

Chapter 2

Newspapers and the Runup to Independence

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With the spread of newspapers throughout in the colonies, though still few in numbers their importance grew as the means for citizens to coalesce around ideas and identity.

Meanwhile, among a number of events in the years from 1730 to 1775, two in particular triggered changes in press behavior that in turn

led to messaging that both overtly and subtly brought the colonies ever closer to unity and independence. The trial of *New-York Weekly*

Journal printer Peter Zenger and the imposition of the Stamp Act (1765-1766) were catalysts for

change, that reflected the symbiotic relationship of newspapers and readers.¹

This essay sketches in these two flashpoints, Zenger Trial and Stamp Act, and argues that we should know more about the latter and what public memory knows about the former is often wrong.



¹ Communication researcher and political scientist Richard L. Merritt identifies more than twenty events between 1739 and 1775 as contributing to the creation of a political community that would undertake the Revolution and beyond, including wars, taxes, and treaties. See Richard L. Merritt, *Symbols of American Community, 1735-1775* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966)

Newspapers in America

The idea of press freedom

Although editors in the early eighteenth century frequently wrote of freedom of the press, government restraints on the press were neither unexpected nor uniformly resisted by printers and publishers.² As historian Charles Clark notes:

What has to be borne in mind by those of us with twentieth-century assumptions is that neither the legal nor intellectual tradition of England yet contained any conclusive elements upholding “freedom of the press” as a positive good. ... the practice of prior restraint would be abandoned in England, but not the common-law concept of “seditious libel,” which made any publisher of defamatory remarks about public officials or government, true or false, susceptible to punishment, even in certain cases punishment for treason.³

Nor were the restraints applied uniformly. Colonial governors and local authorities, the most frequent source of government censorship cases in colonial America,⁴ varied in their judgments as did putative provocations by local printers. According to historian Lawrence Wroth, “It was perhaps in Massachusetts that the printer and the local governments came into most frequent conflict, for there the situation was complicated by religious, social, and moral factors not present in the constitutions of other colonies.”⁵

² See, for instance, Leonard W. Levy, “Did the Zenger Case Really Matter? Freedom of the Press in Colonial New York,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (January 1960): 35-50; Michael Emery, Edwin Emery, and Nancy L. Roberts, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*, 8th ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996), 38.

³ Charles E. Clark, “The Newspapers of Provincial America,” in *Three Hundred Years of the American Newspaper* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1991), 375-376.

⁴ Lawrence C. Wroth, *The Colonial Printer*, 2nd ed. (Charlottesville, VA: Dominion Books, 1964; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 173.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

Newspapers in America

Censorship in Massachusetts “was more severe and more continuously irksome than the casual and sporadic efforts of the other colonies to keep the press within bounds,” Wroth writes, adding that besides shutting down *Public Occurrences* in 1690:

It resulted, among other things ... in the altering in 1699 of an edition of the *Imitation of Christ*; in the prohibition about 1688 of a rowdy but amusing piece, *The Isle of Pines*. It brought about in 1695 the suppression and burning of Thomas Maule’s *Truth held forth* [sic]; in 1723, the persecution of John Checkley; the departure from Boston of James Franklin in 1727 and of Daniel Fowle in 1756, and the consequent establishment of the press in the colonies of Rhode Island and New York respectively.⁶

Government control could and did come in several forms. The first and earliest controls came with laws carried over from England and perpetuated after the regulations in England expired. These required printers to publish their works “by authority” of the government, essentially guaranteeing that nothing the government did not want the public to read would be printed. Benjamin Harris had violated that ordinance in 1690 and paid the price. His successor, John Campbell, saw his *Boston News-Letter* as an extension of his position as postmaster and published under the imprimatur of the government. “During his postmastership,” Clark writes “Campbell operated the *News-Letter* at least some of the time as though it were an official organ of the executive branch of the provincial government, and the governor and Council used it that way whenever it could serve the purposes of state or of politics.”⁷

By the 1720s and ’30s, news was no longer printed “by authority,” that is under prior restraint, but as those restraints were removed and politics became increasingly fractious, the

⁶ Ibid., 175-176.

⁷ Charles E. Clark, “Boston and the Nurturing of Newspapers: Dimensions of the Cradle, 1690-1741,” *New England Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (June 1991): 243-271, at 255.

Newspapers in America

way was opened for something new in colonial American journalism: criticism of government in the press. In response, the concept of seditious libel, outlawing criticism, whether true or false, of the government and its leaders found greater employment. Under this concept, the mere fact of criticizing a government official demeaned and injured that person, giving grounds for the libel and ipso facto conviction.

Beyond government control, ordinary citizens exerted pressure on the output of their local printers. Wroth says that as the colonies drew closer to rebellion against England and tensions rose, “the printer had more to fear from the unruly people who surrounded him than from the government.”⁸ To that control, the noted Constitutional historian Leonard Levy adds the sensitivity of colonial assemblies to any suspected slights: The assembly’s “arbitrary use of its prerogative was sufficiently restrictive to have a smothering effect on the free expression of opinion relating to legislative matters and measures.”⁹

Thus, while not coming completely out of the blue, the most famous press case in the colonial period, the trial of John Peter Zenger in New York City, is something of an anomaly in several respects. Zenger has iconic status in press history in particular and American history in general. As recently as 2016 a new Zenger biography was published;¹⁰ he is mentioned with some frequency in the media; and virtually every school child hears about the Zenger trial. Closer examination reveals how often public memory gets it wrong.

⁸ Wroth, *Colonial Printer*, 177.

⁹ Levy, “Did the Zenger Case Really Matter?” at 42.

¹⁰ Richard Kluger, *Indelible Ink: The Trials of John Peter Zenger and the Birth of America’s Free Press* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016).

Adjusting the record

First, Zenger was not a publisher or a writer but the printer of the *New-York Weekly Journal*. Nor did he write the essays that got him in trouble.¹¹ Although it was an opposition press, the real targets of the New York governor's prosecution were not Zenger but the anonymous critics who wrote pseudonymously for the papers. And from the quality of the prose, scholars are clear that subsequent purported first-person accounts by Zenger were probably written by James Alexander, a New York lawyer and a leader of opposition to the colonial government. As media historian Frank Luther Mott says of Zenger's writing, "When one of his sentences is dismembered, its several parts crawl off in various directions, each under its own power."¹² Alexander edited the paper and wrote many of the offending columns.

Yet it was Zenger, not his associates who went on trial. "Zenger's was the only name associated with the new opposition journal. Governor [William] Cosby knew very well that Zenger was only the printer and had nothing to do with the paper's policy. He also knew that James Alexander, a brilliant leader of the political opposition, wrote or edited most of the articles that were critical of the Cosby administration. But the law ... [placed] responsibility on those

¹¹ See, for instance, Vincent Buranelli, "Peter Zenger's Editor," *American Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1955): 174-181.

¹² Frank Luther Mott, "Introduction," in *A Brief Narrative of the CASE and TRYAL of John Peter Zenger, Printer of the New-York Weekly Journal*, Frank Luther Mott, ed. (Columbia, MO: Press of the Crippled Turtle, 1954), iv.

Newspapers in America

who publish a libel—not upon those who write it.¹³ Besides, under threat of jail or worse, printers could be coerced to reveal the real writers.¹⁴

Zenger had been a printer in New York six or seven years when Alexander and other leaders of the opposition approached him about printing an opposition newspaper to the William Bradford's official *New-York Gazette*. New York, thus, would become only the third city between Boston and Philadelphia to have two newspapers.¹⁵ Thomas writes:

Newspapers were not at that time burthened with advertisements. I have seen several numbers printed after the paper had been established seven or eight years, with only one or two advertisements. It was well printed. Zenger appears to have understood his business, and to have been a scholar, but he was not correct in the English language, especially in orthography.¹⁶

Buranelli claims that Zenger's *New-York Weekly Journal* "was the first political independent ever published on this continent," arguing that James Franklin's *New England Courant* focused his criticism not so much on the government than on the Puritan clergy of Massachusetts.¹⁷

"There was nothing hesitant or sporadic about their undertaking," Buranelli says, "The paper came out every Monday, always truculent and always propagandizing one point of view in

¹³ H.V. Kaltenborn, "Foreword," in Mott, *Brief Narrative*, v. Current law no longer exempts a write from a libel suit, but customarily writers and editors are excused from a libel suit because they do not have the money that plaintiffs are seeking, the "deep pockets" of their employers.

¹⁴ See, for instance, Levy, "Did the Zenger Case Really Matter? Freedom of the Press in Colonial New York," *William and Mary Quarterly* 17, no. 1 (January 1960): 35-50.

¹⁵ Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 2nd ed. (Barre, MA: Imprint Society, 1970), 462.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 487.

¹⁷ Buranelli, "Peter Zenger's Editor," 174.

Newspapers in America

politics. The political issue was the only *raison d'être* of publication. Everything else – foreign news, essays, verses, squibs, advertisements – was filler.”¹⁸

Isaiah Thomas points out that “The *Journal* was established for a political purpose. For three years it was in a state of warfare with the administration of Governor [William] Cosby, and his successor Lieutenant-Governor [George] Clarke.”¹⁹

Arrest and Trial

Zenger was arrested on Cosby’s orders on November 17, 1734. Instead of being bailed out until he could face arraignment, however, bail was set at an exorbitant sum, £600 (\$157,390.50 in 2020 dollars)²⁰ and he remained in jail for want of the money to step free. Through nine months of incarceration, though, Zenger daily gave instructions to his wife, Anna, who managed the print shop for him with the help of assistants.²¹

On December 2, 1734, news of Zenger’s arrest and jailing appeared in the *New-England Weekly Journal*. The story also reported that New York’s royal governor, William Cosby, had issued a proclamation “Promising a Reward of *Fifty Pounds* to such Person or Persons who shall discover the Author or Authors of divers [sic] Scandalous, Virulent, False and Seditious

¹⁸ Ibid., 175. Italics in original.

¹⁹ Thomas, *History of Printing*, 487.

²⁰ Eric W. Nye, *Pounds Sterling to Dollars: Historical Conversion of Currency*, accessed Saturday, September 19, 2020, <https://www.uwyo.edu/numimage/currency.htm>.

²¹ Vincent Buranelli, “The Myth of Anna Zenger,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (April 1956): pp. 157-168, at 160.

Newspapers in America

Reflections upon the whole Legislature, Printed in divers News-Papers, (but more particularly in Numb, 7, 47, 48, 49) Printed & Published by *John Peter Zenger*.”²²

The ins and outs of the courts and the law at that time are arcane and challenging to modern readers. In a nutshell, though, by the time he came to trial on August 4, 1735, “Zenger had become something of a folk hero.”²³

Cosby and his faction had tried to undermine Zenger’s defense by disbarring his partners and legal representation, Alexander and William Smith, but Alexander arranged for Andrew Hamilton, a renowned Philadelphia lawyer held by some to be the best in the colonies,²⁴ to take the case.

Despite Cosby’s efforts to stack the judiciary with his men, Zenger’s defense team outwitted them. “The jury’s duty, according to the prosecutors and the judges, was to affirm that Zenger was guilty of printing the materials and no more. English common law placed the decision as to whether the material was libelous or not in the hands of the judges, whose loyalty to the governor assured a conviction.”²⁵

Hamilton threw them a surprise, opening the defense by admitting Zenger had printed the offending articles.

²² “New York, Nov 25. On the sixth Instant,” *New-England Weekly Journal*, Boston, December 2, 1734. Except for recasting the medial S’s, which look like F’s but were, in fact, S’s, in proper English usage for hundreds of years before the 1800s, all spelling, punctuation, and syntax are in the original. Since headlines were seldom used in colonial newspapers, stories are identified by their first few words for citation purposes.

²³ William David Sloan and Julie Hedgepeth Williams, *The Early American Press, 1690-1783* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 89.

²⁴ Mott, *Brief Narrative*, 48.

²⁵ Sloan and Williams, *Early American Press*, 89.

Newspapers in America

And in his closing argument to the jury, Andrew Hamilton declared:

The question before the Court and you, Gentlemen of the Jury, is not of small or private concern. It is not the cause of one poor printer, nor of New York alone, which you are now trying. No! It may in its consequence affect every free man that lives under a British government on the main of America. It is the best cause. It is the cause of liberty. And I make no doubt but your upright conduct this day will not only entitle you to the love and esteem of your fellow citizens, but every man who prefers freedom to a life of slavery will bless and honor you as men who have baffled the attempt of tyranny, and by an impartial and uncorrupt verdict have laid a noble foundation for securing to ourselves, our posterity, and our neighbors, that to which nature and the laws of our country have given us a right—the liberty of both exposing and opposing arbitrary power (in these parts of the world at least) by speaking and writing truth.²⁶

Important – or not?

Scholars have debated the importance of the Zenger case. Leonard Levy, for one, questions what it achieved: “The Zenger case at best gave the press the freedom to print the ‘truth,’ but only if the truth were directed away from the assembly [legislature]. The power of the assembly to punish nonmembers, as well as members, for breach of privilege, enabled it to control the press.”²⁷ Sloan and Williams, among others, point out that “Zenger’s 1735 trial was not a swaggering attempt to establish press freedom. Instead it came about as the result of a longstanding political feud among various factions in New York.”²⁸

Levy argues:

The jury in the Zenger case, swayed by the magnificent forensics of a great lawyer, Andrew Hamilton, returned a verdict of “not guilty,” but the common law remained the same. Hamilton never conducted a frontal assault on the concept of seditious libel. He never argued that publications tending, however remotely, to breach the peace or to lower the public’s esteem of the government should be free from

²⁶ Mott, *Brief Narrative*, 131.

²⁷ Levy, “Did the Zenger Case Really Matter?” 39-40.

²⁸ Sloan and Williams, *Early American Press*, 82.

Newspapers in America

prosecution. His argument, rather, was that if the defendant could prove the truth of his criticism or accusations, the jury should acquit; in other words, the truth should be a defense against a charge of seditious libel.²⁹

And, as Levy points out, “Events in colonial New York demonstrate that the press was still not free after the Zenger case.”³⁰

Indeed, one of the ironic anomalies of the Zenger case is that contemporary reports in the news columns tended to devote more ink to his lawyer, Andrew Hamilton of Philadelphia, than Zenger, who is given little agency. Yet it is Zenger we remember.

Wroth, however, underscores scholar Livingston Rutherford’s analysis of the Zenger trial in saying it “first established in North America the principle that in prosecution for libel the jury were the judges of both the law and the facts.”³¹

Levy contends that “As New York approached the revolutionary controversy, its press was only as free as its legislature permitted. In practice, all political comment was tolerated as long as criticism did not in any way touch the people’s representatives.”³² He adds, “No cause was more honored by rhetorical declamation and dishonored in practice than that of freedom of expression during the revolutionary period, from the 1760’s through the War for Independence.”³³

²⁹ Levy, “Did the Zenger Case Really Matter?” 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

³¹ Livingston Rutherford, quoted in Wroth, *Colonial Printer*, 176.

³² Levy, “Did the Zenger Case Really Matter?” 42.

³³ *Ibid.*, 50.

Setting the agenda

A useful and influential theory of mass communication, Agenda Setting, was developed at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at UNC-Chapel Hill in the 1970s.³⁴ It holds that newspapers may not be able to tell readers what to think but they are very influential in telling readers what to think about. Furthermore, by giving prominence to some facts and ideas but playing down or extinguishing others by not mentioning them, newspapers play an important part in the dialogue of public life.

The Zenger trial remained the flashpoint for continuing debates on freedom of the press. Within weeks of his acquittal, Zenger published a first-person account of the trial in the *Journal* so “that the World may see how unjust my Sufferings have been.”³⁵ In 1738, “Y.T.,”³⁶ a New York correspondent sent Franklin a copy of a discourse that originally appeared in the London *Craftsman*, using the Zenger trial as text for a lengthy sermon on the value of a free press.³⁷ A week later, Franklin advertised that he had for sale, “A brief narrative of the CASE and TRYAL of John Peter Zenger, Printer of the New-York Weekly Journal.”³⁸ This tract, too, was written in the first person and Zenger’s name appeared as author, but from its more perfect sentence structure it has been supposed by scholars that the true author was James Alexander.³⁹

³⁴ Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (January 1972): 176-187.

³⁵ John Peter Zenger, “To My Subscribers and Benefactors,” *New-York Weekly Journal*, August 18, 1735.

³⁶ “To the Publisher,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Philadelphia, April 6, 1738.

³⁷ “The Craftsman,” *ibid.*

³⁸ “To Be Sold,” *ibid.*, April 13, 1738.

³⁹ Mott, “Preface,” *Brief Narrative*, i.

Newspapers in America

The next month, Franklin ran a collection of encomiums from London for Hamilton – “His Character is now raised *much* above the reach of ignorance, envy or malice”; “*a glorious Assertor of Public Liberty and of the Rights and Privileges of Britons*”⁴⁰ – and Alexander’s book: “The Tryal has been reprinted four times in three months, and there has been a greater demand for it, by all ranks and degrees of People, then there has been known for any of the most celebrated Performances of our greatest Geniuses.”⁴¹

In May 1738, “an ingenious Gentleman” of Philadelphia sent a copy of a book to the *Boston Evening-Post*, saying, “I send you inclos’d one of *Zenger’s Tryals*, a Book that has made great Noise in England, having pass’d *Four* Editions in *Three Weeks*, and been vastly applauded. If you please, you may show it Mr. [Evening-Post publisher Thomas] *Fleet*, for I doubt not but an Edition of it would sell with you in Boston.”⁴²

The *Evening-Post* returned the next week with a lengthy excerpt of the *Craftsman* piece Franklin had run in praise of free press and the Zenger outcome.⁴³

In 1737, Benjamin Franklin ran a complex, two-installment opinion piece signed only “X” although the writer is held to be Alexander,⁴⁴ in answer to a criticism of Hamilton’s Zenger defense that first appeared in the *Barbados Gazette* and then was reprinted in Andrew Bradford’s

⁴⁰ “To the Publisher,” *ibid.*, May 18, 1738.

⁴¹ “We have been lately amused,” *ibid.*

⁴² “The following is an Appendix,” *Boston Evening-Post*, May 22, 1738.

⁴³ “From the *Country Journal*,” *Boston Evening-Post*, May 29, 1739. The newspaper name in the title was a variant of the full name, the *Country Journal; or the Craftsman*.

⁴⁴ Mott, *Brief Narrative*, 142.

Newspapers in America

American Weekly Mercury.⁴⁵ The writer concluded the second instalment, saying, “To suppress inquiries into the administration is good policy for an arbitrary Government: But a Free Constitution and Freedom of Speech have such a reciprocal dependance on each other, that they cannot subsist without consisting together.”⁴⁶

Through these stories in the newspaper networks, the idea of freedom of speech and press, whatever that might mean, remained alive in the American polity and would find its way into the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, second in importance only to freedom of religion.

“Americanizing” the colonies

In 1754, during the French and Indian War, Benjamin Franklin published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* the first newspaper political cartoon, the famous “Join or Die” snake showing severed sections of a snake labeled with the initials of the colonies.⁴⁷ The cartoon was in support of the Albany Plan of Union, a failed attempt to unite the colonies. Nevertheless, the idea of collectivizing the colonies had taken root, at least some along the Eastern Seaboard were beginning to think of themselves as distinct and different from Great Britain. But they had a ways to go and newspapers helped them get there.

Colonists in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, some historians argue, “separated by the lack of communication facilities and walls of indifference, had no inkling of

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ James Alexander, “In Civil Actions,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Philadelphia, December 8, 1737.

⁴⁷ “Join or Die,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Philadelphia, May 9, 1754; Frederic R. Kirkland, “An Unknown Franklin Cartoon,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 73, no. 1 (January 1949): 76-79.

Newspapers in America

the extent to which they shared a common way of life and a common fate.”⁴⁸ With interaction hobbled by distance, poor roads, wilderness, and ignorance of those in other colonies, scholars have claimed, the individual colonies had closer ties to England than with each other. “Even local news, some writers point out, reached England before nearby colonies.”⁴⁹

It would be a mistake to suggest newspapers were the sole means of connecting through communication in colonial America. Some scholars point to the coastal trade that brought merchants together. Others point to friendships, even kinship, among colonial elites.⁵⁰ An improving postal system under co-deputy postmasters Benjamin Franklin and *Virginia Gazette* publisher William Hunter facilitated greater exchanges, albeit including newspapers, among colonies, while political events prompted creation of committees of correspondence in each of the colonies to exchange important news. On the other hand, the networks of newspapers cannot be underestimated. “Their continuous publication at regular weekly intervals enabled the printers to expose the colonists to a certain body of news and opinion, as well as to certain patters of symbol usage, over a long period of time.”⁵¹

Merritt, employing quantitative analysis set out to find out: “When did the idea that the Americans comprised a single group, different from other national groups and with a fairly well-defined set of group interests, begin to appeal to the eighteenth-century colonists?”⁵²

⁴⁸ Merritt, *Symbols of American Community*, 4-5.

⁴⁹ Merritt, *Symbols of American Community*, 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 14.

Newspapers in America

Notwithstanding that in 1719 Andrew Bradford named the fourth newspaper in the colonies and first outside Boston the *American Weekly Mercury*, Merritt found that “From 1735 to 1775, the newspapers sharply increased their attention to symbols of American place names, while maintaining a fairly steady interest in Britain and paying ever less attention to European and other place-name symbols.”⁵³

On the other hand, Merritt found that “English writers (at least those whose articles and letters appeared in the colonial newspapers) preceded American writers in identifying both the land and its people as ‘American.’”⁵⁴ In a sense, the English had entered the agenda setting business.

Further evidence of Americans’ increasing self-awareness as distinct from Britons can be found in the way newspaper names changed. From the days when nearly every publisher called his paper the *Gazette*, we see in the 1730s, a lot of *Gazettes*, plus a growing number of *Posts*, *Post-Boys*, *Reflectors*, *Journals*, *Mercuries*.

Despite wartime privation, new papers continued to spring up, some with names reflecting their politics. Boston became home to the *Continental Journal, and Weekly Advertiser* (1776-1787), the *Independent Chronicle* (1776-1817), and the *Independent Ledger* (1778-1786), while New York City saw the *Constitutional Gazette* (1775-1776).

Where it was safe to do so, chiefly in British-held New York, Tory sympathies could spring up, as when James Rivington, publisher of *Rivington’s New York Gazetteer or the*

⁵³ Ibid., 54.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 58.

Newspapers in America

Connecticut, Hudson's River, New-Jersey and Quebec Weekly Advertiser, changed its name during the war to the *Royal Gazette*.⁵⁵

The Stamp Act

Historians and others have identified numerous causes for the American Revolution, but no event of the pre-Revolutionary period so united the colonial printers as Parliament's passage of the Stamp Act of 1765. Faced with heavy taxes on paper and the requirement that paper be purchased from Britain rather than locally, additionally pushing up the cost, was a mortal threat to the colonial press.

Under the parliamentary act, "All court proceedings, diplomas, donations, bills of lading, appointments, liquor licenses, probates, bonds, land warrants, contracts, indentures, notarized papers, pamphlets, books, newspapers, playing cards, dice, advertisements, almanacs, calendars, passports, let-passes, cockets, clearances, official papers, and wages that were paid to clerks and apprentices were subject to the tax."⁵⁶ Although the new tax would touch virtually every citizen, clearly, creating a threat to the trade most able to communicate with – and organize – the citizenry was a bad idea.

An eighteenth-century historian observed:

It was fortunate for the liberties of America, that News-papers [sic] were the subject of a heavy stamp duty. Printers, when uninfluenced by government, have generally arranged themselves on the side of liberty, nor are they less remarkable for

⁵⁵ Emery, Emery, and Roberts, *Press and America*, 45-46.

⁵⁶ C. Ashley Ellefson "The Stamp Act in Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (March 1962):1-19, at 2. Merriam-Webster defines cocket as "a certificate given to merchants warranting that goods have been duly entered through customs and all duties paid." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. "cocket," accessed at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cocket>.

Newspapers in America

attention to the profits of their profession. A stamp duty, which openly invaded the first, and threatened a great diminution of the last, provided their united zealous opposition.⁵⁷

To the British government, the stamp tax was a reasonable way of getting the colonies to pay the enormous cost of waging the French and Indian War, 1754 to 1763, on their behalf and the now staggering cost of defending the vast new colonial territory won from the French. In the colonies, however, the issue was framed as the imposition of a tax on which no one on the western side of the Atlantic had been able to vote, much less approve. “No taxation without representation” and words to that effect became a rallying cry for opponents of the stamp tax and other taxes that Britain imposed.

Owing to the circulation of exchange newspapers among editors, the same news items and opinion pieces could appear throughout the colonies with a couple of weeks of an original publication. Thus, readers and opinion leaders could see and be aroused by consistent messages and rally around the same, well-circulated ideas. Ironically, Britain unintentionally sowed revolution by giving the colonists a single, ubiquitous issue.

Part of a letter from colonial-born Stephen Sayre, a merchant in London to merchant and patriot Isaac Sears of New York⁵⁸ appeared in several colonial newspapers, warning that:

You’ll soon have a Parcel of Marmadonian [sic] Ravens, who will rip up and feed upon your very Vitals, such as the Officers of Stamp Duties, Appraisers of Lands, Houses, Furniture, &c. The Ministry are [sic] determined to make you pay for the Peace

⁵⁷ David Ramsay, *History of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: 1789). Quoted in Sloan and Williams, *Early American Press*, 127.

⁵⁸ John Richard Alden, *Stephen Sayre: American Revolutionary Adventurer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 10.

Newspapers in America

which you like so well; the People here find so much fault with it, that they are fearful to load them with any more Taxes.⁵⁹

To be sure, England had ample history of taxing commodities used by the colonists, and stamp taxes imposed by their own governments were not new to the colonies. Massachusetts had levied one in 1755 and New York had done the same in 1756, and the British ministers and civil servants who drew up the parliamentary act had studied the colonies' laws and the comparatively muted reaction to them.⁶⁰ Not that the colonial taxes were without critics or effects. Historian Mack Thompson quoted an unidentified Bostonian as writing to a New York friend:

The Stamp-Duty laid here upon our News-Papers, expires the first day of next Month: And our Legislature perceiving its great Tendency to ruin the Printers, without enriching the Government, have resolved not to continue it, not withstanding [sic] the Cause is as urgent as ever. ... [and of the four newspapers printed in the colony at the time of the enactment of the Act] one was obliged to stop, and another Printer removed into New-Hampshire Government; all the others have lost more Customers than the value of the whole Amount of the Duty: your way gained above an hundred customers of us, as I have heard, but we flatter ourselves we shall now have them back again, with Interest.⁶¹

Thompson concludes that the colonial stamp taxes were less onerous than alternatives – including taxes on alcohol – and so met with less backlash.

The act did not come as a surprise; hints of it were floated a year or two earlier and throughout 1764, word continued to dribble out of London that a tax was in the offing. “It is said there is an Intention to propose a Bill for laying a general Stamp Duty throughout our American

⁵⁹ “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman in London, to His Friend, Here,” *New-York Mercury*, April 2, 1764. See also, “New-York, April 2,” *Boston Post-Boy*, April 9, 1764; “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman in London, to His Friend, Here,” *Boston Evening-Post*, April 9, 1764; “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman in London, to His Friend, Here,” *New-Hampshire Gazette*, Portsmouth, April 13, 1764.

⁶⁰ Mack Thompson, “Massachusetts and New York Stamp Acts,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (April 1969): 253-258, at 258.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, at 256-257.

Newspapers in America

Colonies,” the *Pennsylvania Gazette* told readers in May 1764, “but it cannot be thought consistent with the Genius and Spirit of our happy Constitution, that any Sett [sic] of Men whatever, either Home or Abroad, should be subject to be taxed, without Representatives to assent or dissent to such a Tax.”⁶²

In Maryland, Benjamin Welsh took out an advertisement to tell Green and Rind, publishers of the *Maryland Gazette*, of his opposition to the looming stamp tax: “I am informed that the STAMP LAW takes place the first Day of *November* next: I therefore hereby give Notice to all Officers whatever, that may be appointed by Virtue of that most grievous and unconstitutional Act (to prevent them Trouble) That I will Pay no Tax whatever, but what is laid upon me by my Representatives.”⁶³

The newspapers conveyed a common set of arguments against the tax. Citizens throughout the colonies were given incentives and ways to act as news reports of local initiatives showed the way. When townspeople of Cambridge in Massachusetts voted to disobey the Stamp Act, the news spread. Arguing that “(with all Humility) it is the Opinion of the Town, that the Inhabitants of this Province have a legal claim to all the natural, inherent, constitutional Rights of Englishmen, notwithstanding their great Distance from Great Britain” and that if the act took effect, “Trade will languish and die – or our Cash will be sent into his Majesty’s Exchequer – and Poverty come on us like an armed Man.” Accordingly, the townspeople voted to “advise and direct their Representatives, by no Means whatsoever to do any one Thing that may aid said act

⁶² “Captain Fortin; Genoa; Berlin,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Philadelphia, May 3, 1764.

⁶³ Benjamin Welsh, “GENTLEMEN,” *Maryland Gazette*, Annapolis, September 5, 1765.

Newspapers in America

in its Operations; but that in Conjunction with the Friends of Liberty, they use their utmost Endeavours that the same might be repealed.”⁶⁴

While legislatures up and down the Atlantic Seaboard adopted resolves to be sent to Parliament decrying the stamp tax, newspapers by and large made the act a free press issue. Editorials railed at the tax as imperiling the future of newspapers. Some did go out of business and some made a show of it. As the tax was about to take effect, November 1, 1765, Isaiah Thomas says the *Pennsylvania Journal*, published October 30:

[I]n full mourning. Thick black lines surrounded the pages, and were placed between the columns; a death’s head and cross bones were surmounted over the title; and at the bottom of the last page was a large figure of a coffin, beneath which was printed the age of the paper, and an account of its having died off a disorder called the stamp act. A death’s head, &c., as a substitute for a stamp, was placed at the end of the last column of the first page.⁶⁵

Readers elsewhere saw similar visual protest.

Repeal and resentment

Faced with uproar that went well beyond newspaper denunciation and included mobbing tax men, shipping boycotts, and embargoes, Parliament retreated – somewhat – and repealed the Stamp Act in 1766. But in return, it enacted the Declaratory Act (1766), insisting that repeal or not, Parliament had the right to pass the stamp tax in the first place. Moreover, on the heels of

⁶⁴ “At a Legal Meeting of the Freeholders,” *Connecticut Courant*, Hartford, June 24, 1765.

⁶⁵ Thomas, 158.

Newspapers in America

repeal, Parliament passed the Townshend Act in 1767 placing new duties on goods exported to the colonies.⁶⁶

The unrest continued. In Pennsylvania, John Dickinson began sending his “Letter from a Pennsylvania Farmer,” a twelve-letter series, to the *Pennsylvania Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*. The letters were quickly picked up by other newspapers. Estimates of the letters’ reach vary, but most historians agree that only four of the colonies’ twenty-three newspapers failed to publish them in full.⁶⁷ The arguments contained in the twelve letters published in late 1767 and early 1768 “furnished the basis on which all those who resented the attacks on their liberty were able to unite.”⁶⁸ The letters were signed simply “A Farmer,” but it soon came out that Dickinson, a well-educated and well-known lawyer, was the author.

Although he was not seeking separation from England, Dickinson took up charge that Parliament had no legal basis for taxing the colonies:

The place of paying the duties imposed by the late act, appears to me therefore to be totally immaterial. The single question is, whether the parliament can legally impose duties to be paid *by the people of these colonies only* for the sole purpose of raising a revenue, *on commodities which she obliges us to take from her alone*; or, in other words,

⁶⁶ See, for instance, Patrick Griffin, *The Townshend Moment: The Making of Empire and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017); Robert J. Chaffin, “The Townshend Acts of 1767,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (January 1970): 90- 121.

⁶⁷ See, for instance, Emery, Emery, and Roberts, *Press and America*, 47; Thomas C. Leonard, “News for a Revolution: The Expose in America, 1768-1773,” *Journal of American History* 67, no. 1 (June 1980): 26-40, at 28.

⁶⁸ R.T.H. Halsey, “Introduction,” in John Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* (New York: Outlook Co., 1903). Accessed at Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/47111/47111-h/47111-h.htm>. From the newspapers, Dickinson compiled the letters in a pamphlet that was published in New York and Boston and also in Great Britain.

Newspapers in America

whether the parliament can legally take money out of our pockets, without our consent. If they can, our boasted liberty is but A sound, and nothing else.⁶⁹

Dickinson argued, among other points, that the onerous revenue acts that Parliament was laying on the colonies might be red herrings for more dreaded parliamentary intrusion on the lives of colonial Americans. “All artful rulers, who strive to extend their own power beyond its just limits,” he warned, “endeavour to give to their attempts, as much semblance of legality as possible. Those who succeed them may venture to go a little farther; for each new encroachment will be strengthened by a former, That which is now supported by examples, growing old, will become an example itself," and thus support fresh usurpations.” He went on:

A free people, therefore, can never be too quick in observing, nor too firm in opposing the beginnings of alterations, either in form or reality, respecting institutions formed for their security. The first leads to the last; on the other hand nothing is more certain, than that forms of liberty may be retained, when the substance is gone. In government as well as in religion, “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.”⁷⁰

Dickinson argued that in the duties on Britain’s exports to America, Parliament was in fact taxing Americans without their consent. ⁷¹“One thing we may be assured of, which is this; whenever a statute imposes duties on commodities, to be paid only upon their exportation from Great-Britain to these colonies, it is not a regulation of trade, but a design to raise a revenue upon us.”

⁶⁹ John Dickinson, “Letter II,” in Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* (New York: Outlook Co., 1903). Accessed at Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/47111/47111-h/47111-h.htm>. Spelling, punctuation, and syntax in original.e

⁷⁰ Ibid., “Letter IV”

⁷¹ Ibid.

Newspapers in America

He decried Parliament's orders that colonists must billet troops on much the same grounds. "If the British Parliament has a legal authority to order, that we shall furnish a single article for the troops here," he argued, "and to compel obedience to that order; they have the same right to order us to supply those troops with arms, cloaths, [sic] and every necessary, and to compel obedience to that order also; in short, to lay *any burdens* they please upon us."

What is this but *taxing* us at a *certain sum*, and leaving to us only the *manner* of raising it? How is this mode more tolerable than the Stamp Act? Would that act have appeared more pleasing to Americans, if being ordered thereby to raise the sum total of the taxes, the mighty privilege had been left to them, of saying how much should be paid for an instrument of writing on paper, and how much for another on parchment?

An act of parliament commanding us to do a certain thing, if it has any validity, is a tax upon us for the expence [sic] that accrues in complying with it, and for this reason, I believe, every colony on the continent, that chose to give a mark of their respect for Great-Britain, in complying with the act relating to the troops, cautiously avoided the mention of that act, lest their conduct should be attributed to its supposed obligation.⁷²

Historian Thomas Leonard writes that "The newspaper format was in fact essential to his [Dickinson's] appeal. It was not simply that newspaper quickly built an audience much larger than the later pamphlet sale. The ... [letters] sought to draw the reader into the expose –to answer doubts and make the reader an investigator of corruption – and the illusion of a weekly exchange with readers made this possible."⁷³

Leonard quotes a Boston shopkeeper of the time with the delicious name of Harbottle Dorr as saying, "The Farmer's Letters opened the eyes of all America." Leonard adds that "A

⁷² John Dickinson, "Letter I," in Dickinson, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies* (New York: Outlook Co., 1903). Accessed at Project Gutenberg, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/47111/47111-h/47111-h.htm>.

⁷³ Leonard, "News for a Revolution," 28-29.

Newspapers in America

Boston town meeting declared that the Farmer had ‘AWAKENED the most indolent and inactive to a Sense of Danger.’”⁷⁴

Fueling the fires

In Boston, one or more Sons of Liberty – including John Adams, some have suggested – began writing a “Journal of Occurrences” documenting day by day the abuses of the British soldiers occupying the town. The “Journal” was sent to the *New-York Journal*, which published the report weekly and, through the exchange press, circulated the document throughout the colonies.

For example, on November 17, 1768, readers learned that:

An Householder of the West Part of the Town, hearing the Cries of two Women in the Night, who were rudely treated by some Soldiers, ventured to expostulate with them for his behavior, for which Boldness he was knocked down with a Musket and much wounded, they went off undiscovered; another had a Thrust with a Bayonet near his Eye.⁷⁵

In another report, readers were told that:

Reports that the Small-Pox is on board some of the Irish Transport; we have certain Information that several had that Distemper on board one of them since she left Cork; notwithstanding which said Ship has been suffered, contrary to the Law for preventing the spread of infectious Disorders to come up to Town, and Numbers of the Passengers have been seen walking the Streets.⁷⁶

Loyalist newspapers, on the other hand, disparaged the ‘Journal.’ The *Boston Post*, proclaiming on its nameplate that it was “Printed by Authority,” hurrumphed:

The New-York Journal by Hartford Post, consisting of One Sheet and two Supplements, contain [sic] no News to us, except what is in the Journal of Occurrences in

⁷⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁷⁵ “Journal of Occurrences,” *New-York Journal*, November 17, 1768.

⁷⁶ “Journal of Occurrences,” *New-York Journal*, New York, November 24, 1768.

Newspapers in America

*Boston, some Articles in which would indeed be extraordinary New to many People here. – That Paragraph respecting the Court Gazette, the Printer hereof begs Leave to inform the Journalists, is, to say the least, an unfair Representation.*⁷⁷

The press in wartime

With the battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, the partisanship of the press broke into the open. Sloan and Williams observe, “From the moment the first shot was fired, all attempts at impartiality and balance in the press ceased. Patriot newspapers viciously attacked the Loyalist cause. Loyalist newspaper editors launched all-out attempts to discredit the American effort for independence.”⁷⁸ Colonial troops were called patriots in the independence newspapers and rebels in the loyalist press.

Such partisanship could come at a price, however. Wroth observes that “the printer had more to fear from the unruly people around him. . . . It has never been regarded as good taste to differ politically from one’s neighbors, and in Revolutionary America the editor who was suspected of loyalist sympathies or of ‘defeatism’ went in fear of the mob’s indignation.”⁷⁹ More than once mobs destroyed the presses of publishers with whom they disagreed, even forcing some, like John Mein of Boston and James Rivington of New York, into exile.⁸⁰ Mob violence against editors would continue well into the next century.

⁷⁷ “The New York Journal,” *Massachusetts Gazette*, Boston, December 2, 1768. Italics in original.

⁷⁸ Sloan and Williams, *Early American Press*, 171.

⁷⁹ Wroth, *Colonial Printer*, 177.

⁸⁰ Ibid. See also, Emery, Emery, and Roberts, *Press and America*, 46; William David Sloan, *The Media in America: A History*, 8th ed. (Northport, AL: Vision Press, 2011), 57-59.

Covering the war

Although there were no war correspondents covering the battles of the American Revolution, news of the conflict did make it to local newspapers through publication of correspondence, letters from the participants. At times the correspondence circulated in the newspapers as a means of rallying the countryside and enlisting support or mobilization. In 1776, General Philip Schuyler, commander of the Northern Army, circulated a letter from Saratoga in New York, reporting on two American defeats on Lake Champlain and the British intention to capture Fort Ticonderoga. In it, he asked Massachusetts men “to march expeditiously” to support the continental army, and that “each man should come provided with as much provision and ammunition as possible.” The *Massachusetts Spy* concluded the item with a note from the Stockbridge Committee of Correspondence to the committee in neighboring Hampshire County, reporting that “The Militia in this County are rallied and on their march, and we think it of the utmost importance that you comply with the General’s request immediately.”⁸¹

A sense of how news traveled from the front lines to the home front comes from a report in the *Boston Gazette* of Benedict Arnold’s naval victory in the Battle of Valcour Island on Lake Champlain September 11, 1776. News of the battle started out as dispatches from Arnold that Schuyler received on October 14 as he was traveling to Saratoga. Within an hour of receiving it, at about 3:30 p.m., Schuyler had his secretary, Richard Varick, write a letter describing Arnold’s report. That letter, addressed to the Stockbridge committee, was expressed from Albany. Varick added that Schuyler “has given me directions to desire you to keep your militia in readiness to

⁸¹ Richard Varick, “Gentlemen,” *Massachusetts Spy*, Worcester, MA, October 16, 1776.

Newspapers in America

march at a moment's warning."⁸² There is a break in the chain because we don't know how the letter got to the *Gazette*, but the editor said it arrived "by Express last Saturday afternoon," October 19.

Additional details of the engagement followed this letter in the *Gazette*, although other than that the paper learned them "from an undoubted source," no further attribution was offered.⁸³

Casualty Reports

As they would in greater measure during the American Civil War, newspapers also provided family and friends on the home front reports of men killed, wounded, or captured. An item in the *Connecticut Courant* in 1776 reported, "The following Prisoners are still confined in one room at Halifax, among felons, thieves, robbers, negroes, soldiers, &c. which we here publish for the satisfaction of their anxious friends."⁸⁴ The list included the famed Ethan Allen, hero of the capture of Fort Ticonderoga who was taken prisoner September 25, 1775, in an ill-fated attack on Montreal.⁸⁵ He would be returned in a prisoner exchange on May 6, 1778.

The *Courant's* report is identical in part but surprisingly inferior to a much more complete listing that appeared in the *Connecticut Journal* two days later. Clearly they were working from the same source, but the *Journal* listed a greater number of prisoners and also men

⁸² "Watertown," *Boston Gazette, and Country Journal*, October, 1776.

⁸³ "We further learn," *ibid.*

⁸⁴ "The following Prisoners," *Connecticut Courant*, Hartford, September 16, 1776.

⁸⁵ See, for instance, Ethan Allen, "An American Defeat in Canada, September 1775," in *A Narrative of Col. Ethan Allen's Captivity*, repr. in *The American Revolution: Writings from the War of Independence* (New York: Library of America, 2001).

Newspapers in America

who were hospitalized. Moreover, the *Journal* could report that of men in the Halifax room, “All in the goal but Sessions [one of the patriot captives], are well and in good spirits; but wishing greatly for an exchange.”⁸⁶

As was customary in the newspapers of the day, no source was given for the information, though if true its must have been someone with insider information to report that the prisoners were “in good spirits.”

Editors gained some of their news in the way they or their correspondents always had, when they or their intermediaries interviewed others who had information of interest to their readers. In 1782, for instance, the *Norwich (CT) Packet* carried what it called an “extract of a letter from a gentleman at Newport [RI] to his friend in this town” in which the correspondent described operations in the Yorktown, VA, area. After laying out considerable detail about naval fighting in the Chesapeake Bay, the unknown writer said, “This is the morning news. Capt. Norris, who is one of their pilots, is not yet come on shore; by him I expect to get the particulars.”⁸⁷ A vastly shorter version of the same story appeared two weeks later in Philadelphia.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ “The following Prisoners,” *Connecticut Journal*, New Haven, September 18, 1776.

⁸⁷ “Norwich, March 1,” *Norwich (CT) Packet and the Weekly Advertiser*, March 1, 1781.

⁸⁸ “Norwich, March 1,” *Pennsylvania Packet and General Advertiser*, Philadelphia, March 13, 1781. Despite the similarity in names and the sharing of the same news item, Their contemporary, the historian and publisher Isaiah Thomas does not indicate a connection between the *Norwich* and *Philadelphia Packets*. Thomas, *History of Printing in America*, 309, 438-439.

Presenting the news

It was not the custom nor within the technological capabilities of these early printers to create showy displays to highlight important news. Headlines of any size type would not become customary until around the turn of the nineteenth century. Crude wood-cut engravings might adorn the nameplates of these newspapers and all-purpose illustrations might creep into the advertising sections, but illustrating the news was beyond the printers' ability. Thus, presentation of even the most important victors – when there were victories – appears strikingly mundane to a modern eye. Broadsides, by comparison, could be well illustrated, and cartoons also frequently made the rounds, although with the particular exception of Benjamin Franklin's "Unite or Die" snake, which was added to several newspaper nameplates, cartoon art did not grace many newspapers.

Changing hands, sometimes loyalties

Historian Stephen Botein observes that many printers during the last days before the revolution were cautious about overt politics.⁸⁹ To maximize their business and profits, printers often stressed their need to be apolitical, or at least to accommodate the trade of all political positions. Benjamin Franklin was the most illustrious but hardly the only printer to publish those sentiments. In his *An Apology for Printers*, Franklin explains:

Printers are educated in the belief that when men differ in opinion, both sides ought equally to have the advantage of being heard by the public; and that when truth and error have fair play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter. Hence they

⁸⁹ Stephen Botein, "Printers and the American Revolution," in *The American Journalism History Reader*, Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2011).

Newspapers in America

cheerfully serve all contending writers that pay them well, without regarding on which side they are of the question in dispute.⁹⁰

The “truth will out” argument has been championed by journalists ever since (though it is being sorely tested at present) but the problem for colonial journalists is that often the issue was not in provable or even testable truth but in passionately held opinion. Franklin acknowledged that – “so many men so many minds” – and rued that “they who follow printing being scarce able to do anything in their way of getting a living, which shall not probably give offence to some, and perhaps to many; whereas the smith, the shoemaker, the carpenter or the man of any other trade may work indifferently for people of all persuasions without offending any of them.”⁹¹

“Unused to the violently polarizing effects of a Revolutionary conflict,” Botein says, many printers “tried to temporize, often to their eventual regret. Willingly or not, sooner or later most printers gave up neutrality to choose sides.” He adds:

More than twice as many, it appears, opted for the patriots as for the Tories. No exact count is possible, however, since some switched parties and others were so tepid in their commitments as to elude meaningful classification. Reluctant to advertise themselves as full-fledged partisans, many printers tried in public to claim the middle of the road, steering one way or another when obliged.⁹²

The frequently defensive war that the Continental Army fought meant that publishers often had to relocate to stay in business. From the beginning of hostilities until the British evacuation of Boston March 17, 1776, patriot printers occasionally retreated to the hinterlands,

⁹⁰ Benjamin Franklin, *An Apology for Printers*, ed. Randolph Goodman (New York: Book Craftsmen Associates, 1955), 5-6.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹² Botein, “Printers,” 87.

Newspapers in America

as they would from New York and Philadelphia and elsewhere. With the British evacuation of Boston, however, Margaret Draper, the loyalist publisher of the *Massachusetts Gazette and Boston News Letter*, left with the British and the newspaper ceased publication. According to Isaiah Thomas, who had been forced to move his *Massachusetts Spy* from Boston to Worcester when the war broke out and Boston came under siege, “all the newspapers, excepting hers, ceased to be published; and but one of them, *The Boston Gazette*, was revived after the British evacuated the town.”⁹³ He adds, “It is noteworthy that *The News Letter* was the first and the last newspaper which was published in Boston prior to the declaration of independence. [sic]”⁹⁴

Other provocations

To be sure, there many other moments and events that led to the war for independence. Some were major – the Boston Massacre – and some just quotidian enough to keep resentment and resistance simmering and the shared sense of being Americans. Merritt identifies twenty such events between 1739 and 1775 “as events tending most to increase colonial integration”⁹⁵ Clearly, though, the Zenger trial and the Stamp Act stand out as significant in the history of newspapers and community-building in the years leading up to independence.

⁹³ Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 2nd ed. (Barre, MA: Imprint Society, 1970), 176.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Merritt, *Symbols of American Community*, 29.