



# CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

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American Newspapers during Ratification

## Newspapers and the Debate over the Ratification of the Constitution

Newspapers played a critical—perhaps a determinative—role in ratifying the Constitution. Between 1787 and 1790 ninety-five newspapers were printed throughout the United States—sixty-nine in Northern states and twenty-six in Southern states. Additionally four monthly magazines were also published in the North—the *American Museum* and the *Columbian Magazine* in Philadelphia, the *American Magazine* in New York City, and the *Massachusetts Magazine* in Boston. In addition, newspaper printers sometimes also printed broadsides, pamphlets, and almanacs; while some also operated book shops that sold a variety of paper goods.

America's largest towns had the most newspapers: Philadelphia had 11 of the state's 15 newspapers; New York City had 9 of its state's 13 newspapers; and Boston had 7 of its state's 15. All four of South Carolina's newspapers were printed in Charleston; while 8 of Connecticut's 10 newspapers were printed in 8 different towns. Even though it did not have a daily newspaper, Boston had a newspaper printed every day of the week (except Sunday). Sometimes newspapers printed in one state would circulate just across the border in a neighboring state. Thus, newspapers printed in New York City and Philadelphia also circulated in New Jersey and Delaware. Such was the case with the Newburyport, Massachusetts *Essex Journal*, which was subtitled "*and New Hampshire Packet*." Three of Pennsylvania's newspapers were printed in the German language. To be financially successful, printers needed to sell at least 300 to 400 copies. Some newspapers had a press run of nearly 4,000 copies. Many printers struggled in collecting the annual fee from their subscribers.

Most newspapers were weeklies, a few biweeklies, and half a dozen dailies (none of which were printed on Sundays). Newspapers consisted of a single sheet of paper folded once to make four pages with each page set in two, three, or four columns. A masthead appeared at the top of the first page that included the newspaper's title and subtitle, the printer's name and address, the day of the week and date of publication, the volume number, the price, a woodcut image often of a ship or the state's emblem or coat of arms, and a motto in English or Latin, such as "A Free Press Maintains the Majesty of the People" in the *Boston Gazette*, "Uninfluenced by Party, we aim to be JUST" in the *Massachusetts Centinel*, and "*Open to all Parties, but Influenced by None*" in the *Newport Mercury* and also in the Philadelphia *Freeman's Journal*. Despite this espousal of neutrality, Francis Bailey's *Freeman's Journal* served as the partisan organ of one of the state's two political parties, so much so that its enemies referred to it as "Bailey's Chamber Pot." Below the masthead on page one, some newspapers contained advertisements while others printed excerpts from literary works.

The last page often included legal notices and advertisements, which were essential in defraying the costs of publication. Some newspapers also included a poetry column that would usually appear at the top of the left-hand column of the last page. Pages two and three contained “Domestic” and “Foreign” intelligence which included anonymous or pseudonymous essays, debates in state legislatures and conventions, and news of political events in different states. Snippets on a wide variety of topics—political, financial, or personal—filled the remaining empty space.

Only a few newspaper printers personally participated in either their town’s politics or in the political debates taking place in their newspapers. Federalist Benjamin Russell of the Boston *Massachusetts Centinel* and Antifederalist Eleazer Oswald of the Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer* were exceptions. Both actively wrote pieces for their papers and were personally involved in local and state politics. Oswald even served as a courier carrying information between Antifederalists in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. James Madison worriedly wrote George Washington that Oswald had closeted himself with Patrick Henry, George Mason, and other Antifederalist leaders while the Virginia ratifying Convention was in session. Most printers, however, were mere copyists. Some printers served as their town’s postmaster, while some were also the official state printer.

A handful of women either printed or assisted in printing newspapers—Mary Holt in New York City, Elizabeth Holt Oswald in Philadelphia, Mary Katharine Goddard in Baltimore, and Ann Timothy in South Carolina.

Every newspaper supported the Constitutional Convention while it met from May through September 1787. Some newspaper printers even stated that Americans should accept whatever the Convention might propose. Shortly after the Convention adjourned, David Humphreys, a trusted aide to George Washington during the war, wrote to his former chief: “the well affected have not been wanting in efforts to prepare the minds of the Citizens for the favorable reception of whatever might be the results of your Proceedings.” Humphreys told Washington that he had “no inconsiderable agency in the superintendence of two Presses, from which more News Papers are circulated, I imagine, than from any others in New England”—probably a reference to the *New Haven Gazette* and the *Connecticut Journal*. “Judicious & well-timed publications,” Humphreys wrote, “have great efficacy in ripening the judgment of men.” Henry Knox, serving in New York City as the Confederation’s secretary at war, wrote the Marquis de Lafayette that “The minds of the people at large were fully prepared for a change without any particular specification.” The printers of the Lansingburgh (Troy, N.Y.) *Northern Centinel* admitted in their newspaper that they “conceived it a duty incumbent on them to prepare the minds of their readers” for the reception of the Convention’s proposals.

Even those newspapers that eventually opposed the new Constitution were very supportive of the Constitutional Convention while it deliberated in secret in Philadelphia. On 20 June 1787, the *Pennsylvania Herald* marveled at the doings in Philadelphia. “Whatever measures may be recommended by the Federal Convention, whether an addition to the old constitution, or the adoption of a new one, it will, in effect, be a revolution in government, accomplished by reasoning and deliberation; an event that has never occurred since the formation of society.” Ten days later, the Boston *Massachusetts Centinel* warned its readers “that unless an energetick, permanent continental government is speedily established, our liberties will be set afloat in the

confusion that will inevitable ensue.—At present we . . . are every day tottering on the brink of civil dissention. . . . It would be better to embrace almost any expedient rather than to remain where we are.” Thus, even before the Constitution was published, newspapers had performed an important service in the ratification debate. Previously, whenever Congress proposed amendments to the Articles of Confederation, the public was suspicious of the central government’s attempt to grasp more powers. Now, due to the extensive favorable publicity in newspapers, there was a general predilection to accept whatever the Convention ultimately proposed. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* on 5 September 1787 predicted that, whereas 1776 is celebrated “for a revolution in favor of *Liberty*,” 1787 “will be celebrated with equal joy, for a revolution in favor of *Government*.”

During the debate over ratifying the Constitution, only about a half dozen newspapers throughout the country steadfastly opposed the proposed new form of government, while another half dozen remained neutral enough to print a significant number of Antifederalist essays. The remaining newspapers were unabashedly Federalist, printing mostly items in favor of the Constitution. Sometimes, however, Antifederalist items appeared as “straw men” only soon to be followed by Federalist critiques. Many issues of newspapers are not extant, especially those printed in North Carolina and Virginia.

By 1787, American newspapers had created a primitive news service system. Assisted by the post office’s policy of free postage, printers often arranged to exchange newspapers with four or five printers in other states and then regularly reprinted essays, news items, and fillers from these shared newspapers. Some popular items were reprinted thirty, forty, or fifty times. Obviously, given the partisan nature of the newspapers, Federalists items were much more widely reprinted than Antifederalist items. Occasionally, printers cited the sources of their reprintings, but more commonly only a dateline appeared to tell the reader where the item had originated—both the town and date. Newspapers in Philadelphia and New York City served as the principal source of Federalist and Antifederalist articles that were then reprinted throughout the country. Political partisans knew how the newspaper exchange system worked and used it to their advantage. For example, Tench Coxe, one of the most prolific Federalist writers in America, had his essays printed in Philadelphia. He would then send several copies to James Madison, then serving as a Virginia delegate to Congress in New York City, asking Madison to forward the articles to Virginia for republication and to give a copy to Alexander Hamilton who, if he felt it worthwhile, would have the essays reprinted in New York. Hamilton himself sent several numbers of *The Federalist* essays to Benjamin Rush in Philadelphia asking that they be published in that city’s newspapers. “Perhaps,” Hamilton wrote, “even if they are not wanted with you, it might be well to give them a passage through your papers to your more Southern neighbors.” Thus, even though news services did not exist, American politicians and printers knew how best to utilize newspapers to disseminate information throughout the country. As the debate over ratification intensified, the *Massachusetts Centinel* of 14 November 1787 indicated that newspapers “are now more read than the bible at this time.”

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