

Innovations and Firsts

Benjamin Harris' *Public Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick* may have been the first newspaper in the colonies and the first to be suppressed by the government, but with nearly fifteen years as continent's uncontested second newspaper, the *Boston News-Letter* could rack up a string of firsts, including the first to print more than one edition, the first sent through the mail, the first newspaper advertisements, the first editorial correction, and possibly the first home delivery. While he was postmaster, Campbell could use his franking privileges to send his newspaper through the mail without cost. But when he lost the job in 1718, that changed.

An advertisement Campbell inserted in the January 11, 1721, *News-Letter* advised readers that “on reasonable terms,” they could have their copy “*left at any House in the Town, Seal'd or Unsealed; and for the advantage of the Post Office an Entire Sheet of Paper to write their Letter on, may also be had there for any one that pleases to have it every Monday.*”¹

It is unclear how Campbell went about getting his papers to “any House in the Town,” nor whether by “any House,” Campbell meant residences or London-style coffee houses and taverns popular in the colonies, or some other businesses. Benjamin Harris had established a coffee house a year before starting his newspaper, and several others existed in Boston, including the Green Dragon, which opened in 1697 and lasted until 1832.² Several of the early coffee houses were operated by women, including Dorothy Jones, who in 1670 was given a license by

¹ John Campbell, “Advertisement,” *Boston News-Letter*, January 11, 1721.

² Bruce Richardson, “Coffee Houses in Colonial Boston,” *Boston Tea Party*. Accessed at <https://www.bostontepartyship.com/tea-blog/coffee-houses-in-colonial-boston>.

the government “to keepe a house of publique Entertainment for the selling of Coffee & Chochaletto.”³

On the other hand, three media historians who have studied and published on the colonial newspaper agree that because Campbell had been replaced as postmaster in 1718, he likely was promoting home delivery because he had lost his franking privilege and the new postmaster, William Brooker, had started a competing newspaper, the *Boston Gazette*, in 1719.⁴ Home delivery might have obviated the cost of sending papers by mail, if Campbell could even get Brooker to accept his papers. That didn’t always happen.

Delivery before dark

If Campbell did not invent the idea of home delivery, it would not be long in coming. When Thomas Fleet turned his morning *Weekly Rehearsal* into the *Boston Evening Post* in August 1735, he advertised that “all the Readers in Town may depend on having it left at their Houses some Time before Dark, (unless upon extraordinary Occasions) which might be a Diversion after the Business of the Day, now the Evenings are grown pretty long.”⁵ Fleet’s comment offers a glimpse of daily life for working Bostonians.

For more than a century afterward, newspapers could be sent to post offices for pickup by subscribers.

³ Barbara W. Sarudy, “In Business – Women & Coffee Houses in Early Boston.” *Colonial and Early American Women*. Accessed at <https://b-womeninamericanhistory18.blogspot.com/2019/02/18c-american-women-in-business-women.html>.

⁴ David Copland, email message to author, September 7, 2020; William David Sloan, email messages to author, September 7, 2020; Julie Hedgepeth Williams, email messages to author, September 7, 2020.

⁵ Thomas Fleet, “Advertisement,” *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, August 18, 1735. Isaiah Thomas says that that wording also appeared the week before in the last edition of the *Rehearsal*. Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 2nd ed. (Barre, MA: Imprint Society, 1970), notes, 248-249.

On June 12, Campbell appears to have published the first newspaper correction in America when he wrote, “In our News-Letter Numb. 5. We gave an Account of 30 kill’d and Captivated [sic] by the Enemy at *Northhampton*, [sic] of which number there are since come & brought in alive Eleven Persons.”⁶ The raid, one of many French and Indian raids on New England settlements during Queen Anne’s War, was neither the first nor the last on Northampton.⁷

First daily newspaper

The *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser*, published in Philadelphia, on September 21, 1784, went from a tri-weekly to become the first daily newspaper in the United States,⁸ although some histories⁹ give the claim to Benjamin Towne’s *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, a tri-weekly published in Philadelphia between 1775 and 1782.¹⁰ The confusion over “firsts” may stem from the fact that Towne’s *Evening Post* was the first newspaper to publish the Declaration of Independence, on Saturday, July 6, 1776.¹¹

⁶ “In Our News-Letter,” *News-Letter*, June 12, 1704.

⁷ David Michael Corlett, “Steadfast in the Ways: New England Colonists, Indian Wars, and the Persistence of Culture, 1675-1715” (Ph.D. dissertation, College of William and Mary, 2011). Accessed at <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd/1539623344/>.

⁸ Thomas, *History of Printing*, 439.

⁹ “Date in History: 1783,” *National Park Service*, Accessed at https://www.nps.gov/revwar/revolution_day_by_day/1783_main.html; “U.S. Census Bureau Daily Feature for May 10: First Daily Newspaper,” *Ciston PR Newswire*, Accessed at . Accessed at <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/us-census-bureau-daily-feature-for-may-10-first-daily-newspaper-300263880.html>; “First Daily U.S. Newspaper – The Pennsylvania Evening Post,” *Bronx Chronicle*, May 30, 2017. Accessed at <https://thebronxchronicle.com/2017/05/30/first-daily-u-s-newspaper-the-pennsylvania-evening-post/>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 440-441.

¹¹ “First Printing of the Declaration of Independence in a Newspaper,” *The News Media and the Making of America 1730 - 1865*, American Antiquarian Society. Accessed at <https://americanantiquarian.org/earlyamericannewsmedia/exhibits/show/age-of-revolution/item/39>.

On the other hand, it was Mary Katherine Goddard who printed the first copy of the Declaration of Independence to contain the names of the signatories, though as a broadside and not for her newspaper, the *Maryland Journal, and Baltimore Advertiser*.¹²

In an era when illustrations were few in newspapers, Benjamin Franklin is credited with publishing the first newspaper political cartoon, the famous “Join or Die” snake, on May 9, 1754, though he had used cartoons in pamphlets before that.¹³

Firsts and superlatives are tricky with newspapers. The *Hartford Courant* (nee *Connecticut Courant*) makes claim to being the oldest continuously published newspaper in the nation, brought out by Thomas Green on October 29, 1764.¹⁴ But the *New York Post*, (nee *New-York Evening Post*), founded by Alexander Hamilton to promote Federalist principles, likewise calls itself the oldest continuously published newspaper in the United States, its first issue having been published on November 16, 1801.¹⁵ The honors go to the *Courant*, having been founded earlier, but the *Post* can claim the prize for being the oldest continuing *daily* in the country; the *Courant* didn’t go daily until 1837.¹⁶

¹² Karen Nipps, “The Distaff Side,” *Library Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (October 2015): 454-460, at 455.

¹³ Frederic R. Kirkland, “An Unknown Franklin Cartoon,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 73, no. 1 (January 1949): 76-79.

¹⁴ See, for instance, “The Oldest Continuously Published Newspaper – Today in History: October 29,” *Connecticut History. Org.* Accessed at <https://connecticuthistory.org/the-oldest-continuously-published-newspaper-today-in-history/>; Susan Campbell, “How Alden Global Capital Is Strangling Connecticut’s Hartford Courant,” *Media Nation*, March 10, 2020. Accessed at <https://dankennedy.net/2020/03/10/how-alden-global-capital-is-strangling-connecticuts-hartford-courant/>.

¹⁵ Johnny Oleksinski, “That Time Alexander Hamilton Founded America’s Oldest Daily Newspaper,” *New York Post*, July 3, 2020. Accessed at <https://nypost.com/2020/07/03/alexander-hamilton-founded-americas-oldest-daily-newspaper/>.

¹⁶ Diana McCain, “The Oldest Continuously Published Newspaper in the U.S.,” *WNPR: All Things Considered*, October 10, 2014. Accessed at <https://www.wnpr.org/post/oldest-continuously-published-newspaper-us>.

With the economic crisis befalling today's newspapers, along with technologic change, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, there may be a *last* daily in the United States.