

## Massachusetts Newspapers during Ratification

Twelve newspapers were published in Massachusetts between 17 September 1787 and 1 April 1788. Eleven of them appeared during the entire period. During the debate over Massachusetts ratification, at least one newspaper appeared in Boston on every day of the week, except Sunday; outside Boston, two newspapers were printed on every Tuesday, two on Wednesday, and two on Thursday. Five newspapers were printed in Boston, the principal town and state capital, and one each in Newburyport, Salem, Worcester, Springfield, Northampton, Portland (Maine), and Pittsfield. Two Boston newspapers, the *Massachusetts Centinel* and *Massachusetts Gazette*, were semiweeklies, while the remaining ten were weeklies. (The *American Herald* became a semi-weekly with the issue of 28 February 1788.) Complete files exist for eight of the twelve newspapers. The *Boston Gazette* lacks one issue (21 January 1788); the *Cumberland Gazette* one (21 February 1788); and the *Hampshire Chronicle* three (18 September and 2 October 1787, and 19 March 1788). No issue of the *American Centinel* is extant.

Most newspapers were Federalist. The *Massachusetts Centinel* was the dominant Federalist paper. The *American Herald* was the preeminent Antifederalist one, although the *Independent Chronicle*, and *Massachusetts Gazette* (and to a lesser degree, the *Boston Gazette*) also printed significant amounts of Antifederalist material. The material published on the Constitution in Massachusetts was so voluminous that "A Friend for Liberty" noted that newspapers "are now more read than the bible at this time" (*Massachusetts Centinel*, 14 November 1787).

The five newspapers printed in Boston were the *Massachusetts Centinel*, *American Herald*, *Boston Gazette*, *Independent Chronicle*, and *Massachusetts Gazette*. The *Massachusetts Centinel* and *Independent Chronicle* had the most extensive circulation (Samuel Hall to Mathew Carey, 14 July 1788, Edward Carey Gardiner Collection, Mathew Carey Papers, PHi).

The *Massachusetts Centinel*, one of the most widely circulated newspapers in America, was published on Wednesdays and Saturdays by Benjamin Russell. A native of Boston, Russell was apprenticed to Isaiah Thomas (see below) in 1780 and 1781. Russell and William Warden published the first issue of the *Centinel* on 24 March 1784. Two years later, Russell became sole editor upon Warden's death.

Russell was an early advocate for a stronger central government. While the Constitutional Convention sat, the *Centinel* was filled with articles that advocated strengthening Congress. (For example, see [CC:36](#), [45](#), [59](#).) After the Convention adjourned, Russell wrote articles and editorials supporting the new Constitution. He also participated in local politics, especially as a leader of Boston's tradesmen. As a member of a three-man committee, Russell drafted the report of the tradesmen who met in Boston's Green Dragon

Tavern on 7 January 1788, two days before the state Convention convened, to voice their wholehearted support of the Constitution. His eulogist described him as “an ardent, sincere, enthusiastic Federalist,—an active and indefatigable Federalist,—a Federalist even before there was a constitution, a Federalist even before his party had taken its distinct name and character.”

In a preface to his publication of the Constitution on 26 September, Russell said he strained “a nerve” to get this “HIGHLY INTERESTING and IMPORTANT communication... although lengthy” before his readers and the general public as quickly as possible. Although the masthead of the *Massachusetts Centinel* carried the motto “Uninfluenced by Party, we aim to be JUST,” Russell strongly advocated the Constitution. An example of his partisanship is his comment upon publishing “New England” an answer to the Antifederalist pamphlet, *Letters from the Federal Farmer* “If the foregoing doth not operate a DAMPER indeed, to the (*anti-*) Federal Farmer’s letters, chicanery and falshood are invincible to justice and truth.”

The *Centinel* specialized in the brief article that, in vigorous and colorful language, extolled the Constitution and its framers or scored its critics. In early October 1787, Russell announced that no Antifederalist essay would be published in the *Centinel* unless the author left his name to be made public if requested. Within a month, however, he succumbed to criticism and discarded this policy. Russell published some Antifederalist items, although he usually printed accompanying Federalist items that refuted the Antifederalist pieces. He took notes of the debates in the Massachusetts Convention, which he published in the *Centinel*. (In October 1787 the *Centinel* printed the debates of the state House of Representatives on the resolutions for calling the Convention.)

No printer celebrated the ratification of the Constitution more originally. On 16 January, a week after Connecticut had ratified, Russell printed an illustration of five pillars, each representing a state that had ratified the Constitution, and a sixth pillar representing Massachusetts being positioned in the colonnade by the hand of God. Each time a state ratified, Russell added another pillar.

The *American Herald* was published on Mondays by Edward Eveleth Powars, who also reprinted or printed several Antifederalist pamphlets (see below). While the Constitutional Convention was meeting, Powars advocated the acceptance of “the new Fœderal Constitution,” which he believed the Convention would recommend. After the Constitution appeared, he published almost no original material favoring the Constitution, although he reprinted Federalist, as well as Antifederalist, items from out-of-state newspapers, particularly from the Antifederalist Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer* and *New York Journal* and the Federalist *Pennsylvania Gazette*.

Such a policy, plus Powars’ criticism of the Federalist *Massachusetts Centinel*’s restrictive publication policy, brought him under severe criticism. “John De Witt” complained in the *Herald* of 3 December that Federalists sought “to fetter and suppress” the free discussion of the Constitution by “THREATNING” Powars and “DROPPING” their subscriptions to his newspaper. Powars was intent on keeping his newspaper “OPEN to all parties, and uninfluenced by none” even though he might lose more customers. The quoted

material was probably a play on the *Centinel's* motto. A correspondent in the *New York Journal*, 27 December, applauded Powars' impartiality, mentioned his loss of subscribers, and encouraged those who took Boston newspapers to subscribe to the *Herald*.

In late December 1787, Powars was attacked by Federalists for his proposed republication, in pamphlet form, of the *Letters from a Federal Farmer*—a major Antifederalist work which New York Antifederalists were distributing widely. “Junius” wrote that, after reading an issue of the *Herald*, he “committed it to the flames. It was fraught (with some exceptions) with defamation and slander.” Powars had made the *Herald* a “vehicle of so much stupidity, finished impudence and complete puppyism.” Another critic hoped that “the wise and honest part of the community” would not buy Powars’ “antifederal farrago.” Ignoring such threats and criticism, Powars expanded the *Herald* to a semiweekly on Thursday, 28 February. By the summer, however, cancelled subscriptions had taken their toll, and Powars was forced to cease publication on 30 June. Two months later he resumed publication of the *Herald* as a weekly on Thursdays in Worcester. In his first issue on 21 August, Powars stated that he was not a “dependent retainer of a party,” that “TRUTH” was “his only object,” and that he hoped “not to be the victim of this his unaltered determination.”

*The Boston Gazette, and the Country Journal*, printed on Mondays by Benjamin Edes and Son (Benjamin, Jr.), had strong Antifederalist sympathies, but it also printed Federalist pieces. Before the Revolution, the *Gazette's* office was a favorite meeting place of Samuel Adams and other Revolutionary leaders, who filled its columns with anti-British propaganda. According to Isaiah Thomas, “no newspaper was more instrumental” than the *Gazette* in bringing about American independence. The *Gazette's* motto was “a free press maintains the majesty of the people.” Its masthead included the Latin phrase “*Libertas et natale solum*” (Liberty and native land).

*The Independent Chronicle: and the Universal Advertiser*, published on Thursdays, had strong Antifederalist leanings, although it, too, published Federalist material. Its publishers, Thomas Adams and John Nourse, were also printers to the General Court. A frequent contributor to the *Chronicle* was Antifederalist Benjamin Austin, Jr., who had replaced Samuel Adams as leader of the North End mob. Like the *Massachusetts Centinel*, the *Chronicle* published reports of the debates of the Massachusetts ratifying convention and its own illustration of the pillars of ratification.

The *Massachusetts Gazette*, published on Tuesdays and Fridays by John Wincoll Allen, was probably the state's most impartial newspaper. Although it published many Federalist pieces, it printed more original Antifederalist material than any other Massachusetts newspaper. On 1 January 1788, Allen made the usual printer's plea, requesting payment from his subscribers. He predicted that 1788 would be “no less important to the liberties of Americans of the present generation, than to the peace and tranquillity of unborn millions in future ages.... The establishment of our ‘dear country’ on the firm basis of federal, energetick and liberal government, is the great event anticipated, wished, and expected. To this great end, how far the youthful exertions of the Editor have been effective, the publick will please candidly to judge—remembering, however, that the Gazette, ever uninfluenced by

party—a darling privilege which freemen WILL enjoy—is a channel through which the unbiassed sentiments of many—and good men too—have been ushered to publick investigation.”

*The Essex Journal & New-Hampshire Packet*, printed on Wednesdays by William Hoyt, was a solid Federalist newspaper. It reflected the attitudes of Newburyport’s commercial community which hoped that the Constitution would resolve the town’s economic and political difficulties.

*The Salem Mercury; Political, Commercial, and Moral*, a Federalist newspaper published on Tuesdays by John Dabney and Thomas C. Cushing, was somewhat unique. Unlike most newspapers, the *Salem Mercury*, when reprinting unsigned items and reports, often summarized them, reprinted only parts of them, or even combined excerpts from different reprinted items. Moreover, it often did not identify the source of the material it was reprinting, thereby seeming to print new articles. Sometimes, the *Mercury* would both summarize and quote from an article. Thus it can be difficult to distinguish what was original to the *Mercury* from what was obtained from other newspapers.

In April 1775 Isaiah Thomas moved his pro-patriot *Massachusetts Spy* from Boston to Worcester. He stopped publication of the *Spy* on 30 March 1786 to protest an act passed the previous year laying a tax on newspaper advertisements. On 11 April Thomas, to circumvent the tax, commenced publication of the octavo-size *Worcester Magazine*. Appearing on Thursdays, the *Magazine* was dated only by the week of the month and the year (e.g., third week in November 1787). After the tax on advertisements was repealed, Thomas restored the newspaper format on 3 April 1788, with the title *Thomas’s Massachusetts Spy*. He adopted the motto “The Liberty of the Press is essential to the Security of Freedom” taken from Article XVI of the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights of 1780. The *Worcester Magazine* was staunchly Federalist. It did not print an original Antifederalist essay until 7 February 1788, asserting on that date that “The following [article] was a few days since sent us for publication; as it is the first piece written in this county, against the Federal Constitution, that has been offered to us for publication, we think proper, in order to shew impartiality, to publish it, notwithstanding the author evidently appears to be much mistaken in some of his assertions.” The *Magazine*, however, reprinted some Antifederalist material from other newspapers. Thomas was more than just a newspaper publisher; he also published books, pamphlets, and a widely circulated almanac. Benjamin Franklin, who had appointed him postmaster of Worcester in 1775 (a position Thomas still held in 1787–88), called him “the Baskerville of America.”

In September 1787 the mildly Federalist *Hampshire Chronicle: Political and Historical, Moral and Entertaining*, established in March 1787 by John Russell and “Published every Tuesday Evening,” was located in the Connecticut River town of Springfield. In May Zephaniah Webster joined Russell, but the partnership dissolved with the issue of 9 October. Webster “relinquished” the newspaper to Ezra W. Weld and Isaiah Thomas with the issue of 8 January 1788. The new editors, also Federalists, adopted the motto: “An impartial Administration of justice, is the Glory and Ornament of a wise and good government.” (The *Chronicle’s* motto

had been “be just and fear not.”) In the issue of 15 January, Weld and Thomas announced that the *Chronicle* “will in future be published on *Wednesdays*.”

The Federalist *Hampshire Gazette* was published on Wednesdays in the Connecticut River town of Northampton by William Butler, who had started the newspaper in early September 1786 “by the advice and encouragement of a number of Gentlemen” in Hampshire County. The primary object of the *Hampshire Gazette* was to defend and support the state government against the “regulators” or Shaysite insurgents, who were active from the summer of 1786 through mid-February 1787. In the ratification debate, Butler published some original Federalist articles, but most important he reprinted eleven of the thirteen strongly Federalist essays of “A Landholder” (Oliver Ellsworth), which were originally printed in the *Connecticut Courant* and *American Mercury* of the Connecticut River town of Hartford.

The Portland *Cumberland Gazette*, published on Thursdays by Antifederalist Thomas B. Wait, reprinted both Antifederalist and Federalist items from other states. (Two issues in November 1787 were printed on Fridays.) Wait strongly supported the inclusion of a bill of rights in the Constitution.

The Pittsfield *American Centinel* was apparently established in late September 1787 by Ezekiel Russell and Roger Storrs. No issue of the *Centinel* is extant.

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