ff)

Apparently only three issues (August, 1758, October, 1758, and March, 1759) were published before Mecom lost interest. In this short lifespan, however, the *New-England Magazine* took American magazine publishing in a new direction, and, in the same way that Prince found a market for a special-interest periodical and Smith found a market for literature, Mecom demonstrated a potential market for family magazines.

The *New-England Magazine* was America’s 12th magazine, and the Colonies’ last magazine launched until 1764. For a five-year period between 1760 and 1764—a period encompassing the end of the French and Indian War, a severe recession, and debate of the Stamp Act—American journalism was practiced in newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides... but not magazines.

⁶ The *New American Magazine* was launched in January, 1758, 18 years before the first newspaper was produced in New Jersey. This makes New Jersey the only colony in which magazine publishing preceded newspapers.