

Rhode Island Newspapers

From 17 September 1787, the day the Constitutional Convention promulgated the Constitution, to 29 May 1790, the day the Rhode Island Convention ratified the Constitution, four weekly newspapers were published in Rhode Island, two each in the Federalist strongholds of Newport and Providence. The *Newport Herald* and the *Providence United States Chronicle* were printed on Thursdays and the *Providence Gazette* appeared on Saturdays. (See below for the various days on which the *Newport Mercury* was printed.) Complete runs for this period are available for the *Herald*, *Chronicle*, and *Gazette*. Only about sixty percent of the issues of the *Mercury* are extant.

The *Providence Gazette* and the *Newport Herald*, in particular, supported the Constitution. The *United States Chronicle* was apparently neutral, devoting roughly an equal amount of space to essays supporting and criticizing the Constitution. The type of items generally published in extant issues of the *Newport Mercury* makes it impossible to determine conclusively if the paper had a political bias.

All four Rhode Island newspapers printed a variety of items on the Constitution. They published essays written by Rhode Islanders, either unsigned or signed with a pseudonym. There were extracts of letters from writers identified only by their locations, occasional editorial comments, and poems. More common were observations of unidentified correspondents and news reports. Newspapers reported on legislative and state Convention proceedings, town meetings, and celebrations. The mix of items printed varied by newspaper. The four newspapers also reprinted items that originated in the other states. The variety of out-of-state items was similar to the Rhode Island material, and again the mix of reprinted material on the Constitution varied. Some items were printed or reprinted at the request of a newspaper's readers.

In addition to discussing the Constitution, newspapers also covered local and state politics, with especial emphasis on the politics of paper money. The articles on state and local politics, as well as those on the Constitution, were often laced with bitter personal invective as individuals were frequently described with unflattering sobriquets. The individuals described were apparently well known to many inhabitants in this small, compact state, but historians have had difficulty identifying to whom the descriptions referred. Because the state was small, newspapers were within the reach of many people who discussed them in several venues, especially in town meetings. From newspapers Rhode Islanders learned the arguments for and against the Constitution and the chances for its ratification in Rhode Island and other states.

The Providence Gazette: and Country Journal was established in 1762 by William Goddard, and for a time it was operated by his mother Sarah. In September 1767 Sarah Goddard took on as a partner John Carter (1745–1814), a native of Philadelphia who had apprenticed with Philadelphia printers Benjamin Franklin and David Hall. Carter became sole owner of the *Providence Gazette* in 1768, printing his first issue on 12 November. He was a firm supporter of the patriot cause during the revolutionary movement against Great Britain. An active job printer, he also published numerous broadsides, pamphlets, and books, including Rhode Island laws and statutes. Carter published his newspaper on Saturdays. He was also the postmaster of Providence from 1772 to 1792.

Carol Sue Humphrey, a historian of journalism, published a detailed analysis of Rhode Island newspapers and the ratification of the Constitution. She found that John Carter, despite supporting the Constitution, published a significant number of Antifederalist essays. Between September 1787 and May 1790, states Humphrey, Carter printed 90.50 columns of pro-Constitution essays and 39.50 columns against the Constitution. Carter, she asserts, was more impartial early in the debate over the Constitution. After 19 July 1788, he printed no more Antifederalist essays (“The Rhode Island Pillar’: Rhode Island Newspapers and the Ratification of the Constitution,” *Rhode Island History*, 52 [1994], 52). Some of the disparity in the space allotted to Federalist and Antifederalist essays was possibly the result of Carter’s reprinting all nine of the Federalist “Fabius” essays between 3 May and 2 August 1788.

Even though the *Providence Gazette* was somewhat impartial early in the debate over the Constitution, John Carter’s impartiality was called into question. On 29 December Carter responded to the criticism:

Whatever may have been my private sentiments respecting public measures, I have never suffered them to interfere with what I conceive to be the indispensable duty of an impartial Printer; nor have I at any time suffered myself to become the *dupe* or *tool* of a party. My sentiments are well known in this and most of the other States, particularly on the subject of paper money (to which an allusion seems intended by another writer on this occasion) and the suggestions of my adversaries cannot fix a stain on my reputation. Although a *Fœderalist*, and perhaps zealous as the “*Pamphlet-Monger*” himself, yet my conduct as a Printer would certainly merit the severest reprehension, were I impertinently to attempt the preclusion of *free enquiry*. For this purpose was the constitution sent to the several States. The cause of truth can never suffer from argument; indeed argument would of course cease, were the papers partially to hold up *one* side of a question only.—On the broad basis of an *uncontroled* and *liberal* press, I found a humble claim to public patronage. On these principles I have hitherto had “*spirit*” and “*stability*” to conduct it, and I trust that the frowns of *disappointed ambition* will not swerve me from the path of rectitude.

The controversy over Carter’s editorial policy escalated in early 1788 into a scurrilous and personal newspaper war in which the freedom of the press was a major issue. See the Editors’ Note entitled “The Rhode Island Reprinting of Extracts from ‘A Citizen of America,’ ” 22–29 December 1787 for a listing of some of the essays involved in this bitter dispute. All of these essays, plus others not cited in this Editors’ Note, can be found as a grouping under 22 December 1787.

On 17 April 1790, as Rhode Island was on the verge of ratifying the Constitution, John Sullivan, U.S. district judge for New Hampshire, wrote to one of that state’s U.S. Senators, John Langdon, about a post office position for John Carter. Sullivan described the Providence printer “as high a federalist as he was a whig when you knew him” during the struggle for independence from Great Britain. Carter had served in the post office “for years under Doctor Franklin & conducted to approbation.” Sullivan concluded his letter: “I should not give you the Trouble but I am bound in Justice to his merit to use every effort to serve a man whom I have known in the worst of times & has ever been a True friend to the Interest of his Country and now is an avowed Enemy to antifederalism paper money and Tender Laws even though countenanced by the Rhode Island assembly.”

Bennett Wheeler (c. 1753–1806), a native of Halifax, Nova Scotia, arrived in Providence in September 1776, and after a few months he began working for the *Providence Gazette*, remaining there until December 1778. In March 1779 Wheeler formed a partnership with Solomon Southwick to publish *The American Journal; and General Advertiser* in Providence. Southwick left the firm in December 1779, and Wheeler printed the paper until August 1781, after which he continued working as a job printer. On Thursday, 1 January 1784, Wheeler published the first issue of *The United States Chronicle: Political, Commercial, and Historical*. The *Chronicle* continued to appear on Thursdays and by 1788 “circulated in every town in the State” (“A Rhode-Island Landholder,” *United States Chronicle*, 20 March 1788).

The *United States Chronicle*, as historian Carol Sue Humphrey has demonstrated, devoted more space to the publication of essays about the Constitution than any other Rhode Island newspaper. Moreover, declares Humphrey, Wheeler’s publication of these essays was “remarkably balanced.” The *United States Chronicle* devoted 71.75 columns in support of the Constitution and 75.25 columns opposing it. The latter figure considerably exceeded the amount of space allotted to pieces opposing the Constitution in either the *Providence Gazette* or the *Newport Herald*, which together printed only 45.50 such columns.

Beginning on 6 March 1788 Wheeler printed reports of the proceedings of the Rhode Island legislature. Not referring to arch-Federalist Peter Edes’s legislative reports in his *Newport Herald*, Wheeler gave his reasons for publishing the legislature’s proceedings:

It being the Wish of almost every Man in the State, that the Proceedings of the Legislature should be regularly published, as soon after their Meeting as possible, the Editor of the Chronicle attended at the late Session, in order, as far as in his Power, to gratify the Wishes of the Public.—Having but a very imperfect Knowledge of Short-Hand Writing, he has not been able to do Justice to the Debates—but thus far he engages, that the Votes are accurately stated, and that all the Ideas here found fell from some or other of the Gentlemen speaking.—His Aim is to be of Service in the Line of his Profession, and he hopes this first Attempt, in this Way, will meet the Candour of the Public.

Wheeler’s efforts to provide a balanced view of the debate over the Constitution were not appreciated by some Federalists. “Marplot, Jun.” in the *Newport Herald*, 9 April 1789, charged that the printer of the *United States Chronicle* “assiduously” attended every legislature in order “to pay his court to the paper money majority” and that the printer “was in fact admitted into the *sanctum sanctorum* of the late grand nocturnal convention at East-Greenwich!—These things, it is true, seem to be directly in the face of the *federalism* of the Printer of the *United States Chronicle*.” “Marplot, Jun.” admitted that, while some readers looked upon Wheeler as an Antifederalist, others viewed him as a Federalist.

On 23 April 1789 Wheeler apparently left it to essayists to make it easier for him to demonstrate his impartiality when he published this notice: “*The printing of controversial, or Party Pieces, being attended with much extra Trouble—in future we shall expect PAY for all such inserted in the Chronicle—as is the Custom in other Places.*”

On 5 December 1789 “Veritas,” writing in the *Providence Gazette*, was angered by “the snarlings of certain demagogues of power” who used the *United States Chronicle* “to set the mechanic interest of this town at variance with the mercantile . . . making discord the constant source of their importance.” These “restless beings” had discharged their “venom so often and copiously” in the *Chronicle*. “Veritas” asserted that economic difficulties were not brought

about by any class but that these difficulties “have arisen from the nature and present situation of our government, which has sunk both public and private credit in one common vortex of destruction.”

Peter Edes (1756–1840), the printer of the *Newport Herald*, was a native of Boston and the son of patriot Benjamin Edes, who with John Gill published *The Boston Gazette, or Country Journal* from 1755 to 1775. The *Gazette* was in the forefront of the revolutionary movement in Massachusetts against Great Britain. In 1779, Peter Edes and his brother joined the paper and Peter continued in that partnership until 1784, when he established in Boston *The Exchange Advertiser*, the first issue of which was published on 30 December. The newspaper’s final issue appeared on 4 January 1787. Shortly thereafter Edes moved to Newport, where he established the *Newport Herald*.

The *Newport Herald* could be described as an organ of the town’s merchants since the newspaper voiced its fierce opposition to the Country party and its paper-money system. Moreover, when the Constitutional Convention promulgated the new Constitution in September 1787, the *Herald* vigorously supported its ratification. Edes’s partisanship led one observer to note that “The majority [Country party] call it [the *Newport Herald*] the scourge—It indeed makes them bleed and groan” (Henry Channing to David Daggett, 28 September 1787). William Ellery, a member of Newport’s mercantile community, referred to Edes as “Our printer” (to Benjamin Huntington, 30 September 1788).

The first issue of *The Newport Herald* appeared on Thursday, 1 March 1787, and Peter Edes quickly revealed his hostility to the Country party. Perhaps his most valuable contribution to the political battle was his publication of the proceedings of the state Assembly. On 22 March 1787 Edes started printing a series of reports of these proceedings, completing the series on 21 January 1790. In all, Edes described eighteen sessions, including the “fallen” session of August 1787.

Peter Edes’s legislative reports focused on paper money. In them he excoriated its proponents who threatened to cut funding to the *Newport Herald* for government printing. Since official records covering the legislative sessions are sparse, Edes’s reports provide considerable information on the politics of legislation, demonstrating the powerful influence of paper-money forces. Some of Edes’s reports were widely reprinted in out-of-state newspapers.

The purpose of Edes’s report of the proceedings of the March 1788 session of the Assembly, which he printed on 10 April, was evident from his preface: “The history of our government for two years past, is the history of a PAPER MONEY SYSTEM, as all our measures have been subservient to it.—We have therefore conceived it our duty, to continue an impartial detail of the progress of this system, not with a view of familiarizing injustice, nor with an intent of immortalizing the patrons of it, but to guard our fellow citizens from artful misrepresentations, and to arouse them from the apathy of past delusions to a sense of our common danger, trusting that we may thereby revive the dormant virtues in this State, and that our deviations from justice and honor may prove a salutary monitor to others.” Edes’s reporting impressed William Ellery who wrote that “The General Assembly finished their Session last Saturday.—The *Newport Herald* will I suppose according to custom give a true account of their proceedings” (to Ebenezer Hazard, 16 June 1788).

On 15 May 1788 Edes published four paragraphs under the heading “*A succinct view of affairs.*” In the first three paragraphs, he attacked the paper-money system, the refusal of the

Country party to accept criticism of its policies, and the rejection of the Constitution by Antifederalists. The fourth paragraph states: "Thus engaged in a civil contest, novel as well as severe, we have become the political phenomenon of the day, and the world stands gazing for the event,—We shall therefore, from duty as well as information, faithfully continue an impartial detail of every interesting occurrence, unbiassed by party and undaunted by the threats of power, trusting that honor, virtue and justice will, ere long, illumine this degraded State." Seventeen newspapers reprinted these four paragraphs.

The Country party punished Peter Edes's partisanship, in particular by refusing to pay him for printing the state's laws. Convinced that legislative transparency was closely linked with the *Newport Herald's* "extensive circulation," Edes continued to publish the acts "*gratis*" in order to ensure their wide availability.

On 22 October 1789 Peter Edes rejoiced in the suspension of the tender provision of the paper-money act of 1786 and the improved chance of Rhode Island's ratifying the Constitution. He prefaced his report of this October legislative session with an editorial policy statement:

The printer of the *Newport Herald* with the highest satisfaction announces to the public the following sketch of the proceedings of the Legislature of this State at their last session, as affording a prospect that the discordant sentiments which have too long agitated the minds of the citizens of this State will soon subside. On this occasion he begs leave to observe, that addicted to no party, he has repeatedly declared his press to be impartial—*It is to contradiction, consequently to the liberty of the press, that physics, morality and politics, owe their improvement*, is the motto of this paper; and he conceives that the sentiment is founded in truth—he shall therefore, in consistency with his motto, continue to publish any pieces which may be offered to his press on these subjects, leaving it with the public to decide who has the best of the argument, or on which side the truth lies—all he wishes from his readers is, that they would not attribute to him any impropriety in such publications, remembering that they, and not the printer, should be the judges of their propriety.—If printers were to undertake to determine upon the fitness of pieces for publications, they would certainly give offence to many writers, and might, by forestalling the public judgment, deprive the community of many useful observations.—Agriculture, manufactures, morality and politics, not party politics, but politics in general, considered as the science of legislation and government, are themes copious and beneficial:—and pieces on these subjects, he trusts, will embellish his paper when harmony and concord shall commence their peaceful reign.

While Peter Edes paid particular attention to the Country party's paper-money system, the *Newport Herald* campaigned for Rhode Island's ratification of the Constitution. According to Carol Sue Humphrey, the *Herald* devoted 64.25 of its columns to essays favoring the Constitution and only 6.00 columns to those opposing it. The *Herald* printed more essays originally written in Rhode Island than any other Rhode Island newspaper but reprinted fewer out-of-state essays on the Constitution. Hence the *Herald's* total of 70.25 columns hardly compares to the 147 columns of the *United States Chronicle* or the 130 columns of the *Providence Gazette*. The *Herald's* low figure on essays is due, in part, to the many editorial comments and observations of correspondents that it printed, the great space devoted to legislative proceedings, and the more extensive reprinting of non-partisan out-of-state news items. The *Herald's* readers knew that Edes was biased. He persisted in his views, but in 1791 he ended publication of the *Herald* and returned to Boston.

Rhode Island's fourth newspaper, the *Newport Mercury*, was established in June 1758 by James Franklin as *The Newport Mercury, or, the Weekly Advertiser*. Early in 1759 the title was shortened to *The Newport Mercury*. After Franklin died in April 1762, his mother Ann took over and soon thereafter Samuel Hall became her partner. Hall was sole proprietor from 1763 to 1768. Solomon Southwick, a strong supporter of the revolutionary movement against Great Britain, was proprietor from 1768 until December 1776, when he suspended publication just before the British occupied Newport. Henry Barber resumed the publication of the *Newport Mercury* in January 1780, and in 1785 Solomon Southwick joined him as a partner. In January 1787 Southwick became the sole owner, but illness and a paper shortage forced Southwick to suspend publication from 8 November to 22 December 1787. The next extant issue is for 28 January 1788, at which time Henry Barber was listed as the publisher. Barber continued as publisher until his death in 1800.

Solomon Southwick (1731–1797), a native of Newport, attended the College of Philadelphia (now the University of Pennsylvania) beginning in 1754 but left before his class graduated in 1757. The college eventually granted him an honorary A.B., and in 1780 he received an A.M. from Yale College. From 1778 to at least 1780, Southwick was Continental deputy commissary general of issues for Rhode Island, and he was a justice of the peace for Newport, 1780–81. (For an account of Southwick's career before 1780, see Patrick T. Conley, *Rhode Island's Founders: From Settlement to Statehood* [Charleston, S.C., 2010], 91–93.) Henry Barber (c. 1748–1800), whose family emigrated from England and settled in Westerly, R.I., was a bookseller as well as a printer.

The days of publication for the *Newport Mercury* varied for the period from September 1787 through May 1790. From September 1787 through June 1789 all but three extant issues appeared on Mondays. For the period from July 1789 through January 1790, all extant issues were published on Wednesdays. From February through May 1790 the *Mercury* appeared on either Mondays, Fridays, or Saturdays.

From 17 September to 31 December 1787, either no issues of the *Newport Mercury* were printed or few survive. Because Southwick reprinted only one essay on the Constitution, his position on the Constitution cannot be determined. In January 1788 Henry Barber became publisher. He printed or reprinted news items but published few essays on the Constitution. A piece in the *Newport Herald* of 31 July 1788 may explain why Barber printed so few essays. The author of the item asserted that Barber had "lately received pieces *favouring of party-spirit or personal reflections*" but allegedly refused to publish the pieces "*thrust under his door*" unless they were "*signed or brought by the authors or some other respectable gentleman.*" The piece concluded that the press "should be entirely free and unrestrained." What Barber's position on the Constitution was cannot be determined from the surviving issues of the *Mercury*.

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