



# CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

[csac.history.wisc.edu](http://csac.history.wisc.edu) > Document Collections > Popular Culture and Ratification >  
American Newspapers during Ratification > New Hampshire

## New Hampshire Newspapers during Ratification

In the years 1787 and 1788, New Hampshire had five newspapers; three were published in Portsmouth, one each in Exeter and Keene. Four of the newspapers were weeklies, while the Portsmouth *New Hampshire Spy* was a semiweekly. All five newspapers supported the ratification of the Constitution. In fact, an unidentified Antifederalist leader, who was a delegate to the New Hampshire ratifying Convention, noted that “the Presses” of New Hampshire were “entirely devoted to the federalists.”

Portsmouth’s weekly *The New-Hampshire Gazette, and the General Advertiser*, printed by John Melcher (1759–1850), played an important part in the ratification debate. It printed original pieces and reprinted important articles from other states. On 5 June 1788 Melcher printed an editorial statement in the *Gazette* as the public debate over the ratification of the Constitution was winding down and the second session of the New Hampshire Convention was about to convene. Melcher wrote:

☞ The Editor of this paper, has prepared a box in his Office window for the reception of such compositions as many persons wish to pass to him, but not with their own hands: He will be much obliged to his friends and customers, for any essays of their own, or extracts from their reading, that may render the New-Hampshire Gazette more useful and pleasing to the public.—Attacks upon individuals, party quarrels, satire aimed at religious denominations of every name, immorality and obscenity, are foreign from promoting any real benefit, or proper amusement, therefore he must be excused from presenting them to the public eye.

Melcher also printed the journals of the New Hampshire Senate from 1787 to 1790, and in 1791 he began printing the journals of both legislative houses. In 1792 he also printed the acts and laws of New Hampshire. Melcher was New Hampshire’s state printer in the mid-1790s and early 1800s.

In December 1784 Robert Gerrish issued the first number of another Portsmouth weekly, *The New-Hampshire Mercury, and the General Advertiser*. The latest issue found for the *Mercury* is dated 12 March 1788. On 12 June 1788, Gerrish wrote a long letter to John Langdon, the newly elected president of New Hampshire, in which he stated that “It is evident to your Excellency that there has been a combination of designing Persons, whose sole aim was to stop my Press, and that they have effected it, in a great measure, is notorious.” Gerrish sought Langdon’s assistance in obtaining state printing jobs. He wanted to print the Senate and House journals, as well as the acts of the legislature for the next year. Gerrish had already printed the acts and laws for 18 February 1786 through 18 January 1787 and for 19 June through 23 September 1787.

In July 1786 John Lamson (1769–1807) and Henry Ranlet (1762–1807) established a weekly in Exeter, *The Freeman's Oracle, and New-Hampshire Advertiser*. Although the *Oracle* supported the ratification of the Constitution, it printed several major Antifederalist articles just prior to the meetings of both sessions of the New Hampshire Convention. This display of impartiality was unmatched by the other four New Hampshire newspapers published in 1787 and 1788. In June 1788 the *Oracle* published the election sermon of the Reverend Samuel Langdon as a forty-eight-page pamphlet entitled *The Republic of the Israelites an Example to the American States*. . . . Ranlet left the firm in August 1789, but he continued as a printer, publishing almanacs, books, pamphlets, sermons, music books, government documents, and several newspapers.

In October 1786 George Jerry Osborne, Jr. (1761–1800), who had left the *New Hampshire Gazette* in January 1786, began Portsmouth's third newspaper, a semiweekly, *The New-Hampshire Spy*. In hopes of replacing John Langdon as president of New Hampshire, General John Sullivan helped Osborne to establish the *Spy*. While political adversaries, Sullivan and Langdon were both staunch Federalists and the *Spy* was the most prolific Federalist newspaper in New Hampshire. Early in the Revolutionary War, Osborne had been a captain in the New Hampshire militia and then a captain of marines on a Continental frigate. Among the *Spy's* most important publications were the reprinting of the nine articles of "Fabius" (John Dickinson), which Langdon had received from someone in Philadelphia where they had first been printed in the *Pennsylvania Mercury*. From 1787 to 1790 Osborne printed the journals of the New Hampshire House of Representatives. In March 1789 he changed the *Spy's* title to *Osborne's New-Hampshire Spy*. Osborne remained with the *Spy* until May 1792. The *Spy* ceased publication in March 1793.

James Davenport Griffith, a former Boston newspaper printer, established *The New-Hampshire Recorder, and the Weekly Advertiser* in Keene on 7 August 1787. The *Recorder* came to an end in March 1791. Griffith, a Federalist, had problems keeping the *Recorder* in print because subscribers were remiss in paying their bills and because too few advertisements were placed. He also found it difficult to obtain paper. On 9 September 1788, Griffith addressed his readers in a lengthy piece explaining the difficulties that he had been having. He outlined his editorial policies and extolled the freedom of the press. Lastly, he emphasized the necessity of the U.S. Constitution. Griffith believed that agriculture, home manufactures, and commerce were "the three great PILLARS of our FEDERAL CONSTITUTION." On 21 May 1789 Griffith stated that his paper had an "extensive circulation" from Dartmouth College in Hanover to Portsmouth, as well as "a considerable circulation" in Massachusetts and Vermont. Griffith also published as a pamphlet an oration by the Reverend Aaron Hall, Keene's delegate to the New Hampshire Convention, celebrating New Hampshire's ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Although a Federalist, on 19 February 1788, Griffith demonstrated his impartiality by reprinting an Antifederalist piece, "A Watchman," from the nearby Massachusetts *Worcester Magazine*, 7 February, a Federalist newspaper that had printed it as proof that it was impartial.

All five New Hampshire newspapers are available on America's Historical Newspapers (Readex). In 1787 and 1788 the extant runs for two of Portsmouth's newspapers are excellent. The weekly *New Hampshire Gazette's* file is complete, while that for the semiweekly *New Hampshire Spy* lacks only three issues. The run for the *New Hampshire Mercury*, Portsmouth's third newspaper, ends on 12 March 1788. The Exeter *Freeman's Oracle* lacks five issues, while the *New Hampshire Recorder* lacks thirteen issues.

Not published in New Hampshire but circulating in the southeastern part of the state, *The Essex Journal & New-Hampshire Packet*, a staunchly Federalist newspaper, was printed by William Hoyt in Newburyport, Massachusetts, a port town located on the Merrimack River five miles from New Hampshire's southern border and twenty-two miles from Portsmouth. The newspaper printed few original pieces about the Constitution during the ratification debate, but it reprinted major Federalist and Antifederalist articles from other states.

Post riders, who carried the mails, were crucial to the dissemination of New Hampshire's five newspapers. For example, in late 1787 and early 1788, as the post office was changing from stagecoaches to post riders to carry the mail, post rider Samuel Bean advertised in the *New Hampshire Spy* and *New Hampshire Mercury* that he traveled every week between Portsmouth and Concord with stops in Exeter and Haverhill, Mass., carrying both the mails and Portsmouth newspapers. People interested in acquiring New Hampshire newspapers were to contact the printer or Bean at "Col. Brewster's Coffee-House Tavern" in Portsmouth. In March and April 1788, Bean advertised in the Exeter *Freeman's Oracle* and *New Hampshire Gazette* that he could supply New Hampshire and Massachusetts newspapers.

On 2 June 1788 Tobias Lear informed George Washington that "so little information about the Constitution had been diffused among the people" of New Hampshire. He claimed that "there have been few, or no original publications in the papers & scarcely any republications." Lear underestimated what the New Hampshire newspapers had printed and reprinted. But editors in New Hampshire frequently had difficulty obtaining out-of-state material. On 18 March, the arch-Federalist *New Hampshire Spy* complained that, for the last three months, it was not receiving enough newspapers from other states. The printer asked his former correspondents in New York City and Philadelphia why the mails had not brought newspapers. On 3 April Eleazer Oswald, the printer of the Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer*, responded that the problem was caused by a new ruling by Ebenezer Hazard, the Confederation postmaster general, that cancelled contracts with stagecoach operators and reverted to post riders. On 28 March the *Spy* printed observations from a correspondent "on the late *alarming* and *iniquitous* practice of interrupting the regular channel of intelligence." On 11 April the *Spy* sarcastically noted: "Received by this day's mail *one Philadelphia paper!*—*When will miracles cease?*" On the same day the *Spy* reprinted a lengthy statement by Eleazar Oswald discussing the problem with the post office and praising the freedom of the press. The statement had appeared in Oswald's *Independent Gazetteer* on 12 March. The *Spy* also reprinted Hazard's defense of his policies that had appeared in the *New York Journal* on 21 March. And on 15 April the semiweekly *Spy* reprinted a lengthy response to Hazard by "A True Federalist" (Eleazer Oswald?), *New York Journal*, 25 March.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XXVIII: New Hampshire (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2017), lxx–lxxix.