News and the Mails

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Postmasters and the postal system were an early enabler of the press and, for good or bad, remained a key feature through most of the twentieth century.

When he started the *Boston News-Letter*, postmaster John Campbell was ideally positioned to be a node in the colonies' communication network. It was "an era long before the envelope, and though many letter writers did use wax to seal their letters, the seals often fell apart during transit and in any case could easily be broken."[1] There were no secrets between letter writers and their postmasters, who received a steady supply of news items from overseas and at home.

They were a key link in commerce, too. Early advertisements from out-of-town businesses often referred people to that community's postmaster for more information. In Philadelphia, Andrew Bradford referred readers to several out-of-town postmasters as his agents for receiving subscriptions to the *American Weekly Mercury*.[2] An ad in the *Boston News-Letter* for real estate at Oyster Bay on Long Island told readers, "Enquire of Mr. *William Bradford* Printer in *N. York* and know further."[3] Bradford would found the *New-York Gazette*, that colony's first newspaper, in 1725.

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[1] Anuj C. Desai, "Wiretapping before the Wires: The Post Office and the Birth of Communications Privacy," *Stanford Law Review* 60, no. 2 (November 2007): 553-594, at 562.

[2] Andrew Bradford, "Advertisement," *American Weekly Mercury*, Philadelphia, December 22, 1719.

[3] "Advertisements," *Boston News-Letter*, May 8, 1704.

That same issue of the *News-Letter* also carried an ad for the return of two anvils missing from Shippens Dock, telling "Whoever has taken them up, and will bring or give true Intelligence of them to John Campbel [sic] Post-master, shall have a sufficient reward."[4]

Free exchanges

Besides being able to tap the news flow, early postmasters had the huge advantage of being able to send their newspapers free along with the mail. Called the frank, or franking, it relieved the senders from paying postage. At various times in later periods, newspapers were considered so vital to the exercise of democracy that all could be sent free through the mails from printer to printer or among the public at a significantly reduced rate.

Historian Richard B. Keilbowicz reports that:

> For the first quarter of a century under the Constitution, the commitment to promote the circulation of news through the mails stood virtually unchallenged. Even contending political factions generally supported the policy of preferential rates for newspapers. Both Federalists and Republicans believed that the same policy – low newspaper postage – advanced their political goals. Federalists assumed that the widespread circulation of news and political discourse buttressed a strong central government by fostering nationalism and promoting party cohesion. Federalists recognized, too, that their partisans occupied most postmasterships and their newspapers had the wherewithal to make aggressive use of the mails. At the same time, Republicans hoped that their party papers carried inexpensively through the mails would inform constituents of Federalist abuses.[5]

Keilbowicz adds, "Postage-free printers' exchanges, recognized in the first United States postal laws, remained the principal method of news-gathering until the invention of the telegraph and the development of press associations in the mid-1800s."[6]

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Richard B. Kielbowicz, "The Press, Post Office, and Flow of News in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 3, no. 3 (Autumn, 1983): 255-280, at 255.

[6] Ibid., at 256.

The Postal Act of 1792 allowed "every printer of newspapers" to send "one paper to each and every other printer of newspapers within the United States, free "of postage."[7] The act also set privileged rates for sending newspapers by mail: "one cent, for any distance not more than one hundred miles, and one cent and a half for any greater distance."[8] By comparison, the act set the rates for a one-page letter at anywhere from six cents for mail less than 30 miles distance to twenty-five cents for mail sent more than 450 miles.[9]

"Postage did not have to be paid by the publisher, which meant that almost invariably the delivering postmaster collected the postage from the subscribers. The rates were modest compared to those for letters, but they still constituted an additional charge to the average price of four cents per paper."[10] These rates, and similar rates included in the Postal Act of 1794 remained in effect until mid-[nineteenth] century."[11]

Forming networks

Newspaper publishers established what is called the exchange press when the government allowed them to exchange their papers with other publishers free, leading to what has been called a pre-electronic wire service that guaranteed news moved from newspaper to newspaper. Through the exchanges, editors were able to reprint items from other editors' newspapers, a practice employed since the time of Benjamin Harris' *Publick Occurrences*, when the London newspapers provided the majority of the copy in colonial news columns. The

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[7] "Acts of the Second Congress of the United States," Sess. I, Ch. 7, 1791, page 238. Accessed at https://www.loc.gov.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Kielbowicz, "Press, Post Office, and Flow of News," at 259.

[11] Ibid.

importance of clipping stories from exchange papers is suggested by one of the toasts at the 1848 Printers Festival: "The Scissors, the Editor's most valuable Assistant."[12] Through the seventeenth century, the exchange of newspapers in the colonies gave the colonists an increasing sense of identity as Americans.[13]

With these advantages in mind, it is no surprise that early editors often were postmasters and that press proprietors had a keen interest in postal affairs. Historian Nancy Pope notes that "Publishers vied for postmaster jobs, knowing they would get the news first, could mail their newspapers for free and even refuse competing papers access to the mails."[14] The famous printer Benjamin Franklin, had been a victim of such practice while Andrew Bradford, proprietor of the *American Weekly Mercury*, was postmaster, so when Franklin became Philadelphia's postmaster 1737, he wrote in his autobiography, he "found it of great advantage; for, tho' the salary was small, it facilitated the correspondence that improv'd my newspaper, increas'd the number demanded, as well as the advertisements to be inserted, so that it came to afford me a considerable income."[15] He added, with delicious satisfaction, "My old Competitor's Newspaper declin'd proportionably [sic]."[16]

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[12] "The Birth-Day of Franklin," *Daily Advertiser,* Rochester, NY, January 19, 1848. It could be argued that the inauguration of the Associated Press in 1846 didn't so much change the exchange practice as automate it via the telegraph, which had been developed in the 1830s and 1840s.

[13] Richard L. Merritt, *Symbols of American Community, 1735-1775* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966.

[14] Nancy Pope, *Benjamin Franklin: Philadelphia's Postmaster*, Smithsonian National Postal Museum, June 6, 2017. Accessed at https://postalmuseum.si.edu/node/2134.

[15] Benjamin Franklin, quoted in Nancy Pope, *Benjamin Franklin*.

[16] Franklin, quoted in "The Printer as Entrepreneur," in *Benjamin Franklin: Writer and Printer*, Library Company of Philadelphia. Accessed at http://librarycompany.org/BFWriter/entre.htm.

From 1753 to 1774, Franklin was deputy postmaster of the colonies (with Virginia publisher William Hunter), using the frank to increase his paper's circulation.[17] In 1775, the Second Continental Congress appointed him the first postmaster general of the United States.

Postmasters in charge

Throughout the colonies, virtually every editor was or had been a postmaster. In Boston, John Campbell lost his postmastership – but not his *News-Letter* – to William Booker, who late in 1719 began the *Boston Gazette*. It initiated the first newspaper competition in America, and at times bitter one at that. Unlike Campbell's retention of the *News-Letter*, successive postmasters took over publication of the *Gazette*. Thomas writes that these postmaster-publishers "seemed to claim a right to such publications, or at least to think that a newspaper was an appendage to their office,"[18] but in 1734 Ellis Huske was appointed postmaster and began the *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*. Elsewhere in the colonies during the eighteenth century, postmasters were also publishers in South Carolina, Virginia, New York, and, of course, Pennsylvania, where the most famous printer-postmaster, Benjamin Franklin, was publishing the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and tending to the mails.

In the printing network he developed, Franklin made sure that his partners were also postmasters. In setting up James Parker as his partner in the *Connecticut Gazette*, the colony's first newspaper, Franklin, as deputy postmaster general of the British colonies, made sure to

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[17] "Postmaster General," Benjamin Franklin Historical Society. Accessed at http://www.benjamin-franklin-history.org/postmaster-general/.

[18] Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 2nd ed. (Barre, MA: Imprint Society, 1970), 249.

appoint Parker postmaster in New Haven, "to help Parker generate revenue and give him free access to the mail."[19]

Postal controls

Postmasters played a darker role in the history of the press, too.[20] In the days leading to the American Revolution, loyalist postmasters aided British authorities in stopping the transmission of pro-independence newspapers, and Franklin's partner in Philadelphia, William Goddard, instituted what was called a Constitutional Post, a parallel system to the Parliamentary Post, to keep mail out of British hands.[21]

In the Antebellum South, postmasters served as censors and disruptors of abolitionists' newspapers, pamphlets, tracts, and other antislavery ephemera. During the morality wars of Anthony Comstock, the postmasters stopped material deemed pornographic. In World War I, postmasters enforced the Espionage Act of 1917, much as they had during the life of the Sedition Act of 1798. As late as the 1970s, prohibitions on sending gambling information through the mail meant newspapers could not publish lottery information, even reports of raffles for charity for fear of losing their second class (now called Periodical) privileges.

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[19] Ralph Frasca, "'I am now about to establish a small Printing Office . . . at Newhaven': Benjamin Franklin and the First Newspaper in Connecticut," *Connecticut History Review* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 77-87, at 81.

[20] See, for instance, Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), passim.

[21] See, for instance, "Editorial Note on the Founding of the Post Office, 26 July 1775," *Founders Online,* National Archives, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-22-02-0074. [Original source: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin,* vol. 22, *March 23, 1775, through October 27, 1776*, ed. William B. Willcox. New Haven and London:: Yale University Press, 1982, pp. 132–134.] Accessed at https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-22-02-0074; "Out of the Mails: William Goddard's Constitutional Post," Smithsonian National Postal Museum. Accessed at https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/out-of-the-mails-hugh-finlays-journey/william-goddard%E2%80%99s-constitutional-post.