THE CONTROVERSY OVER THE POST OFFICE AND THE CIRCULATION OF NEWSPAPERS

"Centinel" IX, Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer, 8 January (excerpt)

It is a fact that can be established, that during almost the whole of the time that the late convention of this state were assembled, the newspapers published in New-York, by Mr. Greenleaf, which contains the essays written there against the new government, such as the patriotic ones of Brutus, Cincinnatus, Cato, &c. sent as usual by the printer of that place, to the printers of this city, miscarried in their conveyance, which prevented the republication in this state of many of these pieces, and since that period great irregularity prevails; and I stand informed that the printers in New-York complain that the free and independent newspapers of this city do not come to hand; whilst on the contrary, we find the devoted vehicles of despotism pass uninterrupted. I would ask what is the meaning of the new arrangement at the Post-Office, which abridges the circulation of newspapers at this momentous crisis, when our every concern is dependant upon a proper decision of the subject in discussion–No trivial excuse will be admitted; the Centinel will, as from the first approach of despotism, warn his countrymen of the insidious and base stratagems that are practising to hoodwink them out of their liberties. . . .

"Centinel" XI, Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer, 16 January 1788 (excerpt)

. . . In a former number I stated a charge of a very heinous nature, and highly prejudicial to the public welfare, and at this great crisis peculiarly alarming and threatening to liberty; I mean the suppression of the circulation of the newspapers from state to state by the of–c–rs of the P–t-O—ce, who in violation of their duty and integrity have prostituted their of–ces to forward the nefarious design of enslaving their countrymen, by thus cutting off all communication by the usual vehicle between the patriots of America;–I find that notwithstanding that public appeal, they persevere in this villainous and daring practice. The newspapers of the other states that contain any useful information, are still withheld from the printers of this state, and I see by the annunciation of the Editor of Mr. Greenleaf's patriotic New-York paper, that the printers of that place are still treated in like manner; this informs his readers that but two southern papers have come to hand, and that they contain no information, which he affects to ascribe to the negligence of the p–t [post] boy, not caring to quarrel with the p–t m–t–r g—l [postmaster general]. . . .

Massachusetts Centinel, 16 February 1788

The several Printers on the Continent are requested to notice in their papers, that since the commencement of the present year, the Printers in the northern States have received scarce a single paper, printed beyond the Hudson.–Notwithstanding the publick are exceedingly anxious, at the present all-important period, to be acquainted with the progress of political affairs, the Printers in Boston have not received any papers from New-York, for several weeks, though before January they were regularly received.–This calls loudly for remedy; and if, as it is said, it is owing to the design of some of the Mail-Carriers, it is hoped, that Congress, or the Post-Master General, will look into, and remedy it–as it must be of first importance, that the channels of information should be kept as free as possible.

James Bowdoin to James de Caledonia, Philadelphia Independent Gazetteer, 27 February 1788 (excerpt)[1]

Boston, February 12, 1788.

. . . However as we have the P–t O—ce still at our service, you must prevent any of the newspapers which contain publications against us, getting out of your state. We have been remarkably successful in this hitherto; every newspaper against us has been stopped, even the reasons of dissent of your minority, and the information of Mr. Martin, has been scarcely heard of here; this was very fortunate, as it would certainly have ruined us in this quarter. So great was the want of information here, that we made the people believe all to the southward of us, indeed that every state but our own were almost unanimous in favor of our plan. You would have laughed to have seen our newspapers on the day the final question was taken in our convention; there we published an account of the almost unanimous adoption of the constitution by the convention of North-Carolina; that the state of New-York had called a convention at a very early day, without any opposition; and the trifling opposition in your state had ceased; that Randolph, Mason, Lee, &c. had joined our party; and many other similar accounts. . . .

[1]This is a satirical Antifederalist letter. "James de Caledonia" was an Antifederalist name for James Wilson.

"Original Letters"[1]
Philadelphia Freeman's Journal, 5 March 1788 (excerpts)

Letter I. from Dr. R—, to Mr. H—l–n, New-York.

I return you thanks for your polite attention in sending the numbers of Publius so punctually; I am well pleased that our scheme of stopping the newspapers containing the Antifederal pieces, has succeeded; let Mr. —— know, that 200 dollars will be forthwith transmitted as a small gratuity for his service.…

Letter II. from Dr. R—, to Mr. H—l–n, New-York.

. . . I mentioned in my last, making a remittance of the 200 dollars for our friend in the P—O—; that matter cannot be accomplished for some time, until we receive some of the outstanding subscriptions; in the mean time let the gentleman know, that he may make himself easy on the occasion, for he shall be honorably recompensed.…

[1]These fictitious Antifederalist letters, allegedly from Benjamin Rush to Alexander Hamilton, were reprinted in the Newport Mercury, 24 March.

"James de Caledonia to James Bowdoin," Philadelphia Freeman's Journal, 12 March 1788 (excerpt)

. . . Every letter I open latterly brings black tidings; I tremble at the cracking of every seal I break, as every piece of bad news seems to put my commission as attorney-general (of the union) farther and farther out of sight. About a month ago I had the blank form of it carefully drawn up by a scrivener; but, my lord, a blank I am much afraid it will remain: and you know how much I must spend if I live at all, and how I am reduced.

I said that accounts from every quarter were against us; but this truth, my lord, none, but about ten of us in the state know any thing of; for we publish both among our adherents and opponents that every thing is going on favorably elsewhere: and I find our system of deception (which we laid down in the beginning) is carried on with spirit all over the continent; it has been of infinite service to us. And then our stopping all real intelligence, by preventing the newspapers going backwards and forwards thro' the Post-Office, has been a very necessary precaution. . . .

Winchester Virginia Gazette, 26 March–9 April 1788

The Editors, 26 March

The Editors of this Paper [Matthias Bartgis and Nathaniel Willis], feel with their brother Printers throughout the United States, the ill-consequences of a late regulation at the general Post-Office, for stopping the circulation of the news-papers through the medium of the mails, they not having received any Northern papers, except by transcient conveyance, for several months past. Whatever secret views the promoters of this diabolical plan may have, we hope the guardians of our liberty and future safety, will be vigilant in frustrating so dangerous a measure, which may eventually lead us blind–fold to the rivets of slavery. If this is a sample of what we may expect from the establishment of the Federal Constitution, may we not with propriety say, from such a government, "Good Lord, deliver us,"

A Federalist: To the Editors, 2 April

Of all the anti-federal productions which have yet appeared, the paragraph in your last paper, respecting the stoppage of the circulation of newspapers is the most extraordinary. If the fact be as there stated, it is a grievance which ought to be redressed, but it is inconsistency in the extreme to charge a government which is not in existence, with the maladministration of the present government. If Congress authorise the abuse, it affords an additional reason for their dissolution, and for the establishment of a government on more liberal principles, in which our rulers will be chosen by the people at large, and consequently we may expect them to be more attentive to our interests, and more vigilant guardians of our liberties, than the members of the present Congress.

The Editors, 2 April

☞ The Editors sincerely wish that the new Constitution had been so framed, that every paragraph published on that important subject, could have been truly federal, but when opinions vary, and it is submitted to the People for free discussion, to see men in public office taking undue measures to establish it, without a thorough investigation, and by means which not only grossly infringes on the liberties of the people, but strikes a fatal blow at their very political existence, the Editors think it a duty incumbent on them as Printers of a public paper, to give the alarm. It ever has been, (even under the tyrannical government of Britain) an invariable privilege to suffer, for the public good, a free passage for news-papers in the mails, but of late, for reasons which the Editors wish not to suggest, they are prohibited. Whatever may be the views of public men at the present day, if they should be continued in office (which it is more than probable they will, unless from their present conduct they are well guarded against) may we not expect the same measures? which, if practised, we may bid adieu to that scourge to tyrants, an unrestrained Press.

The most distant view of injuring the Constitution did not exist by publishing the paragraph above referred to, but, that due notice might be taken of so daring a breach of public confidence.

One of the People, 9 April 1788

Extract of a letter from a gentleman in the country, to his friend in town.

"From Mess'rs Bartgis & Company's addresses to the public, in their papers of the 7th and 14th instant, I was led to believe, that they were no party men. But from their piece in the last Winchester Gazette, I take them to be strong anti-federalists: be that as it may, I am clear of opinion, every man has a right to enjoy his own opinion. But I am also of opinion that they, nor no other man can, with propriety, lay the blame of their not receiving the northern papers, to the Federal Constitution, when every body knows, that Constitution has not taken place, and of course can have no effect. If the Post-Master-General, his deputy, his deputy's deputy, or any other, has stop'd the circulation of news, as they have set forth in their piece, the Post-Master-General, his deputy, &c. are liable to public censure, and ought to be exposed, then their prayer would [have] been with more

propriety thus: From our present, or any other government, which will suffer the Post-Master-General, his deputy, his deputy's deputy, or any other person whatever to stop them.

The Editors, 9 April

☞ The Editors with the greatest reluctance again trouble their readers with a defence of their public conduct, as Printers:–they have before asserted, that no intention existed with them of injuring the constitution:–they wish to expose every secret attempted to effect a partial circulation of observations wrote on the subject, by men who are looking for continuations of lucrative offices. Had an effort been made by those opposed to the constitution, to wrest from the public eye, the means of information, they would as readily have exposed them. They conceive it their duty to be watchful of every attempt to destroy our dear-earn'd freedom, let the design come from what man, or set of men, it may.

Whatever the private sentiments of the Editors may be, on political subjects, they ever have endeavoured to demonstrate a strict equality of publications on the new government: unbiassed by party, and unawed by frowns, they are determined to be free.

George Washington to John Jay, Mount Vernon, 18 July 1788 (excerpt)

. . . It is extremely to be lamented that a new arrangement in the Post Office, unfavorable to the circulation of intelligence, should have taken place at the instant when the momentous question of a general government was to come before the People.–I have seen no good apology, not even in Mr. Hazard's publication, for deviating from the old custom of permitting Printers to exchange their Papers by the Mail.–That practice was a great public convenience & gratification.–If the priviledge was not from convention an original right, it had from prescription strong pretensions for continuance; especially at so interesting a period.–The interruption in that mode of conveyance, has not only given great concern to the friends of the Constitution, who wished the public to be possessed of every thing that might be printed on both sides of the question: but it has afforded its enemies very plausible pretexts for dealing out their scandals, & exciting jealousies by inducing a belief that the suppression of intelligence at that critical juncture, was a wicked trick of policy, contrived by an Aristocratic Junto.–Now, if the Postmaster General (with whose character I am unacquainted & therefore would not be understood to form an unfavorable opinion of his motives) has any candid advisers who conceive that he merits the public employment they ought to counsel him to wipe away the aspersion he has incautiously brought upon a good cause–if he is unworthy of the Office he holds, it would be well that the ground of a complaint, apparently so general, should be enquired into, and, if founded, redressed through the medium of a better appointment.–It is a matter, in my judgment, of primary importance that the public mind should be relieved from inquietude on this subject.–I know it is said that the irregularity or defect has happened accidentally, in consequence of the contract for transporting the Mail on horseback, instead of having it carried in the Stages–but I must confess, I could never account, upon any satisfactory principles, for the inveterate enmity with which the Post Master General is asserted to be actuated against that valuable institution.–It has often been understood by wise politicians and enlightened patriots that giving a facility to the means of travelling for Strangers and of intercourse for Citizens, was an object of Legislative concern & a circumstance highly beneficial to any Country.–In England, I am told, they consider the Mail Coaches as a great modern improvement in their Post-Office regulations.–I trust we are not too old, or too proud to profit by the experience of others. . . .

NORTH CAROLINA ELECTION AND VIOLENCE

Martin's North Carolina Gazette, 16 April 1788

Agreeable to the resolve of the General Assembly, the freemen of the county of Dobbs met at the Court-House in Kingston, on the last Friday and Saturday in March, in order to elect persons to represent them in Convention at Hillsborough, on the third Monday in July next; accordingly Richard Caswell, James Glasgow, John Herritage, Bryan Whitefield and Ben. Sheppard Esqrs. were candidates supposed to be in favour of the Federal Constitution; Jacob Johnston, Morris Westbrook; Isaac Groom, Abraham Baker, and Absalom Price, were Candidates supposed to be opposers of the Federal Constitution:—The whole number of voters were three hundred and seventy two; at sunset on Saturday the Poll was closed and the sheriff proceeded to call out the tickets; two hundred and eighty two tickets were called out, the hindmost in number on the Poll of the Antifederalists had one hundred and fifty five votes, the foremost in number of the Federalists had only one hundred and twenty one, and the tickets coming out fast in favour of the Antifederalists, the other party seemed fully convinced they should lose their election and appeared to be much exasperated at the same, especially Col. B. Sheppard, who, with sundry others cast out many aspersions and very degrading and abusive language to the other candidates, which was not returned by any of the candidates, or any person on their part with so much as one provoking word. At length Col. A. Sheppard went upon the bench where the sheriffs, inspectors, and clerks were attending their business, and swore he would beat one of the inspectors who had been peaceably and diligently attending to his business, and having a number of clubs ready prepared, the persons holding the candles were suddenly knocked or pushed down and all the candles in the Court-House were instantly put out; many blows with clubs were heard to pass, (but it being dark they did the most damage to the Federalists.) The Antifederal candidates being unapprized of such a violent assault, and expecting better treatment, from men who would wish to wear the character of gentlemen, were in no posture of defence, and finding their lives in danger, thought it most adviseable to retire privately in the dark, but one of them (to wit.) Isaac Groom was overtaken in the street, by a party of their men consisting of twelve or fifteen—with clubs, who fell on him and much abused him, in so much that he was driven to the necessity of mounting his horse and riding for his life; the sheriff also related that in the time of the riot in the Court House he received a blow by a club and that the ticket box was violently taken away.

Wilmington Centinel, 14 May 1788

A correspondent, and subscriber to this paper, has sent us for publication, the following particulars of an unfortunate circumstance which lately happened, in North-Carolina; a mention of which was made under the Wilmington head, published in this paper of the 15th ult.

Colonel B. Shepherd, a man of considerable property and great influence in Dobb's county, a few weeks past, paid an evening's visit to one of his neighbours, with whom he had ever lived in the greatest friendship and harmony. Late in the evening, the new proposed constitution became the subject of conversation. Colonel Shepherd, a declared federalist, gave his opinion with freedom, and declared his wish to see it adopted. His neighbour, an anti-federalist, opposed it with much warmth; but finding all his objections readily answered by the Colonel, became very warm and abusive. After receiving several gross insults, Colonel Shepherd, with his hand open, touched him on the cheek, and expressed himself in the following words: "Your language is too abusive to be submitted to; nothing but your age now protects you from that punishment which you should receive." The antifederalist immediately ran out of the house, attended by some of his followers, who all armed themselves with axes—The Colonel, not knowing their design, left the house to return home; it being dark they waylaid him, and with an axe gave him a stroke on the head, which, from its violence, threw him on the ground—the blow was immediately repeated on his breast—One of his friends, who was in the house, hearing his voice, ran out, when he found Col. Shepherd on the ground, almost void of speech, and insensible, the blood running from his nose, mouth, and ears, in

considerable quantities. The alarm was immediately given to Col. Shepherd's neighbouring friends, who collected to resent his injury. The antifederal party hearing them approach the house, concealed themselves till they had nearly reached the door, when one of them fired a rifle, and wounded Captain Stephanus Shepherd dangerously in the arm. The federalists, being numerous, overpowered the other party, and with the rifle that had been fired, broke the arm of the antifederalist who fired it, and wounded him severely in several other places. The wounded remained in this situation for many hours; their friends despairing of their recovery—At length a Doctor Leigh, who resides in some part of the state arrived, and by his assiduity and attention, has restored them to perfect health, after amputating Capt. Shepherd's arm. It seems that no reconciliation has yet taken place between the parties.

RHODE ISLAND'S COERCED RATIFICATION

"Greenwichiensis," Newport Herald, 25 February 1790 (excerpts)

["Greenwichiensis" comments on two previous items in the Newport Herald.]

. . . Let the Constitution be immediately rejected. . . . Our harbors will be covered with the ships, and our stores be replenished with the produce of foreign nations. . . . We shall exceed St. Eustatius1 in its most flourishing state, and, instead of experiencing those evils . . . we shall soon become the wealthiest, the happiest, and the most envied State in the World. . . .

But if we do not adopt the Constitution we shall soon cease to exist as a State, says the Freeholder, Congress will destroy our State jurisdiction, and dismember the State. . . . If they should attempt to subjugate us, would not foreign powers, who will find their account in a commercial intercourse with us, combine to support us. . . . Trust me my Antifederal Friends, these hints of a dismemberment are intended solely to intimidate you.

St. Eustatius was a Dutch West Indies island that served as an entrepŏt for smuggling goods from America and European countries.

William Ellery to U.S. Representative Benjamin Huntington, Newport, R.I.
17 April 1790 (excerpt)

. . . I believe I mentioned in my last letter that any act which Congress might think proper to pass, laying duties on the goods, wares and productions of this State should be passed in time to reach this State previous to the sitting of the Genl. Assembly. Lest I should have omitted it I now mention it.—You may depend upon it that an Act of that kind would have a considerable effect upon our Antis in general,—and probably might induce the General Assembly to request Congress to let the goods &c of this State pass duty free into the other States, upon its adoption of the Constitution, which request would greatly influence the conduct of the Convention.—The fall of the year is the time when the produce &c of this State is shipped to the other States, and then Congress will not be in session; where fore if Congress should pass their act in season, the Antis, who I am sure will be desirous to avoid its operation, will be naturally led to make a request similar to that I have suggested.—

I repeat it, such an Act passed so as to be here before the sitting of the Genl. Assembly would be highly beneficial.—

The Assembly will sit on the 1st. wednesday in May.—

If this State should not adopt the Constitution before the next Session of Congress it is probable that this town, the town of Providence, and some other towns in this State may apply to Congress to be received into the Union,—and an application may be made before Congress rises, if the Constitution should be rejected by the Convention.—Such an application would alarm the Antis

and might endanger the Feds, unless the former should apprehend that Congress would protect the latter against any violence which might be offered to them in consequence of their application.—If the applying towns should be received into the Union they would of course be safe under the protection of the United States;—but if their application should fail they may be involved in a war with the Antis. In that event would Congress assist the Feds if they should request Assistances?—Please to favour me with your opinion, and that of other leading characters in your house on this question. . . .

U.S. Senate Bill on Commerce with Rhode Island, 13 May 1790

Sec. 1. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, That from and after the 1st day of July next, no goods, wares, or merchandizes, of the growth or manufacture of any place or country, shall be brought into the United States, from the State of Rhode-Island and Providence-Plantations. . . . And all ships and vessels which, contrary to this Act, shall enter any port, harbour, creek or river of the said State of Rhode-Island and Providence-Plantations, shall be forfeited, and shall be liable to seizure in any port of the United States, at any time within one year after such forfeiture shall have accrued. And every persons who shall bring into the United States any goods, wares or merchandizes [from] the said State of Rhode-Island and Providence-Plantations, shall forfeit 500 dollars; and be moreover liable to imprisonment, not exceeding 6 months. . . .

Sec. 3. And to the end . . . Be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That the President of the United States be, and he hereby is authorized and requested to demand of the said State of Rhode-Island and Providence-Plantations, 25,000 dollars, to be paid into the Treasury of the United States, on or before the first day of Dec next; which being paid, shall be credited to the said State in account with the United States.

Sec. 4. And be it further enacted, That this act shall continue in force until a Convention of the State of Rhode-Island and Providence-Plantations, shall assent to and ratify the Constitution, and give notice thereof to the President of the United States, and no longer.

John Steele to Joseph Winston, New York, 22 May 1790 (excerpt)

. . . A bill has lately passed the Senate, and sent to us for concurrence which is designed to prohibit any further intercourse with Rhodeisland, untill she shall ratify. It is tyrannical, and arbitrary in the highest degree, and the author of it, indeed the Senate by passing it, seem to have lost sight of that sperit of moderation, and mutual forbearance which ought forever to subsist between Governments, related as they are to us, as well as between individuals.

It is certain that little state was not backward in the late Revolution, that she performed essential services, that she sustained important sacrafices and is therefore entitled to respect. How far she is wrong in her present politicks? Or how far she is right? are questions ⟨which the unerring wisdom of the deity is only capable of deciding.⟩

I hope however the bill will be rejected in the house of Representatives, if it shoud not, and be finally passed into a law, it will be a public testimonial given to the world of the slender foundation of all human Friendships, or political connections . . .

R.I. Governor Arthur Fenner to President George Washington, Providence, R.I., 31 May 1790

I now have the high satisfaction of informing your Excellency that agreeable to my expectations, the new National Constitution of the United States was, on Saturday last Ratified, and Adopted by the Convention of this State, at Newport, pursuant to the Recommendation of Congress in consequence of the proceedings of the General Convention of Philadelphia. . . .

I expect that the Senators who may be elected will give attendance in Congress immediately without any delay after their appointment allowing time only for their going to New-York.