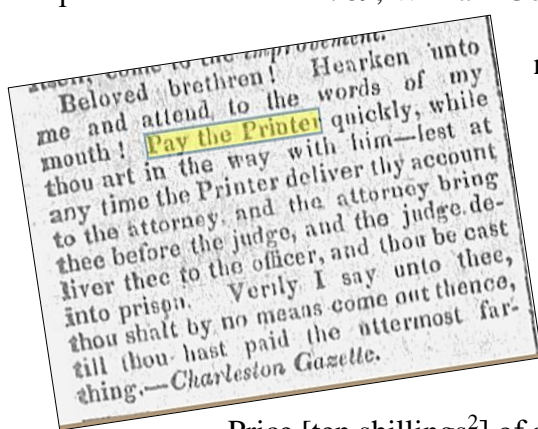


**‘The joys of Heaven
Are never given
To those who cheat the Printer’**

Frank E. Fee Jr.

From the earliest colonial days and until the Penny Press era of the 1830s, newspapers were mostly sold on an annual subscription, although one could sometimes buy single copies at the printer’s office.¹ In 1769, William Goddard ran advertisements around the colonies in



newspapers whose editors were his agents for the *Pennsylvania Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*.

They announced improvements to his paper, including embellishing it with copper plates illustrations,

“which is sold separate, could not be afforded for the

Price [ten shillings²] of a Year’s Chronicle.”

¹ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 15.

² Examination of extant newspapers indicates that 10 shillings per year was a common subscription rate. Although translating the British colonial monetary system of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries yields inexact and competing values (David Walbert, “The Value of Money in Colonial America,” NCPedia. Accessed at <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/value-money-colonial-america>), a British National Archives currency (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk) suggests that 10 shillings in the early to mid-eighteenth century was equal to about £59 in 2017, and that equals about \$75 (<https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=58.90&From=GBP&To=USD>), which the Archives reports was five days’ wages for a skilled tradesman in 1770. Although the Archives figure may be for workers in Great Britain, Lindert and Williamson report that income per capita in 1774 was nearly the same in Great Britain as in the colonies, both in current dollars (\$69.1 to \$69.5) and considerably larger in the colonies in terms of purchasing power from 1700 to 1774. Peter H. Lindert and Jeffrey G. Williamson, “American Colonial Incomes, 16500-1774,” *Economic History Review* 69, no. 1 (2016): 54-77.

After explaining that he had founded the paper to serve the public, not to mention “to obtain for himself such moderate subsistence as one of his profession has a right to expect,” and outlining a bigger, better *Chronicle*, Goddard told readers that:

The extraordinary expenses that the printer must necessarily incur, by providing these improvements, will require *further Encouragements*, and induce him, while he is returning Thanks to his present generous subscribers, to solicit the favour of others, as every one must be sensible from so small a price as *Ten Shillings* a year, and the constant and incidental expense of the Press, how small a profit will remain to the Printer. – Nor can the advance of *Five Shillings*, for the first Half year, which he requests from every subscriber, both new and old, be looked upon as unreasonable, on the present improved and expensive plan, which will require an immediate supply.³

Scholar Michael Schudson acknowledges that for the middle and lower classes in the early nineteenth century, newspapers were expensive and a reach. “A paper ordinarily cost the reader six cents an issue at a time when the average daily wage for nonfarm labor was less than eighty-five cents.”⁴ But when newspapers were sold only by annual subscriptions costing eight to ten dollars, “Not surprisingly, circulation of newspapers was low, usually just one to two thousand for even the most prominent metropolitan papers.”⁵

Nevertheless, the number of newspapers mushroomed in the early nineteenth century. “By the 1820s,” historian Charles Steffen says, “roughly six hundred newspapers, including sixty big-city dailies, were being pulled off the nation’s presses, a quantitative accomplishment in

³ Goddard, William. "PROPOSALS for Continuing and Improving the PENNSYLVANIA CHRONICLE, AND UNIVERSAL ADVERTISER." *The Connecticut Courant (1764-1774)*, May 29, 1769. <http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/docview/552515262?accountid=14244>.

⁴ Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 15. See also, Charles G. Steffen, “Newspapers for Free: The Economies of Newspaper Circulation in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 23, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 381-419, at 383.

⁵ *Ibid.*

which editors took understandable pride.”⁶ By 1830, Schudson says, that number had grown to six hundred and fifty weeklies and sixty-five dailies, with average daily circulation of twelve hundred.⁷ And at the end of the decade, the number of weeklies had grown to eleven hundred and forty-one, with one hundred and thirty-eight dailies, average circulation thirty-two hundred.⁸

Paying the printer

The fragile finances of newspapers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries occasioned no end of exhortations to subscribers to pay for their papers. In direct appeals, allegorical fiction, poetry, humor, and toasts offered at banquets celebrating the craft that were publicized in their newspapers, printers made their case.

Among nearly 100 toasts at a dinner in Rochester, NY, to celebrate the birthday of their patron, Benjamin Franklin, one guest offered, “*Subscribers who cheat the Printer—‘May they have an everlasting itch and never be allowed to scratch.’*”⁹

A column-long, earnest appeal in the form of a sermon made the rounds of the exchange press, telling readers that “the debt that sits heaviest in the conscience of a mortal – provided he has one – is the debt of a printer. It *presses* harder upon one’s bosom than the nightmare – galls the soul – frets and chafes every enobling [sic] sentiment – squeezes all the juice of fraternal sympathy from the heart, and leaves it drier than the surface of a roasted potato.”¹⁰

⁶ Charles G. Steffen, “Newspapers for Free: The Economies of Newspaper Circulation in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 23, no. 3 (Autumn 2003): 381-419, at 381.

⁷ Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ “The Birth-day of Franklin. Third Annual Celebration,” *Rochester (NY) Daily Advertiser*, January 19, 1848.

¹⁰ Dow, Jr. [sic], “Short Patent Sermon,” *Illinois Free Trader*, Ottawa, IL, June 25, 1841. “Dow, Jr.,” was the pen name of *New York Sunday Mercury* publisher Elbridge Gerry Paige, whose work appeared in his own paper;

In 1851, a North Carolina newspaper concluded a list that it said “every man ought to have,” with, “Every man ought to have a Bible and a newspaper in his house” and that, “Every man ought to have honesty enough to pay the printer.”¹¹ The imperative was by no means confined to the United States. “If you would always have a clear conscience, be an honest man and a Christian, and *pay the printer*,” Honolulu’s *Polynesian* told readers in 1840.¹²

Often, the editors resorted to comic vignettes to seek payment:

“Jim, did you ever study grammar?”

“I did!”

“What case is Squire X ---?”

“He’s an objective case.”

“How so?”

“Because he objected to paying subscription he has been owing for five years or more.”

“What is a noun?”

“I don’t know, but I know what renoun is.”

“Well, what is it?”

“Running off without paying the printer, and getting on the black list as a delinquent.”

“Good! What is a conjunction?”

“A method of collecting outstanding subscription, in conjunction with a constable; never employed by printers until the last extremity.”¹³

Not infrequently, readers were importuned with verse, which had the multiple virtues of reminding readers to pay up but also of demonstrating the literary merits of their editors and the

in pamphlet form; and was picked up by many newspapers, especially if the subject was paying the printer. See also, among others, “An Excellent Sermon,” *Richmond (IN) Palladium*, July 24, 1841; “Short Patent Sermon,” *Port-Gibson (MI) Herald*, November 23, 1843; “Short Patent Sermon,” *American Union*, Morgantown, VA, December 17, 1858.

¹¹ “A Few Things That Every Man Ought to Have,” *Tarborough [sic] (NC) Press*, November 8, 1851.

¹² “And Finally,” *The Polynesian*, Honolulu, Oahu, Kingdom of Hawaii, August 8, 1840.

¹³ “Grammar,” *Southern Enterprise*, Greenville, SC, December 10, 1857. Though it is subtle and even northern publishers did not shy from much more pronounced dialect in humor pieces, readers may detect a hint of blackface syntax in this.

creative value of their work, not to mention a bit of fun that enlivened the news columns and sweetened the serious message behind the rhymes.. Often, too, there was an appeal to readers' empathy that these editors and printers were not faceless elites but human beings with needs shared by readers and editors alike.

An unusually long ode by R.H.E. Levering with the frequently used title "Pay the Printer," touched all these bases, plus religious and classical appeals and a topical dig at

women's rights – saving the printer's daughter from having to wear "*Bloomeritish* geer":

“Would you keep the earth from sinking
To primeval sin and gloom?
Would you set each mind to thinking
How to make millenium [sic] come?
Pay the Printer! Pay the Printer!
Reason, conscience, scriptures say –
If you'd have good times to-morrow
Liquidate the debt to-day!

Would you see your race ascending
Proudly in the moral seale [sic]?
Would you see old Satan bending
Clipped his horns and clipped his tail?
Pay the Printer! Pay the Printer!
Printers, like the sun arising,
Drive the midnight shades away!

Would you stop the course of folly!
Show in print its antics wide –
Stop rank crime more melancholy?
Print how villains have beguiled!
Pay the Printer! Pay the Printer? [sic]
He has telegraphic force –
He will bring them to the gallows
Of repentance and remorse!

Would you urge the mind to glory
In pursuits the most sublime?
Elevate it high in story,
Blessing down to latest time?
Pay the Printer! Pay the Printer!
Let your children read his sheet,
Gaining knowledge, and unlearning
Mischief learned upon the street!

Would you make your son a Franklin,
Temperate, honest, good and wise,
Making money, but not rankling
For the petty rogueries?
Pay the Printer! Pay the Printer!
He is of the Franklin school –
Printing wisdom for the knowing.
Printing scorning for the fool!

Would you make your daughter glorious
In her proper mode and sphere?
Would you give her charms victorious
With no *Bloomeritish* geer [sic]?
Pay the Printer! Pay the Printer!
He is of the prudent kind,
Spreading through his decent pages
Angel food for female mind!

Would you spread Columbia's grandeur
Farther o'er the land and sea,
An example and a wonder
Now and to posterity?
Pay the Printer! Pay the Printer!
His strong lever moves the world –
Nations by his press are lifted,
Nations by his type down hurled!

Would you have millennial glory,
Equal rights and equal laws?
Crush impediments before ye,
Hindering every holy cause?
PAY THE PRINTER! PAY THE PRINTER!
Truth is working through the press,
Shedding from his heavenly paper
Plenty, wisdom, Happiness!¹⁴

¹⁴ R.H.E. Levering, "Pay the Printer," *Eastern Times*, Bath, ME, February 5, 1852.

A peppier poem under the same title appeared regularly in antebellum papers around the country, albeit occasionally with local modifications:¹⁵

Here comes winter, here comes
winter,
Storms of hails – and snow – and
sleet,
Pay the printer, pay the printer,
Let him warm his hands and feet.

Here comes winter, here comes
winter,
Whitening every hill and dale;
Pay the printer, pay the printer –
Send your money by the mail.

Pay the printer, pay the printer,
All remember his just due;
In cold winter, in cold winter,
He wants cash as well as you.

Merry winter, merry winter,
It will be when all do right;
Pay the printer, pay the printer,
Do the thing that is polite.

Happy winter, happy winter –
Hark! The jingling of the bells;
To the printer, to the printer,
What sad tales their music tells.

Ah! poor printer! Ah! poor printer!
Your subscribers frolic all
In the winter, in the winter,
But ne'er think of you at all!

In publishing an abbreviated version of this poem, one Pennsylvania editor told readers, “The following has to be published every fall, and we may as well do it now as at any other time. So here goes.”¹⁶ An Indiana editor prefaced the poem with, “We commend the following lines to those of our subscribers who are in arrears. They may think a few dollars can be of no great importance to us, but when hundreds of them seem to think thus, it becomes a serious matter.”¹⁷

Yet another poem promoted the same theme:

¹⁵ See, “Pay the Printer,” *Vermont Phoenix*, Brattleboro, VT, February 17, 1837; *Edgefield Advertiser*, Edgefield Court House, SC, January 7, 1841; *Illinois Free Trader*, Ottawa, IL, January 15, 1841; *The Radical*, Bowling-Green, MO, January 6, 1844; *Port Tobacco (MD) Times and Charles County Advertiser*, January 21, 1858.

¹⁶ “Pay the Printer,” *Mountain Sentinel*, Ebensburg, PA, January 22, 1852.

¹⁷ “Pay the Printer,” *Richmond (IN) Palladium*, October 24, 1849.

If a happy man you'd be,
 You must pay the Printer;
 If a happy man you'd see,
 Go and pay the Printer.
 Why don't you pay the printer?
 O, won't you pay the Printer?
 The joys of Heaven
 Are never given
 To those who cheat the Printer.¹⁸

And another wit offered:

As honest men attend and hear
 The serious fact – the times are dear;
 Who owes a bill, 'tis just as clear
 As star-light in the winter,
 That he should come without delay –
 That's if he can, that bill to pay,
 And ere he puts his purse away,
 "Fork over" to the printer.

The printer's cheek is seldom red,
 The fine machinery of his head,
 Is working when you are in bed,
 Your true and faithful "mentor";
 All day and night he wears his shoes
 And brains to furnish you with news;
 But men of conscience ne'er refuse
 To pay the toiling printer.

'Tis known, or ought to be, by all
 His dues are scatterd and they're
 small
 And if not paid, he's bound to fall
 In debt – for fuel, bread, rent, or
 Perhaps his paper, then to square
 Up with his help a double care
 Bow down his head – now it is fair
 That you don't pay the printer?

The cats will mew between your
 feet,
 The dogs will bite you on the street,
 And every urchin that you meet,
 Will roar with voice of stentor,
 "Look to your pockets – there he
 goes,
 The chap that wears the printer's
 clothes,
 And proud, though everybody
 knows,
 The grub, he gnawed the printer!"

Be simple, just, and don't disgrace
 Yourself, but beg the "Lord of
 grace,"
 To thaw that hardened icy "case,"
 That honesty may enter;
 This done, man will with man act
 fair,
 And all will have the "tin" to spare;
 Then will the "editorial chair"
 Support a well-paid printer.¹⁹

¹⁸ "A Poem," *Shasta (CA) Courier*, April 9, 1859.

¹⁹ Henry Brady, "Pay the Printer," *American Union*, Morgantown, VA, Jan 3, 1857.

The doggerel notwithstanding, the journalists' appeals underscored the fragile financial state prevailing at most newspapers, in part because subscribers, particularly out-of-town readers, often were reluctant to pay.

Fraught business plan

For such a central and, in time, ubiquitous institution in American democracy, the newspaper business model was a fraught one, dependent at times largely on subscriptions and at other times on advertising and always on implicit government subsidies through legal advertising and free or reduced postal rates. In both the news room and the business office, it depended on the honesty of its contacts, whether subscribers or news sources – this even for an endeavor that from the outset saw itself as a watchdog over the public good, implicitly skeptical, if not mistrusting, of the good intentions of their neighbors and governing bodies.

We cannot know Patrick Harris' plan for *Publick Occurrences* had the paper lasted more than one issue but in 1704, John Campbell sought profit from advertising and used his role as postmaster to give his newspaper, the *Boston News-Letter*, free circulation through his post riders. And yet, at the end of the first year and with no newspaper competition, Campbell complained that in putting out the newspaper he was “money out of Pocket, & has not sufficient to defray the necessary Charge; and unless some encouragement be given for the future, it must drop.”²⁰ Isaiah Thomas, printer and historian of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, concludes that Campbell continued to have a hard time: “It is evident from his advertisements in

²⁰ John Campbell, “Advertisement,” *Boston News-Letter* April 9, 1705. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A1036CD221971FE08%40EANX-105662D9C451AD4A%402343897-105662D9DEE9B203%401-105662DA2985A1D4%40Advertisement>.

the course of the publication, that he ‘labored hard to get it along,’ that he had but few subscribers, and that he did not receive much encouragement from advertising customers.”²¹ Nevertheless, Campbell continued to publish his *News-Letter* long after he lost the postmastership and its franking privilege, leaving the business in 1722. “Campbell had published this paper eighteen years; and received but little encouragement,” Thomas writes. “The undertaking could not have been attended with profit; for the expense of paper, printing, and European publications from which he selected information, must have swallowed up the proceeds from his small number of subscribers.”²²

It was a dilemma faced by the first newspaper publishers in America and likewise, no doubt, the last.

²¹ Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 2nd ed. (Barre, MA: Imprint Society, 1970), 217.

²² Thomas, *History of Printing*, 225.