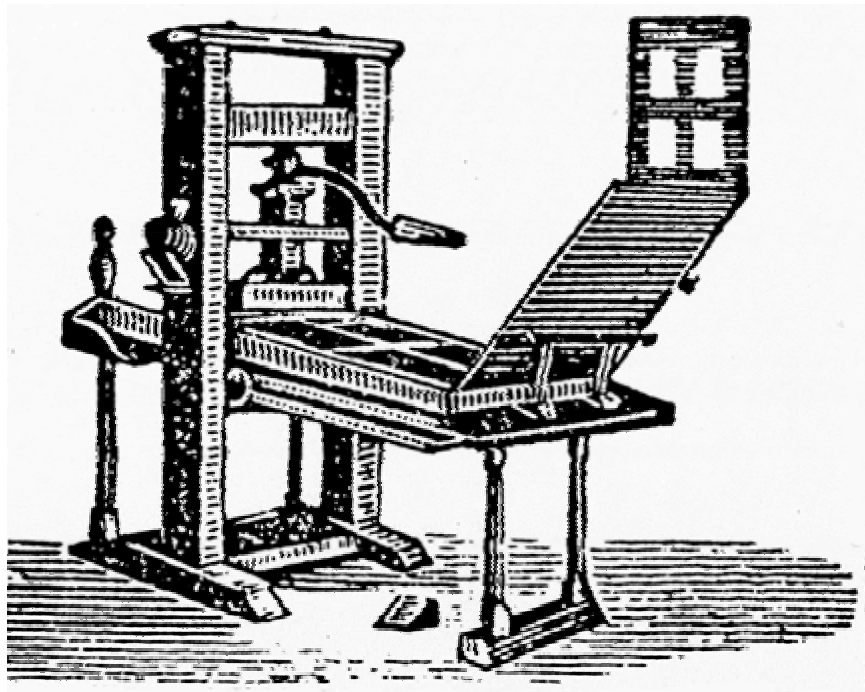


The Germination of a Free Press: A Dissident Print Culture and the Stamp Act in Colonial Virginia

by
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April, 2006

Acknowledgments

The modern electronic world has made crucial primary documents and other sources instantly available through the Internet, yet research still requires the help of many archivists and librarians. This author would like to recognize a special debt to a few experts who have gone beyond the requirements of their job to help:

Rosemarie Zagarri, Professor of History at George Mason University, and my dissertation advisor.

Del Moore, Reference Librarian at the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

J. Jefferson Looney, Editor, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, Thomas Jefferson Foundation, for verifying the Thomas Jefferson letter to Isaiah Thomas does not exist, locating the actual letter, and a variety of other help.

Thomas Knoles, Curator of Manuscripts, American Antiquarian Society for assistance in attempting to locate the supposed letter from Thomas Jefferson to Isaiah Thomas.

Martha King, Associate Editor, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Princeton University, for general research suggestions and for help analyzing Jefferson's handwriting.

Mariam Touba, Reference Librarian, New York Historical Society for help tracking down the origin of a rare *Virginia Gazette*, and possible Jefferson connection.

Kim Nusco, Reference Librarian, Massachusetts Historical Society, for assistance in tracking down an obscure letter from former Lieutenant Governor Alexander Spotswood.

Olga Tsapina, Curator of American Historical Manuscripts, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA for promptly sending me a copy of Landon Carter's letter to Joseph Royle.

Numerous research librarians at the Manuscript Reading Room, Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, General Reading Room, and the Rare Book & Special Collections Reading Room, the Library of Congress.

Reference librarians at the Arlington County Virginia public library Virginia Room.

Copy proofreaders James Cheney Olcott, John Burns, and Jim Schaefer.

Special thanks to my wife, Carol Mellen, for putting up with this and with me.

Introduction

"But I thank God, *there are no free schools nor printing*, and I hope we shall not have these hundred years, for *learning* has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and *printing* has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both!" Governor Sir William Berkeley, 1671¹

"That the freedom of the press is one of the greatest bulwarks of liberty and can never be restrained but by despotic governments." Virginia Declaration of Rights, 1776²

In slightly more than one hundred years, the colony of Virginia was transformed from a place where the printing press was unknown and unwelcome to become the birthplace of the first constitutional protection for printing. This was part of a remarkable conversion of the colony, from an oral-based culture to a print-based culture. This is much more significant than merely being representative of a larger evolution. The printing press was indeed the crucible within which the new society was molded and formed. This paper explores the metamorphosis that lies behind revolutionary new thought, unheard-of opposition to government, and the emerging ideas of freedom of the press in colonial Virginia.

It was a remarkable, yet critically important transition. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Virginia was an extremely deferential society, where only the elites had ready access to printed material. The majority of society lived without print, in an oral based culture where criticism of religious and political

¹ Governor Sir William Berkeley responded to a questionnaire by the Commissioners of Trade and Plantations in London, quoted in William Hening, *The Statutes At Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws Of Virginia, From the First Session of the Legislature In the Year 1619* (Charlottesville; University Press of Virginia, 1969), 2:511-517. Cover etching from Lawrence Wroth, *The Colonial Printer*. 2^d ed. (Portland, ME: Southworth-Anthoensen Press, 1938. Reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1994), cover.

² *Virginia Declaration of Rights*, Article 12.

leaders was highly unusual and even dangerous. No printing press existed in the colony, and the idea of free expression in speech, writing, or print had not yet developed. With the printing press came the spread of new cultural norms. An increasingly market-oriented society brought the printed word to an increasingly diverse readership. With this print culture came freedom of ideas and an increasing ability for critical thinking. This paper focuses on that remarkable transition; from an extremely deferential society where a few elites ruled to what can be termed a 'culture of dissidence.' This was an active, political, public sphere where open criticism of the government first became more common and later became essential. Freedom of the press emerged within this specific context; that is, one of increasing dissidence clashing with government control of print in Virginia of the 1760s. Influence from concurrent battles in England over press freedom and the effects of a nearby press more open to dissident ideas are seen here. Analyzing the texts of the newspapers, pamphlets, printers' financial records, letters, diaries, and other documents reveals much about the importance of print culture, how it led to a critical public sphere, and how that in turn led to new ideas about the liberty of the press.

The focus here is on the colony of Virginia for several reasons. Studies of early American print typically center on the urban communities where there were more printing presses. The Puritan colonies in Massachusetts were the first to have printing and later developed into a hotbed of critical printed matter and revolutionary thought. Philadelphia is where Benjamin Franklin set up his press, and the radical meld of religious freedom and Quaker dissidence did much to advance our ideas of freedom of the press. In New York, the 1735 acquittal of

John Peter Zenger for seditious libel has been the centerpiece of many studies on our legal evolution. However, the more limited opportunities for printing in the southern colonies created a different atmosphere for the development of a free press, and it was in Virginia where the idea of the press as an important 'bulwark' of liberty first came to be codified into law. By focusing on the time of the colonial Stamp Act—a crucial moment in the evolution of dissent in America—and by examining how this was experienced by Virginia society, this study brings an increased understanding of the clash of ideas, the undermining of traditional authority, and the beginnings of American ideas regarding press liberty.

Origins of Virginia Printing

The royal colony of Virginia originally offered a barren ground for the printing press. The social and political environment there was not as welcoming to the technology of printing as it was in the Puritan colony in Massachusetts. England's first American settlement did not offer a soil fertile for a printing press until the eighteenth century. Despite the royal governor's wishes, the first seeds of printing were planted in Virginia in the seventeenth century, before Pennsylvania had its own printer, not long after the Massachusetts' colonists had theirs, but the crop was soon wiped out. One time burgess and merchant John Buckner imported both a press and experienced printer William Nuthead to the capital of Jamestown. In 1682 he reportedly printed several "papers," the form and content of which is not known, and then set to print the laws the Virginia Assembly had just passed. "At this stage a flurry of alarm seems to have seized the Governor and

Council."³ After reviewing two sheets of those printed laws, Governor Lord Thomas Culpeper halted the process, claiming the pair lacked a license. The governor and his council ordered Nuthead and Buckner to post a one hundred pound bond not to print anything again "until his majesty's pleasure shall be known." When Lord Howard of Effingham arrived as the new governor in 1683, he carried specific orders not to allow the use of a printing press. All local laws remained only in manuscript form with limited circulation. The permanent arrival of local printing to Virginia was thus delayed for fifty years, although Nuthead apparently set up his printing press in the nearby Maryland capital of St. Mary's City in 1685.⁴ From early on, the settlement across the Chesapeake was more open to printing, perhaps because of a different style of government. The proprietary colony of Maryland had a governor appointed by the Calvert family rather than a royal governor appointed by the King.

Within six decades, the government of the colony of Virginia made a transition from denouncing printing, to merely preventing printing, and finally to subsidizing printing. Censorship in the form of prior control of printing in England had ended with the lapse of press licensing in 1694, but freedom to print in the colony of Virginia had to wait. By the 1730s, the rulers recognized a need to publish activities of the House of Burgesses, gubernatorial proclamations, and new laws. William Parks, a printer in Annapolis, Maryland, was invited to come

³ Wroth, *Colonial Printer*, 38.

⁴ Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America, With a Biography of Printers*, 2^d ed. (Albany, 1874; reprint, New York: B. Franklin, 1967) 330-332 (page citations are to the reprint edition), Louis Edward Ingelhart, *Press and Speech Freedoms in America, 1619-1995* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997), 9, Wroth, *Colonial Printer*, 38-39. David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book: Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 110-111.

to the Williamsburg capital of Virginia to print the laws and the *Journal of the House of Burgesses*. Parks opened his office in Williamsburg in 1730 and ran print shops in both Virginia and Maryland. In 1733, he closed his business in Annapolis and moved permanently to Williamsburg.

A subsidy from the government was the base of the printer's income, but he also bound books, sold books, stationary, ran the post office, and printed and published. The government paid Parks "a salary of two hundred pounds per annum in country produce."⁵ As in all colonial print shops, the work was physical and dirty. Type was set by hand, the press hand-operated to add pressure, and ink was often mixed locally. Apprentices and wage-earning journeymen would do the most difficult tasks. When Parks died in 1750, employee William Hunter purchased the shop. That press was passed into Joseph Royle's hands in 1761, but he died within five years. Royle's foreman, Alexander Purdie, continued operation of that first printing press along with John Dixon, guardian of William Hunter's son William. On May 16, 1766, William Rind began operation of a second press and a second newspaper in Williamsburg, beginning local competition for the first time in this colony, just as a political crisis was polarizing the population into those angered by new British taxation policies and those who supported King and Parliament.⁶ This complicated genealogy of printers can be

⁵ Thomas, 1:320-21. Jack Greene writes that Parks was paid £ 120, in Greene, *The Quest for Power: The Lower Houses of Assembly in the Southern Royal Colonies, 1689-1776* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 288.

⁶ His paper was originally called *Rind's Virginia Gazette*, later changed to simply the *Virginia Gazette*. At one time there were three papers published simultaneously in the same town with the same name. On the various Williamsburg presses, there has been much confusion, and many scholars simply ignore the fact of multiple presses. For details on ownership, see Mary Goodwin, *Printing Office: Its Activities, Furnishings, and Articles for Sale* (Williamsburg:

summarized for the focus of this paper. Joseph Royle is the only printer in Virginia as the Stamp Act crisis begins. Contemporary criticism marks him as bowing too much to the pressure of the governor. When Royle died in the middle of this crisis, Alexander Purdie took over that shop. William Rind began a second printing press in Williamsburg in 1766, one that some hoped would be free of undue influence. [See a timeline in Appendix A.]

The Stamp Act and Printers

The controversial Stamp Act polarized political opinion in Virginia and led to the call for a second printer. In the summer of 1764, the new British government of Prime Minister George Grenville warned colonial governors that a stamp tax in the colonies was being considered to help pay the heavy debt incurred from Seven Years' War, a large portion of which had been fought on American soil. Parliament passed the Stamp Act and it took effect November 1, 1765. This tax required legal and business documents of all types to be printed or issued only on paper with a royal stamp which had to be imported from England and raised costs substantially. Legal and business forms were to be taxed from 3 pence to six pounds, paperwork for indentures from two and a half to five percent, almanacs two pence and up, newspapers a halfpenny to a penny per sheet, and advertisements in newspapers two shillings. College students would have to pay two pounds to matriculate and another two pounds to graduate; lawyers were to pay ten pounds for admission to the bar. Even playing cards were

Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library, Research Report Series, # 238, 1952), pp. 4n, 34-36, and Laurie E. Godfrey, "The Printers of the Williamsburg *Virginia Gazettes*, 1766-1776: Social Controls and Press Theory" (Ph.D. diss., Regent University, March 1998), 10-14.

to be taxed. Penalties for paper without the stamps were substantial—from forty shillings to twenty pounds. Residents back in England were among the most heavily taxed in Europe and Grenville assumed that the colonists would be willing to pay more of their share, especially as a large portion of this debt was accrued in defending American lands. An outcry from the colonies was not anticipated.⁷

It is not widely recognized that there were antecedents for the colonial Stamp Act. In England, a stamp tax had been in effect since 1712. Even the colonies had used stamp taxes; Massachusetts passed its own stamp tax in 1755, New York in 1757. This act was different. Not only was it passed by a Parliament in which the colonies lacked representation; it also hit American printers hard. In the process, that Stamp Act radicalized American printers.⁸ Some historians and contemporaries see the tax as intentionally aimed at sources of dissidence. John Adams wrote, in the *Boston Gazette*, that the ministry intentionally was trying “to strip us in a great measure of the means of knowledge, by loading the press, the colleges, and even an almanack and a newspaper, with restraints and duties.” One recent literary analyst theorizes that “it was an attempt by authority to curtail civil liberty” by restricting press freedom.⁹ Historians, British records, and

⁷ Edmund Morgan, and Helen Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (1953; rev. Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1995). Arthur Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1957), 10, 14, & 68. In eighteenth century British currency, one pound (£) equaled 20 shillings (s), which equaled 240 pence (d), or twelve pence to the shilling from Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia; University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), introduction.

⁸ Newspapers in England were taxed up until 1855, from Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1695-1855* (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000), 1 and 85. Schlesinger, *Prelude*, 68.

Grenville's papers do not, however, supply evidence in support of this claim.

Whatever the intent, by challenging the printers' viability, reaction to the tax had the opposite effect by strengthening the ties between the printers and between the separate colonies.¹⁰

Reaction from America was sharply negative, as Adams observed:

In every colony, from Georgia to New Hampshire inclusively, the stamp distributors and inspectors have been compelled by the unconquerable rage of the people to renounce their offices . . . Our presses have groaned, our pulpits have thundered, our towns have voted; the crown officers have everywhere trembled . . .¹¹

Historians have not always agreed on why the new tax generated such stiff defiance from the American colonies. The prevalent theory was that the colonists united against the stamp tax because it was a tax on their internal affairs, something Parliament had previously left to local legislatures. In their definitive 1953 history of the Stamp Act crisis, Edmund and Helen Morgan undermined that old internal tax theory. They concluded that what emerged was an important new principle of taxation only by representative government. The importance of this work here is that they recognized the Stamp Act as uniting the various colonies against the tax and that the newspapers had an important role in spreading information between regions.¹²

⁹ Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law." *Boston Gazette*, Aug. 26, 1765, quoted in Schlesinger, *Prelude*, 70. Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 69.

¹⁰ Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*.

¹¹ John Adams, Diary entry, Dec. 18, 1765, in *The Works of John Adams*, ed. C. F. Adams, Boston, 1850-56, II, 154, quoted in Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence*, 20-21.

¹²Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*.

Colonial and revolutionary printer Isaiah Thomas witnessed both the stamp tax opposition and the printers' reaction to it first hand. His 1810 *History of Printing in America* was the first examination of books, printing, and newspapers in early America, and he observed the impact of the new law on printers:

In the troublesome times, occasioned by the stamp act in 1765, some of the more opulent and cautious printers, when the act was to take place, put their papers in mourning, and, for a few weeks, omitted to publish them; others not so timid, but doubtful of the consequences of publishing newspapers without stamps, omitted the titles, or altered them as an evasion.¹³

Thomas suggests that opposition to the tax was not universal, but rather ranged from opposition to neutrality, with no American printers actually supporting the act. One historian notes that while Thomas' "accuracy has been trusted by scholars, and it is often cited as the authoritative source," his book does contain numerous errors, perhaps inevitable in such an early report.¹⁴

Other historians have posited that the Stamp Act's impact on printers generated a universal opposition to it. Historians have also seen a greater influence on the colonial population from such printed opposition. Using Thomas as a major source, Arthur Schlesinger, the elder, wrote a groundbreaking study regarding the importance of printers during the American Revolution, and how the Stamp Act actually unified their support for the patriot cause. His analysis suggests not only the importance of American newspapers in rallying opposition to new British taxes, but argues that the Stamp Act changed the actual role of

¹³ Thomas, *History of Printing*, 2:10.

¹⁴ Susan Macall Allen, "The Impact of the Stamp Act of 1765 on Colonial American Printers: Threat or Bonanza?" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1996), 1-6 & 24.

printers in colonial American. This transformed them, he posits, from merely transmitters of ideas to actual makers of opinion. The Stamp Act was an unprecedented internal tax, and, "as though deliberately to provoke resistance, it saddled [the taxes] largely on the printers, lawyers and merchants who, along with the clergy, formed the most literate and vocal elements of the population." He claims that newspaper opposition was unanimous, "throughout the colonies the printers in one manner or another defied the Stamp Act." All continued to publish without stamps, although some suspended printing briefly. "Never again in like circumstances," Schlesinger notes, "would the press present so united a front." His claim of the unanimity of printers' opposition to the Stamp Act has since been challenged.¹⁵

The Stamp Act put Virginia printer Joseph Royle and all colonial printers in an untenable political and financial bind. It forced them to decide to either stop printing, print without stamps and face prosecution, or attempt to get expensive stamped paper and face angering numerous critics who opposed any payment of the tax. For newspapers, the tax might have only added a direct cost of four percent. Pamphlets could easily multiply in cost, with a tax of up to one shilling for each four pages on a document that typically would initially cost less than two shillings. The tax on almanacs was about twenty-seven percent, but no tax was placed on books. Two hidden costs added to the expense beyond the tax; stamped paper would have to be imported from London instead of being produced locally and taxes had to be paid in hard-to-come by sterling instead of

¹⁵ Arthur Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764-1776* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1957), 68, and 82. For challenges of his position, see for example Allen, "The Impact of the Stamp Act," 135-6.

colonial currency.¹⁶ In nearby Maryland, the printer wrote that he was being forced to stop publishing because of the uncertainty of the cost of stamped paper, and asked his subscribers to pay more before he could resume printing. "But even that advanced Price cannot yet be known, as the Paper, the — Stamped Paper, MUST be Bought of the — STAMP MASTER, but what Sort or Size of Paper, or at what Price, it is impossible yet to tell ..." Printers in Maryland and Virginia never paid the stamp tax. The newspaper took a short hiatus, perhaps for fear of penalties for not paying a tax there was no way of paying, but perhaps simply due to the death of printer Royle. Alexander Purdie soon took over Royle's press and shop and soon resumed printing despite the fact that stamps were not available.¹⁷ All colonial printers faced tough choices that tended to politicize the output of their presses. The hated stamps were never distributed or put into use in most other colonies. Colonial opponents and their allies in London, the merchants who relied on the American trade, petitioned for repeal. By July 1765, unrelated political battles led to the downfall of the Grenville government, replaced by ministers who had opposed the tax. Parliament repealed the hated Stamp Act in February 1766, without the law every having been enforced. In the separate Declaratory Act Parliament did assert its right to tax the colonies.¹⁸ Rather than end the dispute, this was the beginning of the revolutionary struggle.

¹⁶ British Parliament, *The Stamp Act* (London: March 22, 1765), Morgan, 72, Schlesinger 68.

¹⁷ *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis: Jonas Green & William Rind, August 22, 1765) special supplement, 1, Eighteenth-Century American Newspapers collection, Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress, V. 191.

¹⁸ Morgan, Stamp Act, 271-291.

A Changing Virginia Press and the Stamp Act, 1764-66

These disputes over taxation by Parliament became an important part of the print material of this period and the conversations in public spaces.

Newspapers and the discourse they spurred are crucial elements of Jürgen Habermas' concept of the "bourgeois public sphere" that he saw emerging in Western Europe toward the end of the eighteenth century. Printed material generated discussions, centered around this literature, in coffeehouses and other public spaces. The participants were initially nobility; later, this expanded to include the bourgeoisie. This was the key to development of first literary and later political criticism, operating for the first time outside of the government. In Habermas' view, the capitalistic drive for profit collapsed the expanding public sphere in the nineteenth century, as "a means of enlightenment became a marketplace of sensation." His model of forming public opinion has supplied the theoretical basis for much of the historical analysis of the effects of printing, even beyond his limited European example. The idea that printed material combined with public discussions to create a "public sphere," that was able to be independently critical of eighteenth century government is a key to examining what happened in pre-revolutionary Virginia.¹⁹ These ideas open up the possibility of an important role in cultural transformation by the very growth of a print culture, and the public discourse it spawned, albeit with important

¹⁹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought), transl. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989). Anthony La Vopa, "Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe," *The Journal of Modern History* 64, no. 1 (Mar. 1992): 79-116. Michael Schudson, *The Sociology of News* (New York: Norton, 2003), 66.

reservations.²⁰ Historians carefully limit their assessment of agency, with most suggesting the mere presence of print is insufficient to cause change on its own. In addition, many analyses place this "reading revolution" as occurring later, in the post-Revolutionary period.²¹

The expanding market nature of colonial society was a force for expansion of the reading world while it also tended to force printers to avoid anything controversial that might lose business. Print historian Stephen Botein notes that colonial printers were not ideologically driven revolutionaries, but rather lower class, "meer mechanics," who were interested in good business. He quotes printer Benjamin Franklin as suggesting that commercial pragmatism encouraged neutrality: "Printers are educated in the Belief that when Men differ in Opinion, both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick." The Stamp Act directly threatened the printers' business by raising the prices of their products, encouraging many of them to abandon impartiality. However, Botein suggests that printers for the most part did not become partisans until the decade after the Stamp Act, that is until the Revolutionary controversy was well

²⁰ On the printing press as an agent of change, see for example Harry Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, Vol. 34, No. 4. (Oct. 1977), especially pages 520-523, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 157. J. C. Carothers, "Culture, Psychiatry, and the Written Word," *Psychiatry* 22, no. 4 (Nov. 1959): 308-312, and Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1965), especially 9-28.

²¹ On the "reading revolution" in the latter part of the eighteenth century, see Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, vii. David Waldstreicher sees this explosion of public discourse in the 1780s, *In The Midst Of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 26 and 63. Warner rejects this "technodeterministic" perspective in *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 5-9.

developed. Along with other historians, Botein views colonial American newspapers as being driven by the marketplace. Commercial concerns, not political ideas, drove Franklin's concept of press liberty: "printers were attracted to the principle because it suited their business interests to serve all customers." In Virginia as in other colonies, the idea of a press open to all who would pay to express their ideas in the commercial marketplace helped to both expand the reading world and create the foundation for a new concept of liberty of the press.²²

Caught right in the middle of this revolutionary dispute was the sole Virginia printer located in the capital of Williamsburg. Exploring the printed material and the few financial records available reveals much about potential political restrictions on the content while at the same time uncovering a wider dissemination of a broader range of views. As the printer, Joseph Royle was both at the center of growing commercial activity and the intellectual heart of the colony. The town was the market hub for a region without an urban center, and this shop was a retail outlet for the entire colony. Records, in the form of office journals, exist only for part of 1750-52 and 1764-66, but they indicate a substantial trade in books, stationery, business and legal forms, almanacs, newspapers, postal services, playing cards, and other miscellaneous items. An important income source for this Virginia tradesman came from printing

²² Franklin, from "Apology for Printers," first printed in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of June 10, 1731, quoted in Botein, "Printers and the American Revolution," in *The Press and the American Revolution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1980), 16-23. last quotation from Botein, p. 19, also quoting from *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree et al. (New Haven, 1964), 195-196. See also Botein, "'Meer Mechanics' and an Open Press: the Business and Political Strategies of Colonial American Printers," in *Perspectives in American History*, Vol. IX. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 150-211.

government documents. The government of the colony paid the first official printer Parks and his successors to print laws and the *Journal of the House of Burgesses*. This position was voted on yearly by the burgesses, approved by governor's council, and then by the royal governor himself. The annual salary was increased from two hundred to three hundred fifty pounds a year in 1762, and again to three hundred seventy five pounds a year in 1764. This was a substantial amount of money and the printers were quite wealthy, for tradespeople. The printers also sometimes received additional personal and governmental work from the governor for additional pay.²³ The Williamsburg printers also ran a post office and. In 1753, William Hunter was appointed Deputy Postmaster General for the colonies, splitting a salary of three hundred pounds a year with Benjamin Franklin. This lucrative post was subject to the whims of the British government and anyone invoking the wrath of the royal governor was likely to lose this position. As colonists began to take divergent positions over the Stamp Act dispute, printers had difficult editorial decisions to make, all of which could subject them to possible financial disaster.²⁴

²³ John Pendleton Kennedy, ed., *Journals of the House of Burgesses of Virginia* (Richmond: The Colonial Press, Ed. Waddy Co, 1906), 10: 11, 22, 38, 158-9, 164-6, and 221. See, for example, William Hunter's will where his estate was valued in excess of was valued at 8,614 pounds, and Joseph Royle left four separate Williamsburg properties, in "Old Virginia Editors," 13-15.

²⁴ Berg, *Agent of Change*, 49. Benjamin Franklin, the other Deputy Postmaster, averaged £467 annually. Franklin did lose that position for political reasons in 1774. Schlesinger, *Prelude*, 53-5, and 190.

ownership lists of the Virginia elite, perhaps because it was to be found in the kitchen, not in the library.²⁶ This undermines the traditional view of reading materials being limited to only the wealthy white males.

In fact, the daybook records indicate a growth in customers faster than the rate of the colony's population increase, an expanding range of customers, and a shift in the content of books between 1752 and 1766. While a majority of sales were to the gentry—planters and other members of the wealthy elite—an increasing number of sales were to what could be called the middling classes: craftsmen, tavern keepers, and merchants. There is no evidence however, that sales dipped even lower on the social scale: to wage workers, subsistence farmers, servants, or slaves. The types of books sold shifted as well in this period. The number of religious works dropped dramatically, political tracts increased, and there was even a trend toward the new novels. Records indicate the shop even supplied the risqué title *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, commonly known as *Fanny Hill*. Controversial works began to appear, starting with dissenting religious tracts, and eventually pamphlets on politically divisive subjects such as the Parson's Cause and on the tax disputes with Britain.²⁷

²⁶ E. Smith, *The Compleat Housewife: or, Accomplish'd Gentlewoman's Companion* (Williamsburg: William Parks, 1742). This early 'cookbook' also included medical reference and other household tips. Genevieve Yost, "The Compleat Housewife or Accomplish'd Gentlewoman's Companion: A Bibliographical Study," *William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine*, 2nd Ser., Vol. 18, No. 4. (Oct. 1938): 419-435. Accessed JSTOR Feb. 8, 2005 <<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0043-5597%28193810%292%3A18%3A4%3C419%3ATCHOAG%3E2.0.CO%3B2-S>> See also Richard Beal Davis, *A Colonial Southern Bookshelf: Reading in the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979). He notes the "Real Whig" or libertarian influence in the libraries of the elite.

²⁷ *Printing Office Journals*, for a detailed analysis of the journals, I am indebted to Susan Stromei Berg, *Agent of Change of Trusted Servant: The Eighteenth Century Williamsburg Press*, (Williamsburg: Master's Thesis, American Studies, The College of William and Mary, 1993), vi. Available at the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Library, Colonial Williamsburg. Her analysis indicates

While the records *do* portray a wider range of customers, debate remains over exactly *who* was able to read in eighteenth century Virginia. Researchers generally base literacy figures on ability to sign one's name, one of the few remaining pieces of solid evidence two hundred fifty years later. Those numbers may be deceptively low however, as reading was then taught separately from writing. Reading came first and reached a large percentage of people. Richard Brown suggests that more than half the white male population of the American colonies could read by the eighteenth century, although probably closer to ninety percent in Puritan New England. "In both regions [north and south] literacy was more frequent among propertied men, but even the poor were often literate." The gender gap "all but vanished during the course of the 18th century," Brown concludes. Historian Charles Clark agrees that the literacy gap between men and women was closing but goes on to suggest that in the colonies it was likely newspapers were read by men, women, and even children of both sexes. The British-American colonists, Brown says, were even more literate than residents back home in the mother country.²⁸ Hannah Barker finds that the reading public in England was more diverse than earlier studies had shown. Those who could not read could listen to reading aloud in taverns and coffeehouses, as they also did across the Atlantic in Williamsburg. She found contemporary evidence that

book buying increased by 54 % between 1752 and 1765, compared to a local population growth rate of 18%. However, colony-wide population records indicate a population growth similar to the book buying increase. See *Historical Statistics Of The United States, Colonial Times To 1970* (Washington: U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1976), Vol. 2, 1168. For titles, see also Susan Stromei Berg, compiler, *Eighteenth-Century Williamsburg Imprints* (New York: Clearwater Publishing Company, 1986).

²⁸ Richard Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 11-12. Charles E. Clark, *The Public Prints: The Newspaper in Anglo-American Culture, 1665-1740* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 259.

even English working classes could read. A 1751 engraving by William Hogarth, for example, "shows a butcher and a blacksmith reading a newspaper."²⁹ With



**William Hogarth's
Beer Street**

evidence that the colonies had a greater reading rate than England, this helps to alter our view of reading being the exclusive domain of the Virginia elite in the mid-eighteenth century.

The annual almanacs were also an important vehicle for bringing print culture to a wider group of

Virginians. Sold to a wide variety of social classes, they were the best selling product of the eighteenth

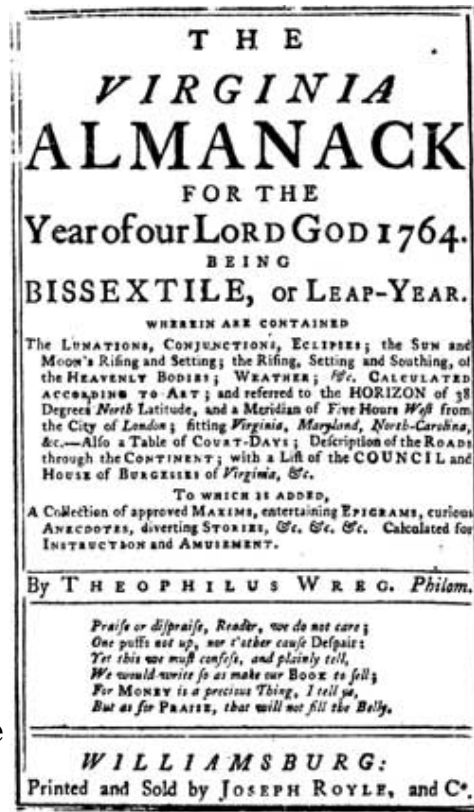
century Virginia printers. The content of these almanacs included information on sun risings and settings, lists of days that court was in session, travel times and roads, names of government representatives, religious tracts, literature, and poetry. Purdie's *Almanac* noted additional entertainment content, common to most versions, "a Collection of approved MAXIMS, entertaining EPIGRAMS, curious ANECDOTES, diverting STORIES, &c. &c. Calculated for Instruction and Amusement." Blank pages were often included for the owner to keep a diary or other notes. While designed to be useful and entertaining, these almanacs also were an inexpensive way to introduce readers to the world of letters and even political debate.³⁰

²⁹ Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society*, 46- 51.

³⁰ Theophilus Wreg [Grew], *The Virginia Almanack for the Year of our Lord God 1767. . .* (Williamsburg: Alexander Purdie & Co., 1766) Early American Imprints, 1st series, no. 41679 (filmed), also Job Grant, *The Virginia Almanack for the Year of our Lord God 1767. . .* (Williamsburg: William Rind, 1766) Early American Imprints, 1st series, no. 10322 (filmed). Note

These “. . . ‘almanacks,’ selling for a few pennies, found their way into practically every household” even those of the poor and illiterate.³¹ The price was low enough that virtually every white customer could afford an almanac:

"Everyone had to have one." Thousands circulated in the colony of Virginia by the mid-eighteenth century. One estimate is that between 1764 and 1766, more than 4,000 almanacs were sold by just one Williamsburg printer.³² It would be reasonable to assume that at least four or five thousand almanacs were sold each year in Virginia by 1766. While the white population of the colony was nearly two hundred thousand, that would be about one almanac for every forty people, or far less than one almanac for every non-slave family.³³ Another analysis estimates a higher number of about one almanac for every twenty-six white people, but offers no



that the colonial printer commonly used capital letters, italics, and other devices for emphasis. More confusing was the typical lower-case 's' that looks like an f.

³¹ Schlesinger, *Prelude*, 41.

³² Berg, *Agent of Change*, 32-34.

³³ Population estimates from *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times To 1970*, Vol. 2, 1168. Numbers derived from British colonial office records. There is no indication that the black population of Virginia, primarily slave, had any substantial literacy rate by this period. "Negroes" made up an estimate 140,570, or 41% of Virginia's 1760 population of about 339,726 people.

specific year in the mid-eighteenth century.³⁴ All of these estimates ignore the fact that the *Virginia Almanacks* were aimed at a wider audience than just Virginians, as the first page indicates, "Fitting Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, &c." This would confuse estimates of almanac sales in any one colony, as some sales would be to outside the colony and people within the colony would be buying almanacs from elsewhere, including Maryland and perhaps even from England. One historian suggests that almanacs were even used by those who could not read, pointing out that sixteenth and seventeenth century almanacs in France contained a system of 'signs' that were understandable and useful to all.³⁵ The *Virginia Almanacks* did not have many pictures, but the drawing of the human anatomy, relating body parts to the constellations, or astrological signs, was understandable even by those who could not read. Throughout the almanacs, the months and days could be related to astrological signs by even those who were semi-literate, as symbols were used for the planets and other astrological aspects. It might be overreaching to suggest



Rind's 1767 Almanac

³⁴ David Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book: Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 60.

³⁵ Geneviève Bollème, *Les Almanachs populaires xviii siècles* (Paris, 1969), 7-15, paraphrased in Hall, *Cultures of Print*, 46.

that many who could not read could utilize these almanacs to any great extent. However, it is evident that the almanac helped to spread the practice of reading well beyond the elites, and this helped to expand the influence of the new print culture.

Pamphlets in this period helped to increase the number and broaden the type of people involved in political conversations in Virginia. The political pamphlet was an important aspect of the dramatic rise of the political press in the colonies by the mid-eighteenth century. Historians confirm that this helped lead to a wider interest in politics.³⁶ Iconoclastic thought first appeared in pamphlets printed in Williamsburg as part of the Great Awakening, when Hunter was paid to print several works of a dissident minister. The writings from both sides in the Parson's Cause are the first apparent political pamphlets from the Virginia press. This dispute between burgesses and Church of England ministers over pay produced some sharp attacks, with Landon Carter and Richard Bland on one side, and Reverend John Camm on the other. Carter paid for and sold some of his own writings, including one titled "Rector Detected." His diary noted, "Printer sent me up 50 copies of my Pamphlet [Rector Detected] against Cam [sic]. Sent 18 over to [shopkeeper] A. Ritchie to sell at 15d. each."

Printer Royle was caught in the middle of this controversy, publishing two pamphlets from the burgesses, then refusing the first of Camm's responses. Apparently this was because this pamphlet was considered too inflammatory. It sharply attacked the burgesses, and the burgesses paid Royle an annual salary for

³⁶ Gary Nash, "The Transformation of Urban Politics," *Journal of American History* 60, no. 3 (Dec. 1973): 617-618.

printing their business. Camm got his response published in Maryland, but the next two were paid for and printed by Royle. Overall, seven pamphlets were published regarding this dispute; six were printed in Williamsburg, one in Annapolis.³⁷

Both Hunter and his successor Royle refused to print pamphlets regarding both the Parson's Cause and Stamp Act when they felt the content was too controversial. The daybooks indicate that pamphlets were typically produced only when the author or another sponsor paid for the whole lot, but the printers would share the responsibility for selling them, and they would also sell pamphlets produced outside the region. Purdie's *Gazette* of March 7, 1766 ran an advertisement for Bland's pamphlet denouncing the Stamp Act, "AN Inquiry into the Rights of the British Colonies..." selling for 1 s, 3 d. The very first issue of *Rind's Gazette* announced the sale of the pamphlet: "Considerations on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes in the British Colonies, for the Purpose of raising a Revenue, by Act of Parliament," written by a Maryland resident. These pamphlets, along with the newspapers, were an increasingly important part of a widening public debate of political issues in Virginia.³⁸

It was the newspaper, however, that most Virginians counted on to keep them informed about the world and political debates. The *Virginia Gazette* followed the model of the London newspapers, especially the *London Gazette*.

³⁷ *Printing Office Journals*, Landon Carter, *The Diary Of Colonel Landon Carter Of Sabine Hall, 1752-1778*, edited by Jack P. Greene, (Charlottesville, Published for the Virginia Historical Society by the University Press of Virginia, 1965), (Monday, March 19, 1764), 261. Berg, *Agent of Change*, 52-59.

³⁸ *Printing Office Journals*, *Virginia Gazette*, Williamsburg: Alexander Purdie & Co., 1766. Eighteenth-Century American Newspapers collection, Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress, V. 1607, *Rind's Virginia Gazette*, May 16, 1766.

There was a great deal of foreign news, especially from England, only sporadic local news, and not a great deal of news from the other English colonies, at least until 1765. The modern reader would hardly recognize this newspaper; there were no real headlines, no lead story, and no apparent logic to the organization or layout. The order of stories had less to do with comparative importance and more to do with timing, or when the story came in. It took a long time to print each paper by hand, so until the advent of steam-operated presses a century later, pages were printed as they were filled with material, meaning the most important story would sometimes be placed in the last page printed in order to get it into the newspaper. There were no reporters. Stories were typically taken from other newspapers (primarily English), came from correspondents (letters written to the printer, often from overseas), or from local letters to the editor with opinions. Modern readers would recognize the advertisements, which filled as much as half of the newspaper. At the top of the front page was a woodcut of the arms of the colony, and the Hunter/Royle/Purdie version had the slogan, "With the freshest Advices, Foreign *and* Domestick." Prior to the Stamp Act dispute, there was not a great deal published regarding local politics and few articles from other colonies other than close neighbors Maryland and North Carolina.³⁹

It is not possible to accurately determine circulation numbers or who read which newspapers. By the 1760s, improvements in transportation and the post led to a virtual revolution in communication, with much faster and more

³⁹ *Virginia Gazette*, Williamsburg, 1751-1766. David Paul Nord, *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 50-52. Regarding English model, see also Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society*, 44, and Clark, 3-5, Thomas, *History of Printing*, 2-164. The modern reader is perhaps disturbed by the large number of ads for runaway slaves.

reliable service to England and between the colonies. Printers were thus able to exchange their newspapers free of charge, greatly facilitating the flow of information. Letters and accounts from London and other colonies were often published two to four months later. English newspapers and at least one paper from a nearby colony had a wide readership in Virginia. Some residents of Northern Virginia were actually better served by the *Maryland Gazette* than by the *Virginia Gazette*. For many residents, Annapolis was closer and an easier journey (by water) than was Williamsburg. The *Maryland Gazette* often ran advertisements obviously directed at the readership to the south. There were notices for home sales in Alexandria, and George Washington and George William Fairfax solicited for a builder for a new church in Fairfax County's Truro Parish. One estimate of overall penetration, from examining numbers of newspapers printed, is that by 1740, Americans printed one newspaper copy for every 67 inhabitants, the same estimate made for Great Britain. With the literacy gap closing and the readership of newspapers extending beyond simply the elite white males, "This wider reach of the press greatly enhanced its influence in the coming war of words with Britain."⁴⁰ In a cultural center such as Williamsburg, where many Virginians visited for court appearances or other business, the newspapers were widely read and talked about in the taverns and coffeehouses, even by people who could not read. "Yet taverns were far more than places to imbibe. Men repaired there to read the newspapers and discuss politics: they

⁴⁰ *Virginia Gazette* and *Maryland Gazette*. See, for example, house sale advertisements for Alexandria, VA in *Maryland Gazettes*, Feb. 2, Feb. 23, 1764, Oct. 2, 1764, the church builder ad May 17, 1764, and a May 26, 1768 advertisement in the *Maryland Gazette* from William Rind, now printing in Williamsburg, for a revised edition of the Laws of Virginia, price 40 shillings. On circulation, see Clark, 259. On influence of the post, see Schlesinger, *Prelude*, 53-55.

were ideal sites for these public acts of affiliation” and a place to develop a critical political culture.⁴¹

There are indications that by the mid-eighteenth century, this political culture of dissidence within the public sphere was gaining importance in Virginia and a critical discussion of government was germinating. However, the royal governor and market concerns continued to influence what could be printed, challenging the very concept of the freedom to publish and read controversial material. In addition to the Parson's Cause dispute, there was also a disagreement with royal authorities over new land patent processing fees that provoked prior censorship by the governor: “Thus, in 1754 Hunter would not publish a piece by Landon Carter taking the Burgesses' side in the pistole fee controversy, and in 1765 Lieutenant Governor Fauquier had enough influence with Royle to prevent his printing another essay of Carter's against the Stamp Act.”⁴² Carter sent his "Address to the Freeholders of the County of Richmond," to the printer, asking him to make public his threat to resign in reaction to the move to tax Americans without their approval. He refers to Great Britain's Parliament as "submitted to anticonstitutional measures" and a "blow ... fatal to American Freedom ... to be a Representative of a People divested of Liberty is to be a real Slave."⁴³ Several of the more controversial pamphlets and articles were instead printed in Maryland by Jonas Green and his eventual partner William

⁴¹ Waldstreicher, *In The Midst Of Perpetual Fetes*, 26.

⁴² Greene, *Quest for Power*, 158-162 and 289.

⁴³ Landon Carter, "Address to the Freeholders of the County of Richmond," sent to Joseph Royle, June 3, 1765, Fairfax Proprietary Papers, Brock Collection (BR Box 229), Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

Rind.⁴⁴ They were willing to take the risks where the one Virginia printer was not, perhaps because Maryland was a proprietary colony rather than a royal colony and political pressure from London was less influential.

Comparing the *Maryland Gazette* with the *Virginia Gazette* reveals a great deal about the two newspapers' perspectives on contemporary politics. By 1765, the Maryland newspaper was much more likely to run articles critical of governmental authority than would its Virginia counterpart. For example, the Annapolis newspaper published a remarkable comment that includes quite severe criticism of King George III: "This Paper has never had Occasion to appear in Deep Mourning, since the Death of our late good KING until NOW."⁴⁵ The few extant issues of the *Virginia Gazette* from before 1766 display a remarkably conservative, apologetic framing, defensive of Parliament's position. For example, the Oct. 24, 1765 newspaper from Annapolis contains a long story about local remonstrations against the Stamp Act: "It is Ordained and Enacted, 'That no Aid, Prize, Tax, Tollage, &c. shall be taken or levied without the Good-Will, and Assent of the Freemen of the Land.' " In contrast, the October 25 issue of Royle's *Virginia Gazette* prominently features a long story about the Massachusetts' governor warning the state representatives what would happen if they disobey Parliament's acts. Two other articles on the "general congress" gathering in New York are positioned so that the emphasis is on royal Lieutenant Governor

⁴⁴ Greene, 289.

⁴⁵ Anonymous, *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis: Jonas Green, October 17, 1765) special supplement, 1, Eighteenth-Century American Newspapers collection, Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress, V. 191.

Cadwallader Colden warning the delegates that their meeting is illegal . “He relieved them very coldly, and told them that the meeting of the commissioners was unconstitutional, unprecedented, and unlawful, and that he should give them no kind of countenance or encouragement.” While both sides of this issue are presented, the emphasis is on the royal viewpoint.⁴⁶

In general, the *Maryland Gazettes* of this period have much greater stress on opposition to the Stamp Act and earlier governmental actions, while Royle's *Virginia Gazette* focuses more on the governmental viewpoint. This is not to insinuate that dissent never makes it to the Virginia press, but it is apparent that Royle makes choices that would not tend to anger the governor. Green and Rind's newspapers, both in Annapolis and Rind's later Virginia paper, show much less evidence of royal influence than does Royle's newspaper. Patrick Henry successfully promoted passage of some controversial resolutions against the Stamp Act by the burgesses in 1765:

Resolved therefore, That the General Assembly of this Colony, with the Consent of his Majesty, or his Substitute, HAVE the Sole Right and Authority to lay Taxes and Impositions upon It's Inhabitants : And, That every Attempt to vest such Authority in any other Person or Persons whatsoever, has a Manifest Tendency to Destroy AMERICAN FREEDOM⁴⁷.

Significantly, while these challenging words were published in Maryland and in other newspapers throughout the colonies, the only newspaper in Virginia at the

⁴⁶ *Second Supplement to the Maryland Gazette*, Annapolis: Green, October 24, 1765, 1. *Supplement Extraordinary to the Virginia Gazette*, Williamsburg: Royle, October 25, 1765, 1, Eighteenth-Century American Newspapers collection, Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress, Box 31, Fol. 34. Interestingly, the only known copy of this issue is one sent back to the Lords of Trade in London by Governor Fauquier.

⁴⁷ *Maryland Gazette*, July 4, 1765 no. 1052, page 3.

time—Royle's—failed to print them. This demonstrates a distinct reluctance to fan the flames of dissent.⁴⁸

One remarkable characteristic of the colonial newspapers of this time, including Maryland and to a lesser extent Virginia, was the noticeable influence of dissent against the British government, especially from "Real Whigs." Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood uncovered the importance of British opposition thought and how the Real Whigs, or Country Party, influenced early American leaders, perhaps even more than John Locke or classical republican writings. This was a newer understanding of the transatlantic nature of political thinking and the media that transmit such ideas. Corrupt officials conspired against traditional English freedoms, in this view, threatening not only the liberty of British radicals such as John Wilkes, but also the liberty of the colonists.⁴⁹ Bailyn noted the unusual and important role of printers, "at once the handicraftsmen, entrepreneurs, and cultural leaders . . . second in importance only to the clergy as leaders of opinion and public educators."⁵⁰ Those in a position of authority were supported by a culture of deference that has long been recognized as a significant characteristic of the times, especially in the royal colony of Virginia. More

⁴⁸ There is only one edition of the 1765 *Virginia Gazette* extant. However, earlier issues support this thesis on the papers' biases. Contemporaries and letters in the *Maryland Gazette* confirm Royle's failure to publish the resolves, see Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 92-102.

⁴⁹ Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York: Knopf, 1968), Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins Of The American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), Gordon Wood, *The Creation Of The American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg, Va., by the University of North Carolina Press, 1969), and Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991).

⁵⁰ Bailyn, *Education in the Forming American Society; Needs and Opportunities for Study*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), pp. 95, 93, quoted in Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 21.

recently noted was the social and religious transformation that began to undermine political authority in the time leading up to the American Revolution. Rhys Isaac recognized that a growing print culture fostered independent thinking, helping to set the stage for dissidence both religiously and politically.⁵¹

In criticizing the government during the Stamp Act, colonial newspapers were also advancing a more radical notion of the liberty of the press. Newspapers began to display a remarkable freedom to criticize the government. Many quotations on the liberty of the press from these English writers are included, from John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon and from Wilkes. In the 1760s, every move this preeminent dissident made received notice back in the colonies, despite questions regarding his sordid private life. References to his expulsion from Parliament, imprisonment, exile to France, and his trial for seditious libel can be seen weekly. The *Maryland Gazette* mentioned Wilkes in a complimentary fashion as early as 1763, and repeatedly praised him by 1766: “he risked his Life and lost his Liberty, and as the Arbitrary and illegal Violations of the Rights of every Englishman, in his Case, had given them a Cause to stand upon . . .”⁵² The very first issue of Purdie's *Virginia Gazette* mentions that Wilkes is expected to return to England soon, and Rind's seventeenth issue reports Wilkes has left Paris. Many testimonials to press freedom allude to efforts by the English government to stifle Wilkes' publishing. An anonymous letter writer from

⁵¹ Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1999), especially 122.

⁵² Wilkes is mentioned, for example in the *Maryland Gazettes* of Sept. 29, 1763, April 18, 1765, March 13, 1766, Sept. 25, 1766, quotation from *Maryland Gazette* March 27, 1766, LOC vols. 190 and 191.

London notes eight attacks on the press by the government in the past year:

"There is no Liberty in this Country which is held more dear than that of the PRESS[<] nor indeed with so much Reason; for if that is destroyed, what we have else to boast of, is gone in an Instant. Arbitrary Ministers (and none but such) are Enemies to this Liberty, because it ever has been a Check upon their Tyranny."⁵³

Several of those attacks were no doubt against Wilkes. Similarly, a Pennsylvania newspaper explicitly tied Wilkes to the concept of freedom of the press, noting a toast drunk to his health: "May the liberty of the Press remain free from ministerial restraint."⁵⁴ These are important examples of direct ties between British radicals and the concept of freedom of press developing in the colonial newspapers. This idea focuses on resistance from government control, including aversion to seditious libel prosecution, a major tactic in the British government's efforts to stifle Wilkes. Royle's *Virginia Gazette* did not have that same interest in the radical Wilkes, however. The index of extant copies of Royle's newspaper has only one mention of Wilkes, that he traveled to France "which his enemies represented as a flight."⁵⁵ That version of the *Virginia Gazette* does not display the same interest in radical politics or the fight for free expression as either the *Maryland Gazette* or the later versions of the Virginia paper.

Royle's pro-royalist sympathies are also evident in a comparison of two accounts of a key incident regarding the Stamp Act. When George Mercer arrived

⁵³ *Maryland Gazette*, July 11, 1765. On Wilkes, see for example Schlesinger, *Prelude*, 35, 113, 123, 125.

⁵⁴ *Pennsylvania Journal*, March 23, 1769, quoted in Schlesinger, *Prelude*, 122

⁵⁵ Lester Cappon, and Stella Duff, *Virginia Gazette Index, 1736-1780* (Williamsburg: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1950), 2. *Virginia Gazette*, Royle, Nov. 4, 1763, 688: 2.

in Williamsburg from London, after being appointed official Distributor of Stamps, a hostile crowd forced him to resign his post. The report in Royle's *Gazette* was remarkably similar to the detailed account in a letter from Governor Francis Fauquier to the Board of Trade back in England, despite the fact that eyewitness accounts of any event are rarely consistent. The newspaper reported that Mercer "was accosted by a concourse of Gentlemen assembled from all parts of the colony, the General Court sitting at this time. They insisted he should immediately satisfy the company (which constantly increased) whether he intended to act as a Commissioner under the Stamp Act." Fauquier's letter stated, "This concourse of people I should call a Mob, did I not know that it was chiefly if not altogether composed of Gentlemen of property in the Colony.... They met Colonel Mercer on the way just at the Capitol there they stop's and demanded of him an Answer whether he would resign or act in his Office as Distributor of the Stamps." Although the two accounts are not similar enough to suggest the same author, neither report is supportive of the crowd's action. The newspaper account is neutral enough that Fauquier included a copy of the paper's report in his letter to his London supervisors, to detail the ending of the affair where Mercer promised to not execute the Stamp Act without local assembly approval. It appears clear that Royle was politically allied with the royal governor, a situation that was generating unrest among Virginians who were more critical of the British government.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Francis Fauquier to Board of Trade, Nov. 3rd, 1765, handwritten transcript in Manuscript Reading Room, Library of Congress, Great Britain PRO CO 5, Container v. 1331 [Public Record Office] 97- 106[137-148], *Virginia Gazette*, Royle, Oct. 31, 1765, 3.

As these disagreements between Virginians and the British authorities boiled to the surface, some readers became dissatisfied with the quality of the only Virginia newspaper and took action. The repeated refusals by Royle to print controversial material led to the establishment of a second printer. William Rind had been an apprentice to Green in Annapolis. Rind had recently been made a full partner, and as that newspaper more readily published what Royle would not, he was a good alternative. As Isaiah Thomas wrote not long after:

As there was but one newspaper published in Virginia in 1765; and but one press in the province, which was judged to have an undue bias from the officers of government, a number of gentlemen who were desirous of having a free and uninfluenced Gazette, gave an invitation to Rind to settle in Williamsburg, with a promise of support; he accordingly opened a printing house in that city, and received satisfactory encouragement. Rind published a newspaper, and was, soon after his establishment, appointed by the legislature printer to the government. This office was at that time lucrative.

Thomas claims this was corroborated by a letter from former President Thomas Jefferson to him dated July 1809: "Until the beginning of our revolutionary dispute, we had but one press, and that having the whole business of the government, and no competitor for public favor, nothing disagreeable to the governor could be got into it. We procured Rind to come from Maryland to publish a free paper."⁵⁷ Many historians have repeated this claim, but in reality, there is no record of any Jefferson letter to Thomas, despite the fact the former president kept complete records of his correspondence in this period. Jefferson

⁵⁷ Thomas, *Printing in America*, 1-335-6, fn 1. This allusion to a letter from Jefferson to Thomas is not in the first edition, but it does show up in the second edition, as edited from Thomas' notes.

did, however, make that statement in a letter to William W. Hening, who likely passed on the information to Thomas.⁵⁸

Virginia ended up in 1766 with two competing newspapers with neither displaying a pro-government bias. The unpopular Royle died just as printers were deciding whether to publish without stamps, and after a brief delay with no newspaper at all, Purdie took over that shop. Simultaneously, Rind began publishing a second newspaper. The governor reported the events back to London:

From the first of November [1765] we have been without any newspaper till very lately. The late printer to the Colony is dead, and as the press was then thought to be too complaisant to me, some of the hot Burgesses invited a printer from Maryland, upon which the foreman to the late printer, who is also a Candidate for the place, has taken up the Newspaper again in order to make Interest with the Burgesses.⁵⁹

The very first issue of *Rind's Virginia Gazette* boldly stated the intent to be "a well conducted NEWS-PAPER" serving "The interests of RELIGION and LIBERTY." The only extant copy of this has an interesting editorial insertion penned in, apparently by the original owner, noting this is the first well-conducted newspaper ever in the colony: "and the first that has ever been Established in this Province." No research has previously been done on either the handwriting or the provenance of this copy, but there are some indications that

⁵⁸ Thomas Jefferson to William W. Hening, July 25, 1809, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, ed. J. Jefferson Looney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 1-369-370. The author of this paper would like to acknowledge Dr. Looney's assistance in tracking down this letter and verifying that the Thomas letter does not exist in any records. The implication that Jefferson was involved in obtaining this new printer is questionable; however, as he was a twenty-two year old law student at the time.

⁵⁹ Fauquier to Board of Trade, April 7, 1766, 132-3 [190-1].

the handwriting is that of Thomas Jefferson. [See a visual comparison of the handwriting in Appendix B.] Regardless of who actually wrote the comment, it does demonstrate the hope of Virginia residents of 1766 to have a better-run newspaper that would be freer to publish criticism of the government.⁶⁰

A new concept of liberty of the press is visible in Virginia of 1766, coming out of the political dispute over the Stamp Act and from a rising merchant economy. Those who saw the importance of freedom to express ideas critical of the government turned to commercial competition as way to supply another voice. One reader commended the new printer and saw this new competition as bringing freedom from the former control: "Congratulations, on Account of the Freedom of the Press we now enjoy. ... LIBERTY can never exist, where every Thing designed for public Inspection, must (as was our unfortunate Case in Time past) receive an Imprimatur from a private Quarter."⁶¹ This idea of good business as the root of free press is quite different from the traditional libertarian view. The accepted view had been that the John Peter Zenger trial established an American tradition of a press free not only from prior restraint but also free from prosecution by the government for seditious libel. Legal historian Leonard Levy gained widespread support for the more restrictive view that the original intent of liberty of the press and the subsequent First Amendment to the United States

⁶⁰ *Rind's Virginia Gazette*, volume 1, May 16, 1766, Eighteenth-Century American Newspapers collection, Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress, V. 1623. The original is at the New York Historical Society; see Clarence Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820* (Worcester; American Antiquarian Society, 1947), 2:1160-1163.

⁶¹ Algernon Sidney, letter to *Rind's Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg: William Rind, May 30, 1766), Eighteenth-Century American Newspapers collection, Newspaper & Current Periodical Reading Room, Library of Congress, V. 1623, microfilm #1518. 3: 2 & 3.

Constitution was in fact based on the prevalent English interpretation. This concept recognizes the forbidding of prior restraint but legitimizes prosecution for seditious libel, which has a serious chilling affect on any criticism of government in the press.⁶² The press freedom evolving in Virginia of the 1760s can be seen as freedom from several types of control: the prior restraint exemplified by the Wilkes' imprisonment and exile, prosecution for seditious libel after the fact as typified by Zenger, and government's indirect control of a commercial press as demonstrated by the governor's control of Royle. It encompassed the idea that a free press should have a place for dissident voices.

While Rind quickly gained favor and even the governmental printing contract, his influence over press liberty may have actually been wider. The burgesses soon voted the new printer Rind the official printer of the colony at a salary of £375, choosing him over Royle's successors and two other nominees. After Purdie and his partner John Dixon took over in 1766, there is no evidence of a pro-governmental bias continuing. In fact, there was cooperation in printing for the government, even though Rind had the contract. Both *Virginia Gazettes* came to support the patriot's cause.⁶³ This culture of dissidence that rose directly from the press was in turn responsible for an increasing expression of the necessity for the liberty of the press. "It is a matter of rejoicing to every well-wisher to mankind that the press, one of the principal handmaids of liberty, is become a

⁶² The important legal interpretation was William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (4 vol., 1765–69), a landmark in creating order from a muddled British law. This work also strongly influenced American law in the colonies and even the early Republic. Leonard Levy, *Freedom of Speech and Press in Early American History: Legacy of Suppression* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), ix, and Levy, *Emergence of a Free Press*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), [An enlargement and revision of *Legacy of Suppression*.]

⁶³ *Journals of the House of Burgesses*, Nov. 1766, 11:17-18 & 72.

free channel of conveyance whereby men may communicate their sentiments on every subject . . ." ⁶⁴ Those who wanted freedom to publicly oppose the stamp tax recognized that they needed an unrestrained press, free to be their open forum. This led to such published letters recognizing the importance of freedom of the press and to action within the marketplace to ensure that such freedom existed through commercial competition. Just ten years later, during the American Revolution and the fight for freedom, Virginians passed the Declaration of Rights as a preface to their new constitution, declaring: "That the freedom of the press is one of the greatest bulwarks of liberty and can never be restrained but by despotic governments." ⁶⁵ This was the first constitutional protection passed anywhere in the world protecting such freedom of expression, and an important precedent for the free press clause in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

⁶⁴ "Philanthropos," *Virginia Gazette*, Purdie and Dixon, August 22, 1766, 1.

⁶⁵ *Virginia Declaration of Rights*, Article 12.

Conclusion

"This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people was the real American Revolution."⁶⁶

"There is no Liberty in this Country which is held more dear than that of the PRESS, nor indeed with so much Reason; for if that is destroyed, what we have else to boast of, is gone in an Instant."⁶⁷

This culture of dissidence, or new public sphere critical of government, flowered in eighteenth century Virginia. It began with the religious Great Awakening, continuing with political leaders clashing with religious leaders in the Parson's Cause, and emerging more broadly during the Stamp Act crisis. A simultaneously emerging print culture not only reflected this dissidence, it in fact was a cultural precedent for it—a necessary preface—but not sufficient in itself. The print culture enabled individuals to think independently, question authority, and helped a public sphere to emerge. Driven by commercially burgeoning print media, critical political debates continued in the taverns and coffeehouses, allowing both dissident lawmakers and their constituents to take part in political decisions for the first time. It was the market commodity of print, allowing people to share the same language, which allowed them to relate together in new ways, to help them to imagine a new community—a nation. In the British Americas, it was the new distribution of political pamphlets and newspaper stories between colonies, especially during the Stamp Act crisis, that helped to bring about public

⁶⁶ John Adams, letter to Hezekiah Niles, Feb. 13, 1818, Adams *Works*, quoted in Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence*, 4.

⁶⁷ Anonymous letter, dated London, April 19, 1765, in Jonah Green and William Rind's *Maryland Gazette* (Annapolis, July 11, 1765), No. 1053, Page 1, column 1.

support for a new nation.⁶⁸ In contrast to Habermas' public sphere, this colonial space began with the elite bourgeoisie, as nobility was virtually nonexistent in the colonies. It began with religion and transitioned to political, lacking the literary focus of that European model. Habermas suggests the public sphere devolved as the capitalistic profit motive consumed it. What we see here instead began as one aspect of an expanding market economy. This expanding public sphere has serious implications regarding the development of freedom of the press.

By looking beyond the laws and the court cases, this analysis of print in Virginia during the Stamp Act crisis shows us how freedom of the press evolved here. It is both transatlantic and inter-colonial in nature, with much derived from English precedents, from English opposition, and from John Wilkes' struggle with Parliament. Closer to home, it evolved directly from the struggle with the royal governor over what could be printed and what could not, and it looked to both constitutional protections and commercial competition as a solution. Levy's view that press freedom only meant freedom from prior restraint and not freedom from after-the-fact prosecution for seditious libel is directly challenged by this evidence. Political criticism was in fact common in Virginia in the 1760s and contributed a great deal to radical political thought and practice before the Revolution. "Contrary to the assumptions of Levy and a number of other historians including Daniel Boorstin and Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., religious beliefs and political authority were being actively challenged in newspapers and

⁶⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso 1983, revised edition, 1991).

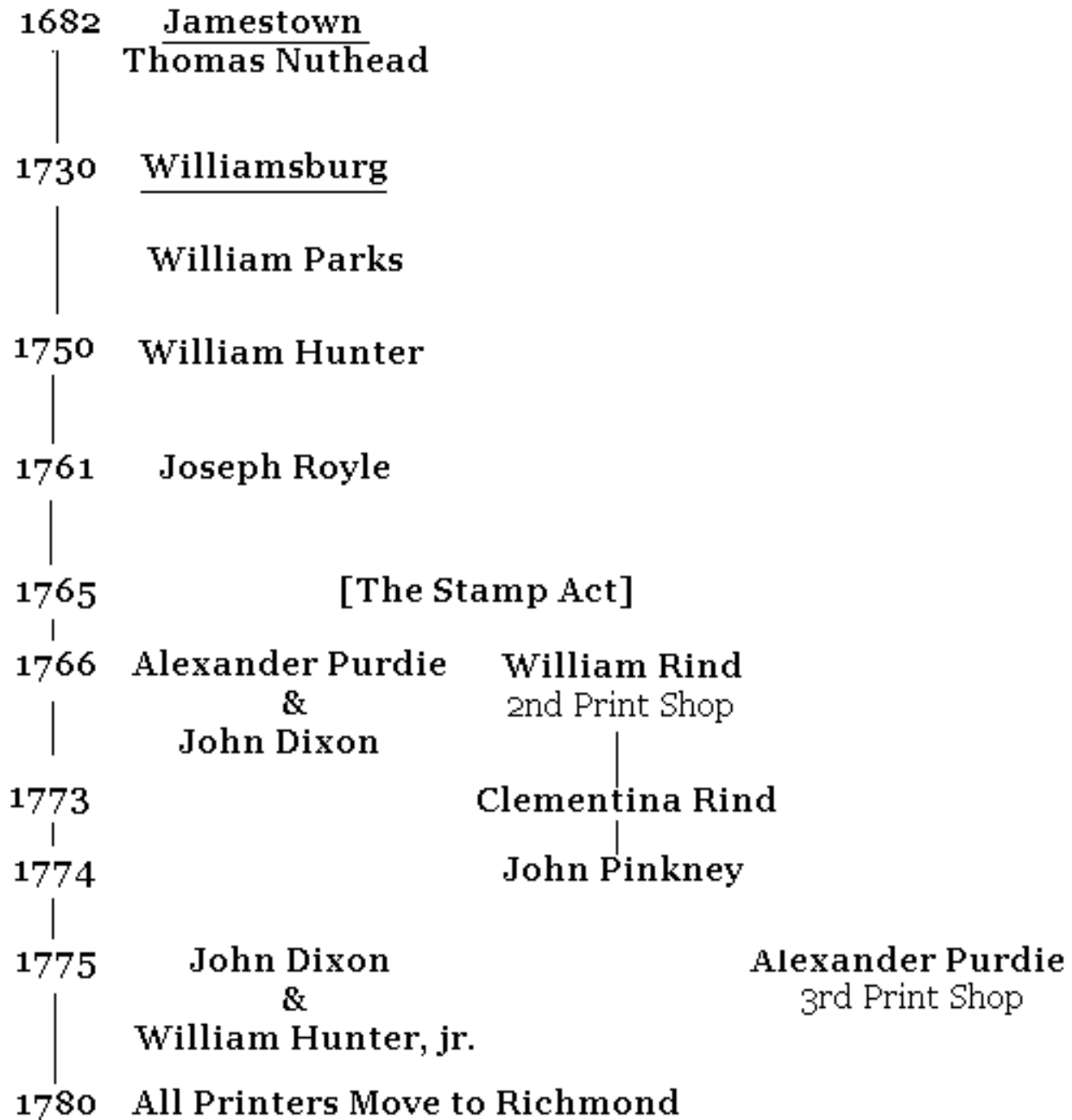
pamphlets for decades before the Stamp Act Crisis."⁶⁹ Governmental influence led to an outcry for liberty of the press that was satisfied, at least for the time being, by competition in the commercial marketplace.

The long-germinating print culture in Virginia finally bore fruit during the Stamp Act crisis. These findings give strong support to the concept of printed matter being the crucible within which a new iconoclastic politics emerged, leading to the very idea of a new nation, and the concept of free press. By 1776 there were three newspapers competing in Williamsburg, with new slogans reflecting these emerging views at the very top of the first page: "Thirteen United Colonies. United we stand—Divided we fall," "Open to all parties, but influenced by none," and ⁷⁰ "The freedom of the press is one of the great bulwarks of liberty, and can never be restrained but by despotic governments.

⁶⁹ Jeffery Smith, *Printers and Press Freedom: The Ideology of Early American Journalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 7.

⁷⁰ *Virginia Gazette*, Purdie, May 17, 1776, number 68, *Virginia Gazette*, Rind (later Pinckney), 1766-1776, *Virginia Gazette*, Dixon & Hunter, Dec.1776 (quoting the new Virginia Declaration of Rights).

Appendix A
Virginia Printers Timeline



Appendix B



Figure 4. First issue of Rind's Virginia Gazette.

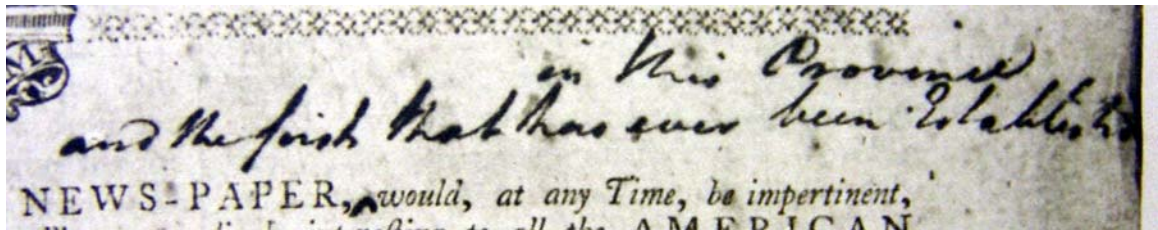


Figure 5. Close up of handwriting.

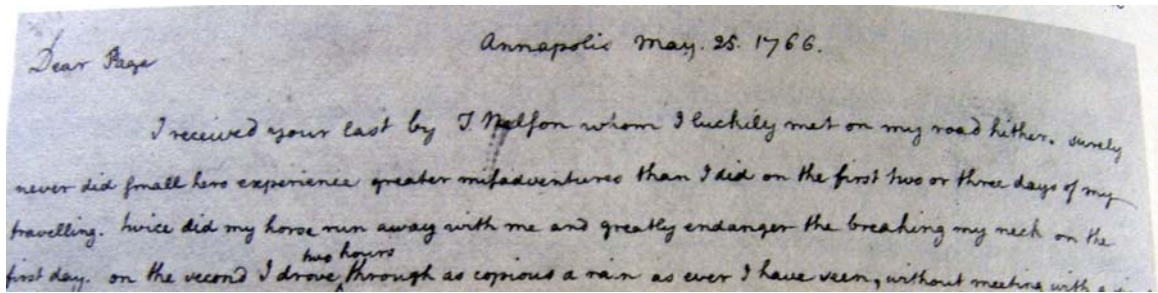


Figure 6. Jefferson Letter of May 25, 1766, New York Public Library.⁷¹

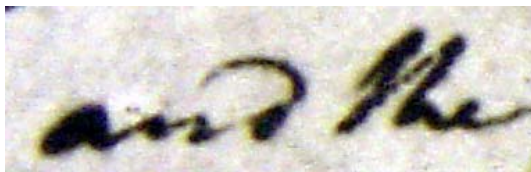


Figure 7. Close-up from newspaper.



Figure 8. Close-ups from letter.

⁷¹ Jefferson, Thomas, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Second Series. Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book*, ed. Douglas Wilson (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 1989) 192.

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