

The First Newspapers in America

In early America, the colonists' thirst for news from Europe and their growing urge for free speech helped spark an unrelenting demand for paper.

■ *Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and Domestick.*

BOSTON – SEPTEMBER 1690

Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and Domestick, the first newspaper published in America, was printed by Richard Pierce and edited by Benjamin Harris in Boston on September 25, 1690. It contained three printed pages and one blank. The pages were about 6 x 10 inches in size in a folded sheet of paper.

Harris was a former publisher of Whig books, pamphlets, and a newspaper in London. He had fled England with his family four years earlier after clashing with authorities for publishing seditious pamphlets, leading to uncomfortable episodes in the pillory and jail.

Publick Occurrences was intended to be “furnished once a moneth (or if any Glut of Occurrences happen, oftener).” Unfortunately, Harris once again ran afoul of the government, and official reaction was swift and certain. Four days after distribution, the Governor and Council issued a statement disallowing the publication, claiming it had been issued “Without the least Privity or Countenance of Authority.”

Particularly annoying to the powers-that-be was some gossip regarding the immoralities of the King of France and an account of recent events of the French and Indian War. Harris denounced the barbarous ways in



The first and last issue of *Publick Occurrences* was published September 25, 1690.

which the Indian allies of the English had treated their French captives.

Declaring “high Resentment and Disallowance of said Pamphlet,” the government ordered that *Publick Occurrences* be “Suppressed and called in.” It was further ordered that nothing would be set to print in the future without prior authority.

Ultimately, the first newspaper published in America became the first to be suppressed by the authorities.

■ *Boston News-Letter*

BOSTON – APRIL 1704

America’s first continuously-published newspaper, the *Boston News-Letter* published its first issue on April 24, 1704. John Campbell, a

bookseller and Postmaster of Boston, was its first editor, printing the newspaper on what was then referred to as a half-sheet. It originally appeared on a single page, printed on both sides and issued weekly. In the first issue of the *News-Letter* there was only one advertisement.

In the early years of its publication, the *News-Letter* dealt mostly with news from London journals detailing English politics and the European wars. The rest of the newspaper was filled with items listing ship arrivals, deaths, sermons, political appointments, fires, accidents etc. The paper was never very prosperous.

One of the most sensational stories published when the *News-Letter* was the only newspaper in the colonies



The front page of *The Boston News-Letter* dated: “From Monday April 17, to Monday April 24, 1704

was the account of how Blackbeard the pirate was killed in hand-to-hand combat on the deck of a sloop that had engaged his ship in battle.

Campbell relinquished his stewardship of the paper in 1722 to Bartholomew Green, its printer. As editor, Green devoted less space to overseas events and more to domestic news. When Green died after a decade as its editor, the *News-Letter* was inherited by his son John Draper, also a printer. Draper proved to be a better editor and publisher than his predecessors. He enlarged the paper to four good-sized pages, filling it with news from Boston, other towns throughout the colonies, and from abroad.

■ **Boston Gazette**

BOSTON - DECEMBER 1719.

This weekly was first printed by James Franklin for publisher William Booker on December 21, 1719. Booker had replaced John Cambell as Postmaster of Boston and originally wanted to continue publishing Campbell's *News-Letter* under the same title. Campbell refused to authorize the use of the title to anyone else. Brooker sidestepped the matter and named his newspaper the *Boston Gazette*. Likely for this reason, there was great animosity between the two newspapers. An early issue of the *News-Letter* carried this editorial: "I pity the reader of the new paper; it is not fit reading for the people."

Seven months later, Philip Musgrave was awarded the position of Postmaster in Boston and replaced Brooker. At this time, James Franklin, the printer of the *Boston Gazette*, was also replaced. Franklin wanted to start his own newspaper despite friends



A copy of the *The Boston Gazette* from Monday, October 7, 1776.

and family telling him that Boston already had enough newspapers (2) and a third could not survive.

Despite this, Franklin went ahead and published his own newspaper, the *New England Courant* August 1721. It became the fourth newspaper published in America.

■ **American Weekly Mercury**

PHILADELPHIA – DECEMBER 1719

In 1719, Andrew Bradford began publication of the *American Weekly Mercury*, the first newspaper in Pennsylvania and the third in the colonies. He was imprisoned for publishing political criticism but defended his own case for freedom of the press, establishing a precedent for the defense of John Peter Zenger.

Freedom of the Press

Editor's note: John Zenger began publication of the *New York Weekly Journal* in 1733 and published

scathing articles in opposition to the policies of then Gov. William Cosby. Zenger's newspaper, backed by several prominent lawyers and merchants, relentlessly attacked the administration. Although most of the articles were written by Zenger's backers, Zenger was legally responsible and was arrested on libel charges and imprisoned (1734). In the celebrated trial that followed (1735), Zenger was defended by Andrew Hamilton, who established truth as a defense in cases of libel. The trial, which resulted in the publisher's acquittal, helped to establish freedom of the press in America.



Dated December 22, 1719, the front page of the *American Weekly Mercury* begins by telling readers "All of our letters from Sweden, are full of the Dismall Ravages committed by the Muscovites there,...[they] have burnt the fine Towns of...ruined all the mines, utterly Destroy'd the Copper and Salt Works, burnt the Woods and carried Thousands of People on Board their Gally's in Order to Transport them into Russia."

The paper also provides readers with news from Paris. Again, the news is obtained through letters from Europe obtained by the publisher.

■ **The New-England Courant**
Boston – August 1721

James Franklin established this weekly on August 7, 1721. This was the third newspaper in the history of Boston. Benjamin Franklin, younger brother of James, worked as an apprentice, helping with the typesetting the newspaper. Benjamin eventually became a newsboy and sold the paper in the streets.

However, Benjamin was looking to do more than simply typeset the paper—he wanted to write for it too. Many of his brother James’s friends already wrote pieces for the *Courant*, but Benjamin felt that any attempt he made to contribute articles would be met with objection by his older, and at times jealous, brother. So, he created a fictitious writer named Silence Dogood.

The 16-year-old Franklin, between April and October of 1722, penned 14 letters bearing Silence’s name. At night he would leave these letters, in disguised handwriting, under the print shop’s door. It was the custom of the time to assume pen names.

James Franklin and his friends never caught on. They could not figure out who was writing the Dogood letters.

Independent newspaper publishing in the English colonies is considered to have begun with the *New England Courant*. It was the most readable of the early colonial newspapers. It became the first American newspaper to feature humorous essays and other literary content. At 4 pence per copy, it was the most expensive newspaper in early America.



The Monday, August 7, 1721 edition of *The New-England Courant*

■ **New-England Weekly Journal**
BOSTON – MARCH 1727

The fifth newspaper established in America, the *New England Weekly Journal*, was published in Boston on March 20, 1727. The paper was edited by Samuel Kneeland. Following the editorial style of the *New England Courant*, the *Journal* featured the letters, essays, and verses of its readers.

■ **New York Gazette**
NEW YORK CITY – NOVEMBER 1725

New York City’s first newspaper was the *New York Gazette* was founded by William Bradford. The *New York Gazette* was a typical colonial newspaper: It stayed out of trouble by supporting the policies of the colony’s governor.

■ **Maryland Gazette**
ANNAPOLIS – SEPTEMBER 1727

Founded by William Parks, the *Maryland Gazette* was Maryland’s



Front page of *The Maryland Gazette* dated from Tuesday December 10 to Tuesday December 17, 1728.

first newspaper. Parks was an eminent printer. Before arriving in Maryland he operated printing shops in three locations of his native England – Ludlow, Hereford and Reading.

The paper’s second publisher, Jonas Green, came from Philadelphia, where he learned the printing trade and journalistic ideals from Benjamin Franklin. Following the death of Jonas Green, his wife Anne Catharine Green published the paper for eight years (while raising 14 children), making her the first woman to be both editor and publisher of a newspaper in the American Colonies.

■ **Universal Instructor in all the Arts and Sciences and Pennsylvania Gazette**
PHILADELPHIA – DECEMBER 1728

Samuel Keimer, a printer from London and one-time employer of Benjamin Franklin, published the first issue of the *Universal Instructor in all the Arts and Sciences and*

Pennsylvania Gazette. The first two issues were filled with extracts from the book "Chamber's Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen." Keimer was unable to make his paper a success, and after nine months from its first issue he sold it to Benjamin Franklin and Hugh Meredith, who shortened the title to the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in September 1729.

■ **South-Carolina Gazette**

CHARLESTON – JANUARY 1731

The first issue of the *South-Carolina Gazette* was printed in Charleston on January 8, 1731. It was edited by Thomas Whitmarsh, who died a few years later (1734). Lewis Timothy established another newspaper with the same title. A variety of essays could be found in the *South-Carolina Gazette*, as were interesting notices of the various performances of popular plays of the period, which were given at the Charleston theatres.

■ **Weekly Rehearsal**
(Boston Evening Post)

BOSTON – 1731

The *Weekly Rehearsal* was established on September 27, 1731 and printed by John Draper. With the issue of August 21, 1732, the paper was printed by Thomas Fleet.

Born in England, Fleet was an American colonial printer who arrived in Boston in 1712 as a refugee because of his opposition to the High Church. He became a prominent printer and publisher in the colony. After his death, his sons Thomas and James continued publishing the newspaper.

In 1735, the paper's name was changed to *Boston Evening Post*. The paper printed more foreign than domestic news, which helped bring the colonists into closer touch with England and Europe. The paper also contained a wide variety of advertisements. In its era, the *Boston Evening*

Post grew to be one of the best written newspapers in New England.

Tremendous Growth

The newspaper business has come a long way since Benjamin Harris published that first (and only) edition of *Publick Occurrences* back in 1690. He undoubtedly would have had a hard time imagining the circulation figures of current-day newspapers or the highly evolved newsprint machines that produce the millions of tons of paper used by the publishers.

Today, newspapers remain one of the most desired mediums for news and information. In 2003, more than 54 million newspapers were sold daily. On any given Sunday, more than 58 million newspapers are sold with an average of 2.4 readers per copy. Preliminary data also shows that U.S. newsprint consumption stood at 10.3 million metric tons in 2003. ■

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