

Women at the Colonial Press

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In spite of law and custom that deprived women of rights to property and participation in the public sphere, from the very beginning women assumed leading roles in the press in colonial America.¹ Historian Mary Biggs notes that:

Throughout colonial days and into the nineteenth century, wives and daughters assisted in family-run printing shops; should a printer die without leaving behind a grown son, his widow typically continued the business. These women performed their chores with varying degrees of competency and for varying lengths of time, but it is certain that some – such as Ann Franklin in Rhode Island and Sarah and Mary Katherine Goddard, mother and daughter, in Rhode Island and Maryland, respectively – functioned for many years as able printers, publishers, and business managers.²

Indeed, the first printing office in British North America was conducted by Elizabeth Harris Glover, who inherited a press when her husband, the Rev. Joseph [rendered Jose by some writers] Glover died at sea as they were immigrating to the Massachusetts Bay colony.³ Arriving in Boston in 1638, she established a print shop in Cambridge with Stephen Daye or his son, sources vary, as the printer and three men who worked the press, all of whom accompanied the Glovers on the trip.⁴ It was “the first printing office in North American colonies, and the first to

¹ See, for instance, Martin Schultz and Herman R. Lantz, “Occupational Pursuits of Free Women in Early America: An Examination of Eighteenth-Century Newspapers,” *Sociological Forum* 3, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 89-109.

² Mary Biggs, “Neither Printer’s Wife nor Widow: American Women in Typesetting, 1630-1950,” *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 50, no. 1 (Oct. 1980): 431-452, at 451-452.

³ See, for instance, Mary Dane Barlow, *Notes on Women Printers in Colonial America and the United States* (Charlottesville, VA: Hroswitha Club, 1976), 35.

⁴ Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 2nd ed. (Barre, MA: Imprint Society, 1970), notes, 287. See also, Lawrence C. Wroth, *The Colonial Printer*, 2nd ed. (Charlottesville, VA: Dominion Books, 1964; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 16.

be owned, although not operated, by a woman.”⁵ Because women of the time were often forbidden to operate a business under their own name, it was called the Daye Press.⁶ Scholar Karen Nipps notes, “There is extensive documentation on women active in colonial America, which boasted two dozen women printers. One of the most prominent of these women was the bookseller, publisher, and master printer Mary Katherine Goddard, who printed the first copy of the Declaration of Independence to contain the names of the signatories.”⁷ Goddard worked with her brother William in his printing offices in Providence (*Providence Gazette*) and Philadelphia (*Pennsylvania Chronicle*) before he founded the *Maryland Journal*, Baltimore’s first newspaper, in 1773. In February 1774, she joined her brother in Baltimore and took over management of the *Journal* while he concentrated on pro-independence activities. “The May 10, 1775 issue of the *Maryland Journal* made official what had been in practice for over a year when the colophon was changed to read, ‘Published by M. K. Goddard.’ Mary Katherine proved to be a steady, impersonal newspaper editor and during the Revolution she was usually Baltimore’s only printer.”⁸ The shop also produced the standard fare of print office: almanacs, books, pamphlets, and broadsides. Another constant in newspaper proprietors’ careers, her brother’s former partner, Postmaster General Benjamin Franklin, appointed Goddard postmaster of Baltimore in 1775 [her

⁵ Barlow, *Notes on Women Printers*, 35.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Karen Nipps, “The Distaff Side,” *Library Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (October 2015): 454-460, at 455; “Mary Katherine Goddard (1738-1816),” Building the Nation: Starting the System, Smithsonian National Postal Museum. Accessed at <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/binding-the-nation/starting-the-system>.

⁸ “Mary Katherine Goddard, 1738-1816,” Maryland Women’s Hall of Fame. Accessed at <https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/educ/exhibits/womenshall/html/goddard.html>.

brother had been postmaster in Providence]. She served 14 years before being ousted in favor of a political crony of then Postmaster General Samuel Osgood.⁹

In South Carolina, Elizabeth Timothy became publisher of the *South-Carolina Gazette* when her husband, Lewis, died in 1738.¹⁰ He had been in partnership with Benjamin Franklin, and Franklin continued the arrangement with Timothy's widow.¹¹ She ran the newspaper under their son Peter's name until he came of age to assume his inheritance, but not all women printer/publishers acted as silent partners. In Rhode Island, Sarah Updike Goddard, mother of William and Mary Katherine, helped her son run the *Providence Gazette* from 1762 to 1765, when it was discontinued for a year, and then with her daughter resumed its publication under the name Sarah Goddard and Company while William moved to Philadelphia.¹²

On the eve of the American revolution, Clementina Rind became printer and publisher of the *Virginia Gazette* upon the death of her husband, William, in 1773 and ran the paper until her own death the following year.¹³ By 1776, historian Susan Henry writes, "at least 13 women worked as printers in America."¹⁴

Henry contends:

⁹ "Mary Katherine Goddard (1738-1816)," Building the Nation: Starting the System, Smithsonian National Postal Museum. Accessed at <https://postalmuseum.si.edu/exhibition/binding-the-nation/starting-the-system>.

¹⁰ Aaron W. Marrs, "South-Carolina Gazette," South Carolina Encyclopedia. Accessed at <https://www.sencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/south-carolina-gazette/>.

¹¹ Leonard J. Hooper, "Women Printers in America's Colonial Times," *Journalism Educator* (April 1974): 24-27, at 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 25-26.

¹³ "Williamsburg, July 7. At a respectable meeting of the Freeholders and Freemen of the county of Richmond ..." *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/78>.

¹⁴ Susan Henry, "Colonial Woman Printer as Prototype: Toward a Model for the Study of Minorities," *Journalism History* 3, no 1 (1976): 20-24, at 20.

Not only did women printers perform a demanding and important service, but they were also typical of a type of person vital to the American 18th Century economy: the businesswoman. Due to the colonial labor shortage, women had many more opportunities for work than they would have had in most of Europe, and were employed in most businesses.¹⁵

Income sources

The earliest printing offices survived on government printing such as laws and public notices, almanacs, business blanks, pamphlets, and other job work. Newspapers were often a byproduct until late in the first half of the eighteenth century. Thus, although some of the women were putting out newspapers, many stuck with the traditional print products. However, when James Franklin died in February 1735, having shut his *New-England Courant* and moving from Boston to Newport, Rhode Island, his widow, Ann Franklin, took over the shop. Their *Rhode Island Gazette*, begun Oct. 20, 1732, was the first newspaper in that colony. Printer and historian Isaiah Thomas reports that she was assisted in the printing by her two daughters and later her son when he was old enough. "Her daughters," Thomas says, "were correct and quick compositors at the case; and were instructed by their father whom they assisted."¹⁶ Thomas' assessment also underscores that while most women lacked the strength to operate the presses for very long (men who did developed almost deforming musculature on one side of their bodies from pulling the lever to make the impression) they were very capable of setting type and, of course, managing the business.

The *Rhode Island Gazette* ceased in 1733 but Anne Franklin maintained the printing business and her son, James Jr., was apprenticed to his uncle Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia. When he returned, they started the *Newport Mercury*, the second newspaper founded in the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Thomas, *History of Printing*, 325.

colony, in 1758. James Jr. died in 1762 but his mother continued to operate the press and the newspaper briefly until forming a business partnership, Franklin & Hall, with Samuel Hall, who continued the newspaper after Franklin died in 1763.¹⁷

In Boston, Margaret Draper continued to manage the *Massachusetts Gazette and Boston News Letter* on the death of her husband, Richard, in 1774, at times with male partners who took over operation of the printing office, at other times apparently on her own.¹⁸ A Tory, Draper's and her newspaper's fortunes rose and fell as Boston changed hands between the British and American armies in the early days of the Revolution. Thomas says that "A few weeks after the revolutionary war [sic] commenced, and Boston was besieged, all newspapers, excepting her's [sic], ceased to be published; and but one of them, *The Boston Gazette*, was revived after the British evacuated the town. 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]."¹⁹ When American troops returned to Boston, the newspaper was confiscated and sold, and Draper ended up fleeing to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and finally to England.²⁰

Although women might continue to operate small, inherited print offices into the nineteenth century, their role in the printing workforce waned as the eighteenth century drew on. By the end of the eighteenth century, journeymen printers were forming labor unions and had even gone on strike on occasion. Biggs, notes that "As the [eighteenth] century wore on, women continued to enter printing shops, but their symbolic significance in the labor movement, as the

¹⁷ Ibid., 316.

¹⁸ Ibid., 175.

¹⁹ Ibid., 176.

²⁰ Barlow, *Notes on Women Printers*, 35.

threat most commonly flung at rebellious journeymen by employing printers, overshadowed their real importance in the trade. As the typographical union gained strength, it naturally moved to neutralize the threat of cheap female labor.”²¹

²¹ Biggs, “Neither Printer’s Wife,” 432.