

## COLONIAL COMMUNICATION—NEWSPAPERS, BROADSIDES, AND THE POST

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In the early colonial period, communication was very different than it was following the Revolution. The majority of America was ruled by England and the residents considered themselves Englishmen, not Americans. Most communication was personal—and usually verbal, via the grapevine. Letters were often transported by friends who were traveling.

Printing presses, which we take for granted as mechanical devices, were considered by the crown to be dangerous. The early colonists probably considered them as irrelevant to their primary purpose of survival in a new world. When the first printing press was allowed in 1638, it was overseen by Harvard College and produced broadsides, religious works, and useful books such as almanacs and law books.

Broadsides—printing on one side of a single sheet of paper—were used to convey “news” such as proclamations and ballads that related interesting events. The content was closely watched by the authorities.

The first regular newspaper in the colonies did not exist until nearly a century after the first permanent American settlement.

- In Massachusetts in 1690 an attempt was made to publish a newspaper, but failed after one issue. The *Boston Newsletter* in 1704 is considered the first. It was followed by the *Boston Gazette* in 1719. Benjamin Franklin learned the printing business at the latter.
- In Philadelphia in 1719 the first issue was printed of the *American Weekly Mercury*, the third newspaper in the country. The first German-language paper was begun in 1732, but quickly failed. Christopher Sower of Germantown began a successful German newspaper in 1739.
- It was not until 1725 that New York had a newspaper, the *Gazette*.
- The *Maryland Gazette* began publication in Annapolis in 1727.
- The *South-Carolina Gazette*, like several of the colonial newspapers, was, in effect, a franchise of Benjamin Franklin’s, set up in 1731.
- Rhode Island was the second New England colony with a regular newspaper when the *Rhode Island Gazette* began publication in 1732.
- The first Virginia newspaper was the *Virginia Gazette*, which began publication in 1736 in Williamsburg.
- North Carolina did not have a newspaper until 1751 when the *North-Carolina Gazette* printed its first issue at New Bern.
- Connecticut’s first newspaper was the *Connecticut Gazette* in 1755. The *Connecticut Courant* was founded in 1764. It is now the *Hartford Courant* and the longest continuously published newspaper in America.

- In northern New England, the *New Hampshire Gazette* was begun in 1756.
- The *Georgia Gazette* commenced publication at Savannah in 1763.
- New Jersey did not have an established newspaper until the Revolutionary War.
- Delaware was even later, with no newspaper until 1785.

It wasn’t until the two decades before the Revolutionary War that newspaper publishing began to proliferate. Many colonial newspapers were in publication for a relatively brief period.

What was considered news in colonial times was not what we might expect. It was almost never local. The grapevine sufficed for that. There was a heavy emphasis on news from England and the continent, which was dependent on the arrival of ships carrying newspapers and other communications from England. News from other colonies was important, as were items of business.

Newspapers carried a variety of advertising. Even in the colonial period, you can find ads for medicines that claimed to cure an incredible array of human ailments. Some newspapers offered literary content such as stories and poems. As time went on, some became more forward in taking political positions, although this was often done subtly or indirectly so as not to bring about the closure of the paper.

Although deaths of important persons might be noticed, births and marriages would not. Local individuals were mentioned only as they related to business. Thus, you are likely to find the name of your ancestor only if he was offering items for sale, had detained wandering livestock, had letters at the post office, or had a servant or slave or wife who had ran away—or if he or she *was* the runaway servant, slave, or wife.

As newspaper publishing spread, so did royal concern about it. The crown sought some level of control through the Stamp Act of 1765. At this point in time, there were 23 newspapers operating in the colonies (about two dozen more had become defunct), in New Hampshire (1), Massachusetts (4), Connecticut (2), Rhode Island (2), New York (3), Pennsylvania (4, of which 2 were in German), Maryland (1), Virginia (1), North Carolina (2), South Carolina (2), and Georgia (1). Only Delaware and New Jersey did not have a newspaper.

The Stamp Act decreed that all newspapers, books, and legal or official documents had to be printed on special stamped paper on which tax—a not insubstantial tax—had been paid. Additionally, advertisements would be taxed. It was probably anticipated that this would simultaneously bring income to the crown and put a damper on the increasingly political nature of some newspapers. Instead, it served as a focus for open rebellion.

In the six months between announcement and effect, the newspapers strongly attacked the act in a variety of ways. In the end, no American newspaper published on the stamped paper. Some suspended publication, some morphed into non-newspapers by removing the serial number or the name, and a few defiantly continued publication on normal paper. The act was repealed within a few months.

Not all issues of all colonial newspapers survive. Almost all of what has survived has been microfilmed by private companies. The Family History Library has only a few of these. The best place to find them is in college libraries. Several books have been published abstracting genealogical information in newspapers that include the colonial era, but the coverage is by no means comprehensive.

#### MAIL AND THE POST OFFICE

Initially, postal contracts were royal contracts awarded to individuals. At the end of the 1600s, only Boston, New York, and Philadelphia had such contracts, with service to a few nearby settlements and those along the roads connecting the three towns.

Queen Anne's Postoffice Act of 1711 changed the system, making the postmaster a royal appointment, rather

than a private charter, which helped expand and improve postal service, especially in the southern colonies where settlement was dispersed.

There was a close link during the early eighteenth century between the mail and newspapers. In several instances the postmaster was the printer of the newspaper. Newspapers were carried to other towns by the same riders who carried the mail. Roads were not good. In fact, roads were awful. News, whether contained in letters or newspapers, traveled slowly. Winter and rain slowed the post riders even more.

The Revolutionary War created a difficult situation in the rebelling colonies because the postal service was an English government function. Some private postal delivery services had arisen. The Continental Congress took over one such service in 1775, appointing Benjamin Franklin, who had been the crown's Deputy Postmaster General from 1752 until 1774, as the first Postmaster General of what would become the United States.

Understanding the differences in communication between the colonial period and later time periods can lead to more effective research.

Those wanting to learn more can consult Frank Luther Mott's *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States through 250 Years, 1690 to 1940*.