

*Three Hundred Years
of the American Newspaper
Introduction*

IN THE FALL OF 1990, the American Antiquarian Society observed the three hundredth anniversary of the publication of the first American newspaper, *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*, with an exhibition and a series of lectures for the general public in the greater Worcester area and a symposium for professional journalists and journalism educators held at the headquarters of the Gannett Foundation in Arlington, Virginia, across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. Those activities were made possible by a grant to AAS from the Gannett Foundation, as is the publication of this special issue of the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, published in an effort to put the scholarship on display in the public lectures and symposium into the hands of an even wider audience.

It was, of course, highly appropriate for the Society to engage in special activities to commemorate the long history of the newspaper press in this country and to assess its contributions to the development of American society and culture, for AAS and the newspaper in America have been closely connected for nearly two centuries. The Society's founder, Isaiah Thomas, was the printer, publisher, and editor of one of the most important newspapers in the Revolutionary struggle that launched the American republic (the *Massachusetts Spy*) and was the first historian of American journalism as well as of American printing in general (his *History of Printing in America*, 2 vols., Worcester, 1810). The librarians of the Society, beginning with Thomas himself, have amassed the

best and most accessible collection of early American newspapers anywhere. In the twentieth century, the Society has pioneered in the bibliographical control, microreproduction, and preservation of the products of the American newspaper press, which have proven to be such useful windows into an understanding of the course of American history.

For the participants in the program, the Society selected scholars who are among the best historians of journalism in the country today—scholars who are known for their ability to place the history of the press in wider contexts of American cultural history and the history of communications and to apply the insights of a number of academic disciplines to the task. Three of the scholars—Charles E. Clark, professor of history at the University of New Hampshire; David Paul Nord, associate professor of journalism at Indiana University; and Gerald Baldasty, associate professor of communications at the University of Washington—tackled specific chronological segments of the first two hundred years of the history of the American press. The lecture in Worcester by Michael Schudson, professor of communications at the University of California at San Diego, which did double duty as the eighth annual James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book in American Culture, ventured well into the twentieth century and provided an interpretive framework for the whole subject. The fifth participant, Loren Ghiglione, president of Worcester County Newspapers, Inc., and immediate past president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, presented an entertaining yet serious look at the changing image of the American journalist in American popular culture, specifically, fiction. His talk was given as the public lecture for the Society's one hundred seventy-eighth annual meeting.

For the symposium at the Gannett Foundation, four prominent working journalists were invited to comment on the papers of Professors Clark, Nord, Baldasty, and Schudson, and to draw out the relevance and significance that the historical insights they provided hold for journalists and journalism today. The four were

Pat O'Brien, author and journalist; Les Payne, national editor of *Newsday*; John Seigenthaler, editorial director of *USA Today* and chairman, publisher, and chief executive officer of *The Tennessean* (Nashville); and Martin Schram, national editor of *Washingtonian*.

A number of themes emerge from the papers presented in Worcester and Washington: among them, the symbiotic, but often strained, relationship between newspapers and government (especially in wartime), the role that the press plays in the defining and shaping of American community and of the American political and social agenda, the tensions between the newspaper's roles as both profit-making business and public watchdog, and how the newspaper finds and maintains its niche relative to other forms of public communication, including other printed media as well as the oral, written, and electronic. The journalist-commentators, of course, picked up on these and other themes, and drew out the resonance for them and for their work—resonance, in fact, for all of us today in a world of declining newspaper readership, of instant electronic access to events unfolding worldwide, and, once again, strained relations between the press and a government at war.

The papers presented here represent the new direction that journalism history has begun to take. Once decried as 'Whig' history because of its chronological recitations of publishers' pedigrees and its insistence that change always equalled progress, the new histories of journalism represented by the work of the authors in this volume are really an extension of intellectual and cultural history and are part of the field known as the history of the book. The work is analytical and critical, and is not simply the historical notations of an industry and its people, but is linked to the national psyche, to the history of ideas. Here the history of journalism becomes richer in the nexus of people and ideas tied, of course, to cultural trends and technological and social change. While this enriches the discrete history of journalism itself, it also strongly encourages historians of American life and culture in general to pay more heed to the press as they describe and interpret the development of the nation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The American Antiquarian Society is grateful to the Gannett Foundation for making the Worcester and Washington programs and this publication possible. Special thanks are owed Everette E. Dennis, vice-president of the Gannett Foundation and director of the Gannett Foundation Media Center at Columbia University, and Félix Gutiérrez, vice-president for education at the Foundation, and to the fine staff of the Foundation, for their encouragement, advice, and hospitality. Joyce Ann Tracy, the Society's curator of newspapers and periodicals, and her assistant, Dennis Laurie, were principally responsible for mounting the exhibition in Antiquarian Hall.

John B. Hench

JOHN B. HENCH is the Society's director of research and publication.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.