“A TORRENT OF WORDS”: COLONIAL PRINTERS AND THE PUBLIC, 1765-1775

by

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A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The University of Utah
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Degree in Bachelor of Arts

In

History

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May 2012
ABSTRACT

Although printers had long been important in colonial society and politics, it was not until 1765 that they fully realized their potential in shaping colonial attitudes and behavior. With Parliament’s institution of the Stamp Act, an outraged public insisted that newspaper publishers assume a more active role in reflecting its increasing anger and politicization. The subsequent relationship that developed between printers and their readership became a dynamic exchange in which individuals demanded a press that expressed colonial sentiment while printers simultaneously realized their importance in shaping public opinion. This paper examines the fluid relations between printers and readers that began in 1765 and set a pattern that held through the American Revolution and beyond. By analyzing primary documents such as newspapers, cartoons, and town meeting minutes and comparing those sources to modern historical interpretations of the Stamp Act, this paper traces the transformation of colonial printers from passive bystanders at the outset of 1765 to powerful shapers of public opinion by the time of the Stamp Act’s repeal. This paper also explains how American colonists, both individually and collectively, influenced and controlled the content of newspapers they read and reacted to. Although opposition to the Stamp Act launched printers to positions of prominence within the colonies, printers remained subject to public sentiment when deciding upon the content of their publications. This interplay of power between colonists and printers, which first emerged in 1765, formed a tradition of reading and
reacting that would influence colonial behavior throughout the following decade of struggle against British interference and the quest for independence that followed.
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Introduction

Late in 1776, months after Americans had officially declared their independence from Great Britain, a farmer in the small town of Keen, New Hampshire recorded in his journal that he and his brother had gone to the neighboring farm “to grind our seythes and read newspapers.”\(^1\) Just ten years earlier, American colonists in had emerged from a year in which the content of their newspapers drastically changed so that rather than reading news largely imported from Great Britain, by 1776 people like Abner Sanger would have been reading politically charged information that clearly reflected provincial political values. Such a tradition of partisan political journalism in which printers informed a largely literate public of the events occurring around them and fully expected the public to react accordingly would have transformed men like Sanger from small-town farmers to politically active participants in the Revolutionary events occurring around them.\(^2\)

Pronouncing 1765 as the year in which such a tradition began or naming the Stamp Act as the impetus behind the phenomenon is not to ignore previous political partisanship by colonial publishers. John Peter Zenger, for example, became an important figure among printers when, in 1735, he was tried after having been imprisoned for making derogatory remarks about the British government within the colonies in his *New-York Weekly Journal.*\(^3\) He was eventually acquitted, and Zenger’s

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\(^2\) For an analysis of literacy in the American colonies during the later half of the 18\(^{th}\)-century see T.H. Breen, *American Insurgents American Patriots* (New York, 2010). Breen claims that “literacy rates were high” and that “almost all free colonists had ‘some Education.’” p. 102.

case is recognized by many historians as “the most famous case of newspaper partisanship before 1765.”

But conditions in the colonies during 1765 set the stage for partisan activities among newspaper publishers on a much greater scale than that of Zenger and his New-York Weekly Journal. Initially, colonial printers remained largely passive towards Parliament’s newly adopted Stamp Act, but the colonial public did not. Throughout the colonies, individuals and groups demanded that their outrage at the passage of the Stamp Act be expressed and circulated in town and city newspapers. As printers became obligated by colonists to reflect deepening anti-Parliamentary sentiment, they began to realize their own power in shaping public opinion and behavior. While disseminating information the public desired, printers came to expect and predict the nature of the public’s reaction to what it read in the newspapers.

By the end of 1765, a relationship between colonial printers and the colonial public had been established in which each party wielded a motivating power over the other. While colonists demanded information and forced printers to publish articles and opinions in favor of the American cause, printers understood that they could influence and even manipulate the general response to British policies. Printers and the public, then, began a cycle in which the public demanded information, while printers shaped that information to elicit specific responses from their readership. While John Peter Zenger is part of a long tradition of a partisan American press, it was 1765 and the imposition of the Stamp Act that defined and enshrined that tradition in the colonies. During 1765,

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4 Pasley, Tyranny of Printers, 30.
colonists joined together to influence the press while printers, propelled to power by popular demand, united to ensure that their publications maintained and intensified the growing partisanship throughout the American colonies. Rather than a single individual like Zenger publishing anti-British sentiments, colonists and printers joined forces in shaping and influencing each other to make communication the foundation for the success of Revolutionary activities, while reading and reacting to newspapers became a more urgent part of ordinary life. As a result of the events of 1765, colonists like Abner Sanger, a small-town farmer, could report in 1776 that reading the newspaper had become an integral part of daily life and a cornerstone of political consciousness.

George Grenville’s Failed Ingenuity

With the conclusion of the Seven Years’ War in 1763, Britain’s victory was particularly apparent in North America where a massive tract of formerly French and Spanish land transferred to British control. It was here, in administering its territorial expansion, that fissures within the British empire seemed most obvious and where the challenge that Great Britain would face in attempting to maintain control of its newly-acquired station in world politics was exposed. Addressing the importance of North American land and the burden of maintaining it, historian Fred Anderson writes, “Unlike every prior eighteenth-century European conflict, the Seven Years’ War ended in the decisive defeat of one belligerent and a dramatic rearrangement of the balance of power, in Europe and North America alike.” But, continues Anderson, “the scope of Britain’s victory enlarged its American domains to a size that would have been difficult for any
European metropolis to control, even under the best of circumstances.”

The task of deploying soldiers and constructing and maintaining forts throughout its western territory would prove to be both strategically and fiscally difficult. Saddled with a national debt that had almost doubled during the war, by 1763 Parliament could not spare any portion of government revenue to service its North American territory with men or buildings.

“The war,” writes Anderson, “made British authorities wonder, even before the final treaties had been concluded, whether in the future they could afford to maintain any significant military presence whatever in the west.”

Even as the Peace of Paris was being signed, British Prime Minister George Grenville was laboring to devise some kind of plan in which Britain’s North American colonies could become a cost effective enterprise. Historians Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan inform that by the summer of 1763, Grenville was already drafting what would later be instituted as the Stamp Act. Grenville himself considered the idea of a stamp tax a “masterpiece.” The Stamp Act was “a work of rare ingenuity,” writes Anderson:

a tax that would be both unintrusive and virtually self-collecting. No excisemen would ever enter workplaces or homes to extract money from American purses, because revenues would arise from a benign Crown monopoly over the paper that the colonists used for legal purposes and the transmission of news.

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5 Fred Anderson, *Crucible of War: The Seven Years’ War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754-1766* (New York, 2001), xviii.


7 Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 634.


No obvious tax collection would take place as the source of money would be the government’s control over paper that would be sold bearing a royal seal designating that a duty had been paid. Paper not carrying the crown’s official endorsement would not be sold or accepted in legal matters because vendors and courts would face arrest for selling or accepting unstamped paper. Noncompliance with the tax would be immediately and publicly apparent. The tax would also increase over time as paper consumption and legal needs grew with the colonial population. Grenville also foresaw that a small surcharge on paper to begin with “could be increased once Americans became habituated to paying the levy. The Stamp Act thus promised to provide the Treasury with perhaps a hundred thousand pounds annually at the start, but much more later.” For Grenville, the best part of his tax was that it would “be administered by the Americans themselves” as he would require colonial agents to hire well-known colonists for the position of “stamp-masters.” Grenville’s tax, then, would increase revenue without adding unnecessary bureaucracy or burden to the colonial way of life and would allow the empire to gain back some of what was lost in obtaining victory in the Seven Years’ War.

Regardless of whether or not Grenville’s assumptions about the brilliance of his plan were correct, the most serious consequences of his actions came from not communicating the details of the plan to the American colonies. With questions surfacing on both sides of the Atlantic as to how a tax would be accepted by American colonists, Grenville worked to ensure that Parliament’s right to tax its colonies remained

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13 Anderson, *Crucible of War*, 646.
unassailable. Even though Grenville had determined as early as 1763 to institute a stamp tax, he communicated to colonists that if they could come up with a way to do so, they could tax themselves in order to raise revenue for Great Britain but maintain a measure of control over their own finances at the same time. According to the Morgans, Grenville “definitely proposed... that the colonists might avert the stamp tax. If they would prefer to tax themselves rather than be taxed by Parliament they had a year in which to take action.”¹⁴ Logistically problematic for the colonists, however, was that Grenville refused to state any sum of money that Great Britain would accept as payment for its debts accrued during the Seven Years’ War. As the time to institute the Stamp Act drew nearer, Grenville rejected colonial inquiries as to how much Great Britain would require and instead began encouraging colonial agents to simply “assent in advance to the Parliamentary tax.”¹⁵ In essence, Grenville aimed to guarantee colonial submission to the will of a Parliament whose constitutional right it was to tax British colonies. “Though [Grenville] was willing to make magnanimous gestures,” write the Morgans, “he had no intention of allowing the colonies to prevent passage of his measure either by objections to it or by raising an ‘equivalent’ sum. They would not thwart him by levying a substitute tax themselves: by withholding the necessary information he made sure of that.”¹⁶

What followed as a result of Grenville’s silence on the subject was ironically an unprecedented backlash against Parliamentary authority by colonial printers-- guardians and instigators of the kind of communication that Grenville had so purposefully ignored.

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¹⁴ Morgan, The Stamp Act Crisis, 57.
¹⁵ Morgan, The Stamp Act Crisis, 60.
¹⁶ Morgan, The Stamp Act Crisis, 61.
While historian Robert Middlekauff acknowledges that the passage of the Stamp Act “set off... a crisis that had no precedents,” 17 the Morgans are more descriptive of its results. “When news reached America that the Stamp Act had passed, anger erupted... in a torrent of words.” 18 1765 would become the year in which colonists first collectively united behind a common medium-- the printing press-- to oppose parliamentary decision-making. It would also be a pivotal year in that American printers would learn the great power they wielded through the written word over colonial policies and attitudes. This odd marriage between colonial populations and colonial printers in which each partner influenced the other’s actions first manifested itself in the colony of Virginia. “That an explosion occurred in Virginia,” Middledauff claims, “was something of a historical accident.” 19 Perhaps Middlekauff’s claim is correct. But if so, the accidental “explosion” in Virginia has a definite, identifiable cause. It was in Virginia that John Mercer, a lawyer steeped in the tradition of English rights, first joined popular outrage with the power of the press, in the process initiating a “torrent of words” that would continue to flow throughout the American Revolution.

John Mercer’s Argument Against the Stamp Act

Writing about Mercer, historian J.A. Leo Lemay states that, “Unlike most Americans, Mercer immediately declared the Stamp Act unconstitutional. Further, the

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18 Morgan, The Stamp Act Crisis, 75.
19 Middledauff, The Glorious Cause, 81.
fiery Mercer immediately propagandized his view.” With his clerk, Mercer began work on a chart of each proposed tax tied to the Stamp Act along with a short introduction to the chart explaining the unreasonableness of the act and warning fellow Virginians of British machinations. Joseph Royle, who printed the Virginia Gazette, requested a copy of Mercer’s work and Mercer insisted that his introduction be printed along with his chart, a request to which Royle promised to comply. Much to Mercer’s surprise and anger, however, Royle changed his mind after a personal command from Virginia’s governor to Royle that no commentary on the Stamp Act be published. Although he was still willing to publish Mercer’s chart alone, Royle refused to publish the introduction. Mercer offered to sign the introduction with his own name instead of using a pseudonym and pay Royle for any damages he might incur, but Mercer’s endeavors failed and his introduction was excluded from the original publication of his chart on the damaging results of the Stamp Act in the April 26, 1765 edition of the Virginia Gazette.

Mercer, however, did not surrender and he and his clerk copied out by hand multiple copies of his introduction. Lemay supposes that by their session in May of 1765, delegates to the Virginia House of Burgesses would have heard of the governor’s ban on Mercer’s introduction, viewed Mercer’s chart in the Virginia Gazette, and had a copy in their hands of both the chart and the introduction throughout the session in which Patrick Henry famously set forth his Virginia Resolves. Considering that Mercer was not a printer and thus had no immediate access to a press, his actions to ensure that the

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Virginia House of Burgesses was versed in a constitutional argument against the Stamp Act seem both laborious and tenacious. According to Edmund Randolph, a fellow Virginian and contemporary of Mercer’s, John Mercer, “‘was the first in Virginia who distinctly elucidated upon paper, the principles which justified the opposition to the Stamp Act. He showed them in manuscript to his friends. They spread rapidly so as to produce a groundwork for and uniformity of popular sentiment.’”

Randolph’s comments on Mercer demonstrate Mercer’s influence on Virginia politicians as they began an opposition movement against the Stamp Act. Having had his work suppressed by the Virginian press, Mercer proceeded to copy out by hand multiple copies of his argument against the Stamp Act to ensure that action be taken to oppose the British crown. Laying out a Constitutional argument against the Stamp Act, the Virginia Stamp Act Resolutions claim British rights by inheritance and through legal precedent via the royal charters originally establishing Virginia. Those rights included the now famous right not to be taxed without just representation; a representation that excluded British Parliament and included only the king and the “General Assembly of this colony... Every attempt to vest such power in any other person or persons whatever than the General Assembly aforesaid, is illegal, unconstitutional, and unjust, and has a manifest tendency to destroy British as well as American liberty.”

Trained in the law, John Mercer seems to have been one of the first minds in the colonies to have laid out a constitutional argument against the Stamp Act. And Mercer’s work, both published and not published

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24 H.R. McIlwaine, editor, Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1761-1765 (Birmingham, 1906), 360.
in the *Virginia Gazette* in April, 1765, profoundly influenced the Virginia House of Burgesses and its decision to issue the Stamp Act Resolutions.

**From Avoidance to Open Opposition**

Joseph Royal’s refusal to print all that Mercer desired was hardly unique. Middlekauff reports that while news of Grenville’s Stamp Act arrived in the colonies during the first part of April, it was not until the end of May that anybody in the press reported on the tax.\(^{25}\) That the Stamp Act negatively affected colonial printers seems obvious, taking into account that the tax specifically targeted the print trade. Agreeing with a prediction by Benjamin Franklin that, “‘I think it [the Stamp Tax] will affect the printers more than anybody,’”\(^{26}\) historian Arthur Schlesinger writes:

> In a peculiar sense, the statute was a mill-stone round the colonial printer’s neck, for it hampered him not only as a newspaper publisher but also in all other phases of his business. Every copy of a newspaper or pamphlet printed on ‘half a sheet’ or smaller size of paper carried a halfpenny duty, with a double rate up to a full sheet and still a higher one thereafter. There was, besides, a two-shilling tax attached to every advertisement appearing in such publications.\(^{27}\)

Knowing this, the delay on the part of colonial printers in forming any kind of coalesced response against the Stamp Act seems surprising. Indeed, for most printers, not reporting on the Stamp Act was not exactly delaying but instead, a tactical means of skirting the issue in order to maintain their business in spite of the new British regulations.

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After Franklin’s relatively aloof observation that the Stamp Act would affect printers more than any other profession, he proceeded to aid his friend, John Hughes, in obtaining the stamp distributor position in Philadelphia. Simultaneously, Franklin prepared for the imposition of the Stamp Act by purchasing over-sized reams of half sheets in an attempt to avoid the one cent tax on full sheets. Rather than lash out at a law deemed unjust or unconstitutional, Franklin instead seemed “intent on making the best of a bad business.”28 Many other colonial printers, unsure of a groundswell of colonial support, followed Franklin’s lead. Rather than repudiate the Stamp Act, printers attempted to simply accept the law. Schlesinger writes that colonial printers “turned their thoughts to ways and means of meeting the exactions” rather than looking for ways to rebel against them. “‘The Stamp Act is certainly passed...’ announced the New-Hampshire Gazette between thick black borders on May 17, 1765.”29 Originally, no notion of defiance or rebellion existed among colonial printers when speaking or writing of the Stamp Act. Instead, a kind of defeatism paralyzed the industry from attempting to challenge British policy. Rather than fighting, colonial printers had chosen simply to prepare and accept. Such a solution to dealing with the problem of British interference in colonial affairs, however, was not the only way in which the American public chose to deal with the newly instituted Stamp Act. John Mercer’s influential actions in Virginia emphasize the importance of public opinion in the Virginia “explosion” that began to spread throughout the colonies. This transformation in the American public from apathy to a demand for action would allow printers to work against the Stamp Act, and in many


cases influence public opinion against the Stamp Act, without placing their reputations and businesses in danger.

Lemay writes that, “When almost all Americans accepted the Stamp Act as a *fait accompli*, ... Mercer immediately protest[ed] it, reject[ed] it as unconstitutional, and propagandize[d] against it.”

Although Mercer remains relatively unknown in American history, and the effects of his Stamp Act chart and introductory essay are uncertain, his story of persistence demands to be told when discussing every-day colonial Americans, their relationship to print media, and the effects of their actions on events leading up to the American Revolution. While Mercer’s actions obviously affected Virginian politicians in the House of Burgesses, responses such as his reverberated to other segments of the American populace as well and ultimately influenced printers throughout the colonies, and the colonial public, encouraging a change in behavior toward the Stamp Act. Even as printers called for adherence to the Stamp Act, the events in Virginia touched off by individuals like John Mercer inspired a trend in American politics during 1765 in which opposition to the Stamp Act became popular. Schlesinger addresses this trend and states:

“From the beginning... members of the printing fraternity had glimpsed another and bolder solution of their difficulty. As November 1, the date for executing the law, had drawn nearer, indications had multiplied that, far from standing alone, they had allies in other classes of the community, who for reasons of their own resented the act.”

John Mercer’s denunciation of the Stamp Act would have been one of the “multiplying indications” that colonial printers were not alone in their hatred of the Stamp Act.

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Mercer’s voice, for example, represented community outrage at a British intrusion in American life. Reactions like Mercer’s were important, for on top of being influential in their own sense, such reactions informed printers that actions against the Stamp Act had support from other sections of society. Any actions taken against the Stamp Act by printers could find a warm reception amongst the general American populace.

“Emboldened by this circumstance,” states Schlesinger, “the newspapers adopted an increasingly belligerent tone toward the statute [the Stamp Act]. Their news columns mirrored the growing evidences of widespread antagonism.”32 Rather than continue on in Franklin’s fatalistic attitude of acceptance and making the most of an inconvenient situation, American printers began a direct assault on British policy and the British government, both represented by the Stamp Act.33

A Tactical Assault on the Stamp Act

As printers became aware of support among the colonial public for actions against the Stamp Act, they grew more bold in opposing the British crown. Simultaneously, as printers relied on the public for support, the colonial public looked to the printing community for leadership in organizing against the Stamp Act. No better example of this evolving relationship between the press and the public exists than printer James Davis in North Carolina and his manipulation of both people and information to combat the Stamp Act. On November 20, 1765, Davis issued what he called the Continuation of the North-

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Carolina Gazette which, rather than bearing an official British seal or stamp, bore instead the image of a skull and crossbones underneath the caption, “This is the Place to affix the STAMP.”34 Originally published by Andrew Steuart in Wilmington, North Carolina, the North-Carolina Gazette; And Wilmington Weekly Post-Boy had been discontinued by Steuart in an attempt to avoid payment of any tax dictated by the Stamp Act.35 Davis, angered by what he saw as cowardly actions on the part of Steuart, commandeered the name of Steuart’s discontinued paper, the North-Carolina Gazette, to begin printing under a revised title-- The Continuation of the North-Carolina Gazette. Davis’s first issue detailed the threat of violence from North Carolinian crowds towards stamp collectors located in the colony. In his inaugural issue of November 20, Davis records the protests that occurred throughout Wilmington, North Carolina such as burnings in effigy of Stamp Act supporters and stamp collectors. Parades and marches were also common around public squares and places of gathering, and representations of the Stamp Act in human form being hung, burned, or buried created a kind of central theme to these


35 Schlesinger, “The Colonial Newspapers and the Stamp Act,” 77; Isaiah Thomas, History of Printing in America Volume II (New York, 1874), 166-67. Note that Thomas seems to confuse the title of Steuart’s North-Carolina Gazette with Davis’s The North-Carolina Magazine. Although he claims that Davis established the North-Carolina Gazette in Newbern, North Carolina in 1755, Thomas’s editor notes that a contemporary historian, B.J. Lossing, credited Davis’s paper with the title of The North-Carolina Magazine. When discussing Steuart’s newspaper, Thomas states that, “A newspaper was published in [Wilmington] about the year 1764. I am not certain respecting the title of it, but if I recollect aright, it was...” (Thomas, 167). Thomas then goes on to state an incorrect title. Because the North Carolina State Archives confirms Lossing’s claim that Davis’s paper was titled The North-Carolina Magazine and give Steuart’s paper the title of North-Carolina Gazette, this author believes that Mr. Thomas incorrectly attributed the title North-Carolina Gazette to James Davis, thus ultimately failing to give Davis’s newspaper a correct title and wrongly naming Andrew Steuart’s paper. Forthwith, when referencing Isaiah Thomas’s work, this author will make corrections when necessary to avoid any confusion that could arise between names, dates, and places of publication of any North Carolina newspapers due to Mr. Thomas’s error.
Continuation of
(November 20.)

The
(Numb. 58.)

North-Carolina Gazette.

Wilmington, November 20.

On Saturday the 19th of last Month, about Seven of the Clock in the Evening, near Five Hundred People assembled together in this Town, and exhibited the Effigy of a certain Honourable Gentleman; and after letting it hang by the Neck for some Time, near the Court-House, they made a large Bonfire with a Number of Tar Barrels, &c. and committed it to the Flames.—The Reason assigned for the People's Dislike to that Gentleman, was, from being informed of his having several Times expressed himself much in Favour of the Stamp-Duty.—After the Effigy was consumed, they went to every House in Town, and brot' all the Gentlemen to the Bonfire, and inflicted upon their drinking, Liberty, Property, and no Stamp-Duty, and Confusion to Lord B-T, and all his Adherents, giving three Huzzas at the Conclusion of each Toast.—They continued together until 12 of the Clock, and then dispersed, without doing any mischief.

And, on Thursday, 21st of the same Month, in the Evening, a great Number of People again assembled, and produced an Effigy of Liberty, which they put into a Coffin, and marched in solemn Procession with it to the Church-Yard, a Drum in Morning beating before them, and the Town Bell, muffled, ringing a doubtful Knell at the same Time.—But before they committed the Body to the Ground, they thought it advisable to feel its Pulse, and when finding some Remains of Life, they returned back to a Bonfire ready prepared, placed the Effigy before it in a large Two-seat'd Chair, and concluded the Evening with great Rejoicings, or finding that Liberty had fill'd an Existence in the Colonies.—Not the least Injury was offered to any Person.

On Saturday the 16th of this Inst, William Houston, Esq. Distributor of Stamps for this Province, came to this Town, upon which three or four Hundred People immediately gathered together, with Drums beating and Colours flying, and repaired to the House the said Stare-Oﬃcer put up at, and infuriated upon hearing, "Whether he intended to execute his said Office, or not?" He told them, "He would be very sorry to execute any Oﬃce displeasing to the People of the Province." But they, not content with such a Declaration, carried him into the Court-House, where he signed a Holographic Oath deposing to the Whole.

As soon as the Stare-Oﬃcer had complied with their Deire, they placed him in an Arm-Chair, carried him round the Court-House, giving three Huzzas at every Corner, and then proceeded with him round one of the Squares of the Town, and sat him down at the Door of his Lodgings, formed themselves in a large Circle round him, and gave him three Cheers. They then escorted him into the Streets, where theyfrauen the left Laptops to be bad, and treated him very gently. In the Evening a large Bonfire was made, and no Person appeared in the Streets without having Liberty, in large Capital Letters, in his Hat.

The next Day, a large Table near the Bonfire, well furnish'd with several Sorts of Liquors, where they drank in great Form, all the favourite American Toasts, giving three Cheers at the Conclusion of each. The whole was conducted with great Pomp, and not the least Incident offered to any Person.

Immediately

The North Carolina State Archives

Figure 1. James Davis, Continuation of the North-Carolina Gazette
(Wilmington, November 20, 1765)
demonstrations. In November, William Houston, a stamp collector, was forced to the courthouse where he was obligated to resign his position. Davis’s record of the days leading up to and immediately following November 1 (the day the Stamp act was to be fully instituted) provides a complimentary description of the demonstrations. Rather than focus on the violence represented in burnings and hangings in effigy and potentially presented by roaming crowds of people, Davis reports instead that those crowds insisted upon drinking to “LIBERTY, PROPERTY, AND NO STAMP DUTY,” met happily in streets and public squares, and then “dispersed without doing any Mischief.” At one bonfire, after the effigy was burned, the evening was “concluded... with great rejoicings, on finding that LIBERTY had still an Existence in the COLONIES” and of course, “Not the least Injury was offered to any Person.” William Houston, the stamp collector, was also reported to have been treated well after facing an angry Wilmington crowd:

As soon as the STAMP-OFFICER [Houston] had comply’d with their Desire, they placed him in an Arm-Chair, carried him first round the Court-House, giving three Huzzas at every Corner and then proceeded with him round one of the Squares of the Town, and sat him down at the Door of his Lodgings, formed themselves in a large Circle round him, and gave him three Cheers: They then escorted him into the House, where was prepared the best Liquors to be had, and treated him very genteely.

Writing on Revolutionary-era crowds, historian Dirk Hoeder states that an “analysis of the crowds reveals no single pattern.” While crowd action ranged from the

36 Davis, Continuation, 1.
37 Davis, Continuation, 1.
38 Davis, Continuation, 1.
39 Davis, Continuation, 1.
organized to the chaotic, Hoerder claims that from 1765 to 1766, the behavior of colonial crowds was largely “leadership initiated action that quickly turned into spontaneous riots.” Hoerder’s choice of the word “spontaneous,” however, should not be taken to imply that crowd action was unplanned or disorderly but rather that it was natural or inherent in colonial populations to protest by showing a unified front. Pauline Maier iterates this in her book on Revolutionary opposition, stating that American colonists “consciously [participated in] ordered opposition.” “In short,” argues Maier, “if during July 1765 it seemed possible, even probable, that the Stamp Act would be executed, in August the colonists decided to resist; and by September, efforts were under way to define how that resistance should be carried out.” Maier also underscores the importance of the press in this conscientious decision by colonial populations to rebel. “The newspapers,” according to Maier, were “the prime vehicle of uniting the population.”

The nature of Wilmington crowds driven by outrage at the institution of the Stamp Act fits both Hoeder’s and Maier’s descriptions of the generic crowd of the time period. Unified and organized, Wilmington crowds insisted that their demands be met through intimidation and threats of violence. Davis’s role as a printer in the community was to validate crowd actions through his publications. Ultimately, Davis served as leader of the organized opposition and an important source of validation for the efforts of North

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43 Maier, From Resistance to Revolution, 53.

44 Maier, From Resistance to Revolution, 91.
Carolina crowds. By borrowing the name of Steuart’s newspaper, Davis condemned Steuart’s decision to discontinue publication and reaffirmed to North Carolinian crowds that action against Steuart was appropriate as a means of persuasion. Even as Davis insisted that crowd actions during October and November were entirely peaceful, Andrew Steuart’s testimony suggests otherwise. After refusing to continue his printing business in the face of the newly-levied British tax, a group of colonists knocked on his door on November 16 to confront him about the suspension of his newspaper. Steuart replied that he could not continue publication “As he had no STAMPT Paper, and as a late ACT OF PARLIAMENT FORBID the printing on any other.”45 When the crowd insisted that if Steuart refused to begin running his press again he would be treated in the same manner as the stamp collectors, Steuart replied that, “‘Rather than run the Hazard of Life, being maimed, or have his Printing Office destroy’d, that he would comply with their Request.’”46 Compelled to begin publishing the North-Carolina Gazette again, Steuart’s experience in Wilmington suggests that protests throughout North Carolina were not as “genteel” as Davis’s newspaper claims. Although Steuart remained unharmed as apparently did at least one stamp collector, he was obviously aware that his life and business were in danger should he decide to go against the crowd’s wishes.

Steuart did, in fact, begin re-publication of his North-Carolina Gazette, and without affixing a stamp of British approval. Making certain that the mob understood he was only beginning publication because he was “compell’d thereto,” Steuart made good

45 Davis, Continuation, 2.

46 Davis, Continuation, 2.
on his word.\textsuperscript{47} Strangely, however, or perhaps revealingly, history remains relatively silent on how long Steuart continued publishing and what exactly his resurrected newspaper contained by way of information. Isaiah Thomas recorded in 1810 that Steuart “commenced the publication of a newspaper, but it was soon discontinued.”\textsuperscript{48}

Completely ignoring Steuart’s forced hand in beginning anew his publication, Thomas records simply that Steuart “lost [the] confidence” of “gentlemen of the first respectability in the colony” and in 1769 died a “tragic” death in a river near his home.\textsuperscript{49} In 1935, Arthur Schlesinger acknowledged Steuart’s unfortunate dilemma but also ended the affair simply, although somewhat more authoritatively than Thomas. The publication of Steuart’s newspaper was “resumed... after a time,” states Schlesinger, “and a copy of the last known issue, that of February 26, 1766, Number 72” is still in existence at the Public Record Office in London.\textsuperscript{50} More recently, the North Carolina State Archives has concluded that Steuart printed only two issues after resuming publication before he stopped for good. Surviving copies of both issues show substantial water damage but, to the extent it can be determined, their content appears to be inconsequential, with passages of Shakespeare appearing throughout alongside minor references to the Stamp Act and

\textsuperscript{47} Davis, \textit{Continuation}, 2.

\textsuperscript{48} Isaiah Thomas, \textit{History of Printing in America Volume I}, (New York, 1874), 339.

\textsuperscript{49} Thomas, \textit{History of Printing I}, 339.

\textsuperscript{50} Schlesinger, “The Colonial Newspapers and the Stamp Act,” 77-8 (see footnotes 28 and 30). Note that Schlesinger is mistaken in footnote 30 in claiming that Steuart’s paper began republication on November 20, 1765 under the title, \textit{Continuation of the North-Carolina Gazette}. In reality, it was James Davis who published this paper as manifested by the actual documents on register at the North Carolina State Archives. As far as this author can tell, Steuart did not begin publishing again until January of 1766.
newsworthy events in North Carolina and various other colonies. In the February 12, 1766 issue, directly under what Isaiah Thomas describes as “a small cut of the king’s arms,” Steuart detailed his reaction to the recent events in November at his home in Wilmington:

The Printer hereof cannot help observing to the Publick, that he is at present in a very disagreeable Situation. At the earnest Desire, or rather stern Command of the People, he has endeavoured, with great Difficulty, to carry on a News Paper, well knowing, that that Province that is deprived of the Liberty of the Press, is deprived of one of the darling Privileges which they, as Englishmen...

[illegible]

Printed on unstamped paper, the newspaper title includes the symbol of the king’s arms. Such a paradox suggests that while trying to remain loyal to Great Britain, Steuart’s opposition to the Stamp Act remained intact. Steuart deepens the paradox by stating that although he realizes the importance of the press, it was not by choice that he remained in the profession. Whatever his feelings and opinions, Steuart retains the last word on the issue as history has little to say on his newspaper’s importance in the colony. What makes Steuart’s story significant is the attempt by colonists to make their will known to the crown through the printing industry. What Steuart published mattered less than that he did publish. In Wilmington, Steuart’s publication was an act of defiance to British rule. Although it is true that colonial printers had become “makers and molders of


52 Thomas, History of Printing Volume II, 167.

53 Steuart, Gazette, February 12, 1766, 1.
opinion,” in many cases, public opinion helped to make and mold the opinion of colonial
printers.\footnote{Schlesinger, “The Colonial Newspapers and the Stamp Act,” 81.}

Davis’s actions also had been shaped by the will of the people. His bold decision
to publish a newspaper on unstamped paper, using the name of a competing publication,
and replacing the British insignia with an image of a skull and crossbones sent a clear
message to North Carolina and other colonies to what lengths the printing industry would
go to oppose the Stamp Act. But even as Davis served as a leader to organize Stamp Act
protests in Wilmington, his daring was also made possible by citizens of Wilmington who
demonstrated clear and uncompromising support for open rebellion against the Stamp
Act.

Printers in other locations, however, were less bold than Davis. In Philadelphia,
Benjamin Franklin’s \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette} resisted the Stamp Act but, characteristic of
Franklin, much more elusively than in North Carolina. Not ceasing publication
altogether, but not repudiating outright the Stamp Act either, the \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette}
unceremoniously removed the newspaper’s name from its mast-head. The November 7,
1765 issue of the \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette} was entitled simply but pointedly, “No Stamped
Paper to be had.”\footnote{Benjamin Franklin and David Hall, printers. \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette}, “No Stamped Paper to be had,”
November 7, 1765, 1. Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800,}

Rather than pay the tax associated with the Stamp Act, printers who removed their typical mast-head could publish anonymously and send an indirect message that they were unwilling to align themselves with the British government. The titles of the November 7 and 14 issues reflected demurely the attitude of colonial Americans after the Stamp Act was instituted-- unwilling to comply with British regulations and amazed at uncompromising actions of Parliament in instituting the act.

Although perhaps not as bold as James Davis, printers in Philadelphia by no means shied away from addressing their concern over the Stamp Act and their disbelief at seeming British ineptitude. The first issue of the Pennsylvania Gazette to be published without its mast-head took up only one printed page, devoted entirely to reactions throughout the colonies against the Stamp Act. Franklin’s newspaper, like Davis’s, documented events such as effigy burnings and hangings and harassment of Stamp Act supporters and tax collectors. But the Pennsylvania Gazette waxes more poetic than newspapers in North Carolina that record the occurrences surrounding the Stamp Act as largely quotidian events meant to be told monotonously and chronologically. "On Friday and Saturday last, the DREADFUL FIRST and SECOND Days of November, our Bells were rung muffled, and other Demonstrations of Grief Shown," records the Pennsylvania Gazette on November 7 regarding the outrage in Pennsylvania. In Halifax, Nova


Scotia, the hanging of an effigy on the city gallows “gave great pleasure and satisfaction to all the friends of liberty... as they hope from this instance of their zeal, the neighbouring colonies will be charitable enough to believe that nothing but their dependent situation, prevents them from heartily and sincerely opposing a tax unconstitutional in its nature, and of so destructive a tendency as must infallibly entail poverty and beggary on us and our posterity...”\textsuperscript{58}

New Jersey also picked up the cry of unconstitutionality but, unlike Halifax, did not stop at that. Although technically dependent on Great Britain, New Jersey did not hesitate to upset the mother country by pledging not to allow the Stamp Act to take effect within its borders. After declaring loyalty to the king and British constitution, New Jersey declared Parliament’s act “unconstitutional” and vowed to “endeavour to preserve and transmit to posterity, their liberty and property” by “discountenanc[ing] and discourag[ing]... the execution and effect of the stamp act.”\textsuperscript{59} The “general meeting of the Freemen” of New Jersey ended their statement in a darkly humorous vein by threatening to disassociate themselves from anybody who supported royal encroachment on colonial liberty:

That they will detest, abhor, and hold in the utmost contempt, all and every person or persons, who shall meanly accept of any employment or office relating to the stamp act, or shall take any shelter or advantage from the same; and all and every stamp pimp, informer, favourer and encourager of the execution of the said act; and that they will have no communication with any such person, nor speak to them on any occasion, unless it be to inform them of their vileness.\textsuperscript{60}


Apparently, rather than threaten life or property, those in New Jersey thought that a social shunning would convince their friends and neighbors not to involve themselves with anything or anybody having to do with the Stamp Act. While mentioning the unconstitutionality of the Stamp Act, New Jersey patriots passed over the arguments John Mercer had first made months before, and instead focused much more on the “vile” nature of the people associated with the act. In New Jersey, to “discountenance and discourage” the implementation of the Stamp Act seems to have meant to ignore the act completely unless reminding corroborators and supporters of the act of their abhorrent position in society.

The November 14 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* demonstrates the growing power that printers wielded in the colonies. Two weeks after the Stamp Act’s institution, publications of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* began pushing for the act’s repeal. Rather than simply record events as they happened, the paper now assumed the power to influence and even create events. Forming a kind of pact with colonial manufacturers in Pennsylvania, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* issued a series of “Resolutions and Agreements” asking subscribers to their newspaper to support American manufacturing and boycott British goods. The Stamp Act, claimed the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, would obstruct the colonies’ ability to make good on paying back British debt. Its implementation would also decrease British goods bought by colonials not willing to spend pocket change on an additional tax on goods and services.61 “In justice to ourselves [the colonists],” wrote the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, “to the Traders of Great-Britain, who usually give us Credit, and to

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the Consumers of British Manufacturers in this province,” the subscribers to the
Pennsylvania Gazette would agree to a certain set of anti-British resolutions. This would
be done “in Hopes that [our] Example will stimulate the good People of this Province to
be frugal in their Use and Consumption of all Manufactures, excepting those of
America.”62 The Pennsylvania Gazette also seems to have hoped that British
manufacturers would be influenced by their publication as well and, “find their own
Interest so intimately connected with ours, that they will be spurred on to befriend us.”63
In essence, the paper directed that their subscribers not ship goods to or receive goods
from Great Britain until the Stamp Act was repealed.64

While the Pennsylvania Gazette’s title for November 14, 1765 most likely refers
to the “remarkable occurrences” caused by resistance to the Stamp Act in the colonies,
even more remarkable is the response of the newspaper itself. While the newspaper
returned to using its mast-head and title only two issues after it had stopped the practice,
the newspaper refused to publish the printers’ names for some time after. Not until
January of 1766 when Benjamin Franklin withdrew as a partner at the paper did the
Pennsylvania Gazette begin printing them again.65 This move, when considered in light
of Franklin’s original attitude toward the Stamp Act, hardly seems surprising. But the
paper’s bold aims to change opinion and behavior in both the colonies and in Great

Britain represents a dramatic change from its initially conciliatory attitude toward the Stamp Act.

Franklin’s evolving attitude toward the Stamp Act, which is so clearly reflected in the pages of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, aligns with those of other newspaper printers throughout the colonies. They had, through various means, eluded payment of the much disparaged tax associated with the Stamp Act. Some, like Steuart, simply stopped publication of their papers. Others changed mast-heads or excluded names or printers or titles of publications. And still others went so far as to favor Stamp Act rebellions or to shape public policy against the Stamp Act. While such outspoken activity was encouraged by popular support, printers also realized their responsibility in forming public opinion. “They had become acutely conscious,” states Schlesinger,” of a new political and social force that they controlled: the power of the press. No longer were newspapers mere disseminators of information as in earlier colonial times; they had become makers and molders of opinion.”

**Political Cartoons as Outlets for Colonial Outrage**

One especially successful way of shaping public opinion was the presence of political cartoons in colonial newspapers. Commenting on the importance of political cartoons, historian E.P. Richardson writes, “Political caricatures are of particular interest to the historian because they preserve in sharp focus the men and events of the past as

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they felt and appeared at the moment.”67 This statement seems to be particularly true with regards to the Stamp Act and the years of 1765 and 1766. Although prevalent throughout the years leading up to and following the American Revolution, political cartoons during this two year span were significantly expressive in representing colonial feelings regarding the Stamp Act. Usually printed first in England, cartoon depictions of the Stamp Act were later changed or critiqued by American artists to depict a distinctly colonial point of view. Paul Revere’s *A View of the Year 1765* is an example of the way in which colonists adapted British work for their own purposes. Depicting a dragon crushing British rights and battling colonial representatives, the cartoon imitates one of British origins criticizing an earlier colonial tax in 1763.68 Because the British original was difficult for Revere to conform to issues related to the Stamp Act, Revere carefully labeled each character in the depiction and provided explanatory notes below the cartoon as well.69 Heavy with symbolism, Revere’s print depicts representatives from each colony unified in combat against the dragon who holds in its hand a copy of the Magna Charta, a traditional symbol of British rights. Rather than following the original depiction of British officials in the print, Revere includes the “Liberty Tree,” a reference to August 14, 1765, when a crowd in Boston hung an effigy of stamp collector Andrew Oliver as an act of opposition to the Stamp Act.70 On the tree in Revere’s print hangs

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70 American Antiquarian Society, “View of the Year 1765,” 22.
Figure 2. Paul Revere, *A View of the Year 1765*  
(Boston, January 27, 1766)
John Huske, originally from New Hampshire, who later moved to England, was elected to the House of Commons, and became a supporter of Grenville’s hated Stamp Act.\footnote{American Antiquarian Society, “View of the Year 1765,” 22, 25.}

All details of Revere’s depiction aside, the rhetoric Revere chose to describe his cartoon shows the anger that existed among colonists and that was advanced in the press. “AMERICA. See thy free born sons advance. And at thy Tyrant point the threatening Lance,” writes Revere. That tyrant, represented in the dragon, “grasps” British rights “between his Claws.” With America’s “forchin prostrate” on the ground, the noose hanging from the Liberty Tree is the “fittest Place for Freedoms Foes.”\footnote{Paul Revere, engraver, \textit{A View of the Year 1765}: Line engraving by Paul Revere, adapted from an English print. The Massachusetts Historical Society, \url{http://www.masshist.org/revolution/doc-viewer.php?item_id=244&mode=nav}. Accessed February 22, 2012.}

Pierre Eugène Du Simitière, a Frenchman who arrived in the colonies in 1765 during the height of political backlash by Americans against the British crown, recognized the importance of political cartoons.\footnote{Richardson, “Stamp Act Cartoons in the Colonies,” 279.} Writing home to his wife Abigail in August of 1776, John Adams described Du Simitière as interested in history and overtly political. During their meeting, Du Simitière suggested to Adams designs for a medallion commemorating the surrender of Boston to American forces and for a seal for the “confederated States.”\footnote{John Adams, Letter dated August 14, 1776, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., \textit{Letters of John Adams Addressed to His Wife Volume 2} (New York, 2011), 150.} “This M. Du Simitière is a very curious man,” writes Adams.

He has begun a collection of materials for a history of this revolution... He cuts out of the newspapers every scrap of intelligence, and every piece of speculation, and pastes it upon clean paper, arranging them under the head of that State to which they belong, and intends to bind them up in volumes. He has a list
of every speculation and pamphlet concerning independence, and another of those concerning forms of government.\footnote{Adams, August 14 letter, 151-2.} 

Two clippings that Adams could have seen when visiting Du Simitière’s small library are caricatures of the Stamp Act, one from Boston and one from Pennsylvania.\footnote{Richardson, “Stamp Act Cartoons in the Colonies,” 282.} Imitations of a cartoon originally appearing in London, Du Simitière’s clippings are important as they preserve the only surviving copy of artist John Singleton Copley’s depiction of the Stamp Act crisis.\footnote{Richardson, “Stamp Act Cartoons in the Colonies,” 279-80.} According to historian E.P. Richardson, Copley politically favored Loyalist sentiments but in the politically charged atmosphere of Boston in 1765 he was convinced to become a “propagandist” and depict colonial objections to the Stamp Act.\footnote{Richardson, “Stamp Act Cartoons in the Colonies,” 279.} 

Like Revere, Copley based his cartoon on a British original. Du Simitière affixed the caption, “The wretched Copy done in Philadelphia,” to his clipping for its lack of artistic ability and referenced the “Penna Gazette No 1926” for an explanation of the cartoon.\footnote{Richardson, “Stamp Act Cartoons in the Colonies,” 282.}

The copy of the \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette} to which Du Simitière refers describes the copy of the Copley cartoon done in Pennsylvania. “On the fatal First of November, 1765, was published,” records the \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette}, “a caricature Print, representing the deplorable State of America, and under what Influence her Ruin is Attempted.”\footnote{Benjamin Franklin and David Hall, printers. \textit{Pennsylvania Gazette}, November 21, 1765, 1. Accessible Archives, \url{http://www.accessible.com.ezproxy.lib.utah.edu/accessible/brand?MpThe+Pennsylvania+Gazette=on}. Accessed February 12, 2012.} The paper goes on to detail specific aspects of the cartoon. “Liberty” is portrayed “expiring at the Feet of America,” a tree “inscribed to Liberty” is present sprouting a thistle from
Figure 3. John Singleton Copley, *The Deplorable State of America*  
(Boston, November 1, 1765)
under which “creeps a Viper, and infixes its Sting in the Side of Liberty,” and various stamp collectors are shown standing by a gallows with the label, “Fit Entertainment for St---p M--n.”81 The newspaper’s focus on the cartoon underscores the cartoon’s message that the Stamp Act in America means a kind of death to liberty. Richardson also notes the violence portrayed in both the cartoon and the Pennsylvania Gazette’s description of the cartoon. “In America only greedy placemen would support it [the Stamp Act],” sums up Richardson. But those greedy men would “be safe from their angry countrymen only when protected by British troops.”82 Essentially, anybody supporting the Stamp Act would so anger their fellow countrymen that it would require the British army stationed in the colonies to protect them from retribution. If Copley’s cartoon did not make this clear, the editors of the Pennsylvania Gazette did. By publishing Copley’s cartoon-- and by editorializing about its meaning-- the Pennsylvania Gazette used a dramatic image to amplify its attack on the Stamp Act. Throughout the colonies, allegorical images like Revere’s and Copley’s drove home the unique dangers that the Stamp Act posed to traditional liberties.

From Thought to Action: The Collection of Harbottle Dorr

Du Simitière is not the only person in the colonies whose eclectic habits shed light on the influence of the press on ordinary people to act in rebellion against the Stamp Act. In January of 1765, a Boston shopkeeper began preserving copies of local newspapers in an effort to detail loyalist and patriot opinions and reactions to the institution of the

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81 Pennsylvania Gazette, November 21, 1765, 1.
82 Richardson, “Stamp Act Cartoons in the Colonies,” 283.
Stamp Act. “There is nothing remarkable” about the man Harbottle Dorr, remarks historian Bernard Bailyn.83 “Dorr was an ordinary active participant in the Revolution” but his actions were “extraordinarily revealing.”84 Not only did Dorr collect and preserve hundreds of pages of newspaper, he commented in the margins on popular stories or prominent names as well and eventually created appendices for his volumes of newspaper clippings. The impetus behind Dorr’s actions, claims Bailyn, was to “reveal inconsistencies and misrepresentations, reinforce the truth as he saw it, and guid[e] the reader’s thoughts into proper channels.”85 Between January of 1765 and the end of 1776, Dorr had amassed a staggering 3,280 pages of newsprint that he had annotated, cross referenced, indexed, and organized into volumes.86 His collection includes opinions on the Stamp Act, passionate tirades against the perceived loyalist governor of Boston, Thomas Hutchinson, and explanations of little known facts and references within each newspaper article.87 Bailyn uses Dorr as an example of “the animating spirit of the Revolution.”88 That Dorr would devote so much of his time and energy to preserving newsprint to educate the American public is astounding and does speak to some kind of “animating spirit” that convinced colonists to further the cause of revolution. But Dorr’s collection demonstrates also how such an “animating spirit” spread throughout the

84 Bailyn, “Harbottle Dorr,” 23.
American colonies. The influence of newspapers on Harbottle Dorr and his obsession with print are an example of the power that American printers began to wield on the general public beginning in 1765. Dorr did not simply take the text of his newspapers at face value; he interacted with them, critiqued them, and amplified the concerns they raised. Newsprint had become not only a means of communication but a call to action as well.

While Harbottle Dorr’s actions help us understand one individual’s thoughts and motives during the American Revolution, more important is the role that newspapers played in shaping Dorr and his contemporaries throughout the colonies. Serving as a foundation for knowledge and then as a platform through which Dorr could expound upon his feelings, newspapers had become “the key to expanding the insurgency.”

According to T.H. Breen, newspapers created and perpetrated an “emotional charge” that was not present in pamphlet literature during the revolutionary period. “The character of newspapers began to change after the passage of the Stamp Act in 1765,” writes Breen. “Imperial tensions fueled a popular demand for information.” Newspapers appealed to all classes of society and even the poor could read and relate to articles and information published. That Dorr’s decision to collect newspapers coincided with the widespread dissemination of knowledge beginning in 1765 is no accident. Dorr is simply one example of an individual colonist who saw his own frustrations and ideas represented in

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89 Breen, American Insurgents, 17.
90 Breen, American Insurgents, 100.
91 Breen, American Insurgents, 102.
92 Breen, American Insurgents, 102.
newspapers throughout the colonies and who was affected by the “shared knowledge”
that newspapers made accessible. “Shared knowledge,” according to Breen, strengthened
the revolutionary cause and was “derived not only from the dissemination of
information” in newspapers “but also from how people interpreted that information even
if they had not witnessed the events being described.”

Bailyn claims that Dorr’s
collection, begun in 1765, reveals “with peculiar clarity the animating spirit of the
Revolution and the essence of the public faith that it bequeathed.” But Dorr’s collection
also serves as a model of the way individual colonists learned from and were then
motivated by the press. Parliamentary actions were explained and exposed in newspapers
and as colonists began in 1765 to demand information, they began to interpret it and act
on it as well. “Without newspapers,” Breen claims, “it would have been impossible for
the militants to construct during 1774 and 1775 the sense of mutual trust upon which
organized resistance ultimately depends.”

Although little is known about Harbottle
Dorr’s active participation in Revolutionary events, his commentary at least can be seen
as a response to information obtained through the transformed medium of the newspaper.
Whether they inspired mob action as in North Carolina or individual outrage as in the
case of Harbottle Dorr, newspapers generated a collective commitment to revolution
through shared knowledge that was easily accessed and that inspired a variety of strong
reactions.

John Mein and the Stamp Act as Springboard

Acknowledging the influence of printers on popular opinion during 1765, Jeffrey Pasley surmises that the opposition press ignited by the Stamp Act lessened after the act’s repeal. While “many printers were initially spurred to resistance by the Stamp Act,” Pasley writes, “most went back to relative impartiality once the crisis was over.”96 Using Isaiah Thomas as an example, Pasley points out that in 1771, Thomas offered his Massachusetts Spy as a platform in which both Loyalists and Patriots could make their case for British oversight of colonial independence. Although himself an opposition supporter, Thomas recognized the positive economic benefits of allowing both sides to publish their opinions in his paper.97 Furthermore, writes Pasley, printers who were considered partisan to the colonial cause did not actually write political articles for their newspapers. Instead, “they served the cause by ‘editing’ in the literal sense: publishing the writings of local gentlemen and selecting public documents and items from other papers that made the Whig case... Their papers were more conduits for Revolutionary rhetoric than initiators of it.”98 This argument by Pasley that newspapers were not initiators of “Revolutionary rhetoric” denies any relationship between the colonial press and public that would drive each to do the other’s bidding. Ignoring people like Du Simitière or Harbottle Dorr who were clearly influenced by what they read, Pasley imagines a press that simply narrated events rather than instigated them. Du Simitière

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96 Pasley, The Tyranny of Printers, 36.
97 Pasley, The Tyranny of Printers, 36.
98 Pasley, The Tyranny of Printers, 37.
and Dorr demonstrate, however, the power that newspapers wielded over the colonial public as their publications influenced Revolutionary thought in the public sphere.

Although she does not directly contradict Pasley, Pauline Maier offers a more refined analysis of colonial printing after 1765. Maier does admit that, “Never again did the Americans relapse to the consternation of 1765 when they had lamented that ‘no similar Examples from former Times’ existed to guide them.” But rather than reduce the printers’ influence on the colonial public, 1765 seems to have served as a kind of proving ground in which printers grew familiar with their relationship to the public and began to master the art of shaping public opinion. In subsequent years, colonists had a working model in which the public reacted to information and demanded its dissemination, while the press controlled and shaped that information. Colonists could now look to 1765 as their “torrent of words” against the British government continued. “Colonists,” Maier writes, “now simply revived and developed the tactics first evolved during the Stamp Act crisis.” Maier’s observations of colonial opposition after the Stamp Act’s repeal capture the unique character of rebellion against the Stamp Act. The press acted as opinion maker, while the public molded information through their consumption of and reaction to colonial newspapers. Both groups affected each other in an interplay that took shape during the Stamp Act crisis of 1765 and was “revived” and “developed” throughout the subsequent stages of the build up to the Revolutionary War.

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100 Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*, 113-14.
No character from the Revolutionary era portrays this interaction between press and public better than John Mein. Publisher of the Loyalist leaning *Boston Chronicle*, Mein came up against intense opposition when, in 1769, he decided to come to the defense of several Boston merchants who had broken vows of nonimportation. Richard Archer records the difficult situation in Boston where British policies seemed especially heavy-handed. While “intimidation of British officials had halted implementation of the Stamp Act... intimidation of customs agents no longer was an option, for it would justify the continuing presence of troops” stationed in Boston that had arrived in the harbor on September 27, 1768.101 Boston merchants agreed that from January to December of 1769, they would refuse to import a variety of British goods.102 In May of 1769, a committee of Boston merchants reported that “‘six or Seven Persons’” of the 211 merchants who had agreed to nonimportation had neglected their promise and agreed “to renew their pledge, and not to purchase goods from persons who continued to import from Great Britain.”103 In search of support for their new agreement, the merchants turned to the city’s newspapers to identify those who did not comply with nonimportation practices and preach support for the merchants’ agreement.104


103 Archer, *As If an Enemy’s Country*, 146.

John Mein, entering the fray in favor of those “six or Seven” merchants listed as continuing to accept goods from Great Britain, questioned the integrity of the Boston merchants’ association, which he claimed favored its friends “to the disadvantage of longtime foes.” It remains unclear why Mein chose to counter Patriot publications in Boston, or whether his claims were even valid. What is clear is that Mein had begun a sort of battle of the presses within the city as each side published attack and counter-attack to maintain its integrity in the eyes of the public. During the months of May through October of 1769, Mein’s *Boston Chronicle* challenged Boston merchants to live up to their nonimportation agreement by publishing names of merchants alongside items they had imported and challenging the public to investigate the truth of his claims.

Mein, in fact, published a collection of excerpts from his *Boston Chronicle* from January through August of 1769 detailing the hypocrisy of Boston merchants, “who entered into a SOLEMN AGREEMENT (as they called it) to not import GOODS from Britain, and who undertook to give a ‘TRUE ACCOUNT’ of what should be imported by other persons.” In his introduction to the publication Mein writes that many in the Boston Merchants’ Association were importing goods whose value was fifty times greater than those being singled out by the organization for noncompliance with the nonimportation agreement. “However ready they were to enter into a solemn agreement,” Mein writes of the merchants’ association, “they were as ready to forget they had signed such an

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105 Archer, *As If an Enemy’s Country*, 147.

106 Archer, *As If an Enemy’s Country*, 146-53; Mein, “A State of Importations,” 16-21. Mein’s publication depicts a detailed listing of each merchant and what and how much he was importing.

Recognizing the power and success of printers throughout the colonies in influencing public action toward the British in 1765, Mein used his press to antagonize seemingly hypocritical Boston merchants whose failure to follow their own nonimportation agreement made them easy targets for public humiliation in the press. Archer stresses that, “whatever Mein’s motives, he threatened the popular movement’s efforts to reverse British policy.”

But patriot printers also remembered the industry’s success in 1765. “Recognizing the need for a thorough and timely explanation of [Mein’s] printed manifests, representatives of the merchants’ association made a full, many-pronged assault” on Mein through the newspapers, records Archer. By October 28, the Patriot press had won its battle. As Mein and his partner left their offices (both carrying loaded pistols out of habit), a crowd that had gathered outside “exchang[ed] angry words with them” and followed the two men up the street as they threatened to shoot into the crowd and, at one point, actually did discharge their pistols. In hiding for a short time, Mein eventually escaped a warrant for his arrest by seeking asylum in Great Britain. Before the end of November, Mein had fled the American colonies and would never come back.

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109 Archer, As If an Enemy’s Country, 158.
110 Archer, As If an Enemy’s Country, 153.
111 Archer, As If an Enemy’s Country, 162. Pasley also makes mention of Mein in his “The Tyranny of Printers” and records a disturbing anecdote in which John Hancock, incensed at Mein’s attempt to undermine his economic interests within the Boston merchant class, “managed to exact long-distance revenge by purchasing a £2,000 debt of Mein’s and having the printer thrown into debtor’s prison in England” (34).
Four years after the Stamp Act crisis, the end of Mein’s printing activities at the hands of a Boston crowd echoes Steuart’s forced return to printing at the hands of a crowd in North Carolina. Although Mein chose to antagonize Patriots while Steuart attempted to disassociate himself from partisan printing, both men met crowds at their front doors who demanded a change in behavior. While Steuart returned for a time to the printing industry, Mein simply fled the continent. The accounts of the colonial crowds who encouraged both men to change course, however, hardly differ. Influenced by a powerful press, these crowds were threatening enough that both Mein and Steuart would submit to their desires rather than continue on in their Loyalist or pacifist crusades. And both crowds gathered in an effort to protect the press that had influenced them. While one demanded that Steuart continue to publish, another argued that a printer who opposed liberty should not be free to practice his trade. In spite of the difference in intent, the similarities in both crowds are testament that even after the events of the Stamp Act, colonial printers and public continued to influence each other. As printers fought for an authoritative public voice, colonists validated the power that printers maintained by reacting to the information that was published.

The State of the Press a Decade After the Stamp Act

By 1774, the relationship between the colonial press and public at large had become so firmly established that even the British government realized the importance of printers in the colonies. In a letter sent from London to Philadelphia and printed in New

112 Pasley explains this colonial mindset by saying that, “Since press freedom existed for the purpose of protecting liberty, [American resistance leaders] reasoned, there should be no freedom for a press that opposed liberty” (Pasley, As If an Enemy’s Country, 34).
York by John Holt, those in Great Britain sympathetic to the colonial rebellion warned of the British government’s desire to influence American printers and the content of their publications. “We are credibly informed here, that General Gage... knew many Persons of Consequence in New-York, who could easily be brought over...” “But,” the author adds, “we hope, if there be any such among you, they may be carefully watched, and prevented from doing Injury to the Cause of Freedom.”¹¹³ The letter does not clarify who the “Persons of Consequence” might be that could be convinced to abandon the colonial cause. It notes, however, that the ministry intends to, “Offer one of your Printers Five Hundred Pounds, as an Inducement to undertake and promote Ministerial Measures.”¹¹⁴ Obviously, some in positions of power in Great Britain’s government viewed printing in America as a threat to their cause of submitting the colonies to British will. By convincing the printers to publish pro-British literature, the colonial rebellion could possibly be thwarted. The letter ends with a warning to “Friends of Liberty” to “vigilantly observe” any printer “promot[ing] Ministerial Measures” to “suppress Exertions in Favour of the Liberties of this Country.”¹¹⁵

By 1775, American colonists had efficiently established means of “observing” their printers. Whether because of advice such as that given in the 1774 letter from London or simply of their own accord, colonists worked to keep any of their printers


from supporting the British cause. Directly defying Great Britain’s desire to bribe
printers to publish literature favorable to British measures in the colonies, a convention
held in Worcester, Massachusetts in January of 1775 worked to publicly humiliate and
punish any newspaper publishers perceived as friendly to the crown.

Whereas the Enemies of these United Colonies are indefatigable in their
Endeavours to create Divisions among the Inhabitants and as there are several
Printers on the Continent, viz Rivington and Gaine of New-York, Draper, Mills,
and Hicks, of Boston, that incessantly assist them in their Endeavours by
publishing their scandalous Performances in their several News- Papers:--

Therefore Resolved, that it be recommended to the good People of this
County not to take any more of the aforesaid Papers, but that they encourage
those Printers who have invariably appeared friendly to this country.116

A full decade after the passage and imposition of the Stamp Act, both the
Americans and the British had fully realized the power of colonial newspapers to
influence their goals. In April of 1775, New York printer James Rivington, referenced in
the Worcester Resolves, was forced to issue a public apology and pledge to print only
those things that would aid in liberty’s cause within the colonies. “I am led to make this
free and public Declaration to my Fellow Citizens,” declared Rivington, “which I hope
they will consider as a sufficient Pledge of my Resolution, for the future, to conduct my
Press upon such Principles as shall not give Offence to the Inhabitants of the Colonies...
to which I am connected by the tenderest of all human Ties, and in the Welfare of which I

116 “At a Convention of Committees for the County of Worcester,” Jan 17, 1775, broadside 1. Author
unknown. Early American Imprints, Series I: Evans, 1639-1800,
http://infoweb.newsbank.com.ezproxy.lib.utah.edu/iw-search/we/Evans?
p_product=EVAN&p_action=keyword&p_theme=eai&p_nbhid=A6IV4ERKMTMzMiQ2NzA2My42NiUx
NiU6MToxMzoxNTUuOTcuMTUwLjk5&p_clear_search=yes&d_refprod=EVAN&&s_startsearch=keyword.
shall consider my own as inseparably involved.” 117 Although ten years had passed since the controversy over the Stamp Act, Rivington’s statement to the public is reminiscent of Steuart’s similar statement in North Carolina. Both men fell victim to a tradition beginning in 1765 in which newspapers were obligated to capitulate to revolutionary sentiments or be threatened by colonial crowds. The writer from London to Pennsylvania in 1774 need not have worried about printers betraying the colonial cause in America. Popular opposition to the Stamp Act in 1765 had necessitated that the press give way to a public whose presence was still just as strong a decade after it had first made its will known.

Conclusion

By the middle of March, 1766, the Stamp Act had been repealed. Colonial rebellion during the prior year had simply proved too much for Parliament to withstand. According to Edmund and Helen Morgan, Parliament felt “the great public demand for repeal” as “the Stamp Act had produced more discussion in the press than any other American measure heretofore.” 118 The American press, in effect, had succeeded in bringing about the repeal of an act whose opposition had installed printers in their position of power throughout the colonies. British politics, of course, also helped to bring about the act’s demise. With Grenville’s attempt to leave the king’s mother out of a bill that would establish an heir to the throne should the king die, Grenville’s departure


118 Morgan, The Stamp Act Crisis, 279.
was less a question than who should replace him.\textsuperscript{119} As Charles Watson-Wentworth, the second Marquis of Rockingham, replaced Grenville, Grenville naturally led the opposition in Parliament against the newly-appointed ministry and it became Rockingham’s goal to discredit Grenville and his ideas. “The best way to discredit him,” write the Morgans, referring to the Stamp Act, “would be to discredit his Act.”\textsuperscript{120} By aligning himself with London merchants who had been harmed by nonimportation agreements throughout the colonies and who blamed Grenville for such colonial action, Rockingham’s push to repeal the Stamp Act gained clout in Parliament.\textsuperscript{121} What Parliament could not do, however, was appear to give into the colonial crowd actions that had been instigated and supported by the press. After months of discussion, on March 4, 1766, both the Declaratory Act and a Repeal Bill passed the House of Commons, repealing the Stamp Act while maintaining Parliament’s authority over its colonies. Passing both bills at the same time helped Parliament to save face while backing down to colonial demands at the same time.\textsuperscript{122} The Declaratory Act, asserting Parliament’s right to tax and govern its colonies, was approved quickly in the House of Lords and the Stamp Act’s repeal followed shortly thereafter. On March 18, after months of political gaming, the king himself signed the repeal of the Stamp Act into effect.\textsuperscript{123}

While politics played an admittedly important role in the repeal of the Stamp Act, printing had obviously become a political tool that would continue to influence British-

\textsuperscript{119} Middlekauff, \textit{The Glorious Cause}, 111; Morgan, \textit{The Stamp Act Crisis}, 271-2.

\textsuperscript{120} Morgan, \textit{The Stamp Act Crisis}, 274.

\textsuperscript{121} Morgan, \textit{The Stamp Act Crisis}, 274.

\textsuperscript{122} Middlekauff, \textit{The Glorious Cause}, 121.

\textsuperscript{123} Middlekauff, \textit{The Glorious Cause}, 121.
American relations. Although printers had long been important in colonial politics, not until 1765 did they fully realize their potential in shaping colonial attitudes and behavior. As historian Michael Warner remarks, “Newspaper readerships thus became among the most important forms of political organization in the colonies.”

Throughout the ensuing years leading up to the Revolutionary War and even throughout the Revolutionary War, printers would play an extraordinary role in forming public opinion and encouraging action against the British throughout the colonies. But even with their newfound positions of prominence, printers remained subject to public sentiment when deciding upon the content of their publications. This interplay of power between colonists and printers that emerged in 1765 demanded that while printers fed information to the colonial public, colonists would have to respond in turn to what they read. Thus it was that, when people like Abner Sanger went “to grind [their] seythes and read newspapers,” in 1776, reading the newspaper had become a much more interactive and political process than ever before.

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