

graphs, save for one plate by Baynton in the 1830 volume, which is a rather crude aquatint.

The high technical quality of the plates and variety of processes used in the *Honduras Almanacks* would have been very surprising had they been printed in the settlement, rather than in Boston, since they were produced at a level of technical accomplishment far higher than that possessed by printers elsewhere in the British Caribbean at that time, or by Belize printers later in the 1830s. In the period before 1776 it had not been uncommon for the West Indian colonies to have work printed in New England, and by the late 1840s the American domination of the West Indian printing trade was beginning to show,<sup>6</sup> but U.S. commissions were very unusual in the period around 1830. In this, as in so many aspects of its history, Belize was different from the sugar colonies.

#### Roderick Cave

<sup>6</sup> Note, for example, the inclusion of the Bruce Typefoundry's advertisements in the *San Fernando Gazette* (Trinidad) of May 1851 and in the *Antigua Weekly Register*, September 1849.

### MASSACHUSETTS PRINTERS AND THE COMMONWEALTH'S NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENT TAX OF 1785

On July 2, 1785, the General Court of Massachusetts passed an act that, among other things, placed a duty or tax on all private (i.e., non-official) advertisements inserted in the newspapers of the Commonwealth.<sup>1</sup> The tax was scaled at sixpence per insertion for each advertisement of twelve lines or less, figuring eight words a line; one shilling each in-

<sup>1</sup> 'An Act for Repealing a Law of this Commonwealth, Entitled, "An Act Imposing Duties on Licensed Vellum, Parchment and Paper," and for Imposing Other Duties on Certain Papers, Commissions, Instruments and Processes,' *Acts and Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* [1784-85], repr. ed. (Boston, n.d.), pp. 458-62.

sersion for advertisements of thirteen through nineteen lines; and proportionally higher for notices twenty lines in length or longer. The advertisement tax was part of an act repealing a law passed March 18, 1785, 'An Act Imposing Duties on Licenced Vellum, Parchment and Paper,' which had placed a stamp tax on a number of categories of official and other printed papers, including a tax of two-thirds of a penny on every newspaper printed and one penny on every almanac.<sup>2</sup> This Massachusetts stamp act came twenty years after the infamous British Stamp Act of 1765 which had so galvanized American public opinion, led by newspaper printers whose pocketbooks were threatened by the measure, against British imperial policy. Most if not all of the printers of the state vigorously protested the new action. Their petition to the House and Senate, dated May 17, 1785, argued for repeal of the law on a variety of grounds, both ideological and self-interested, not the least of which was that it would 'inevitably reduce a number of your petitioners to distress and ruin.' The petition was signed by Isaiah Thomas of Worcester; Samuel Hall of Salem; John Mycall of Newburyport; Benjamin Edes and Son, Thomas and John Fleet, Powars & Willis, John W. Folsom, Adams & Nourse, James D. Griffith, Warden & Russell, Peter Edes, Greenleaf & Freeman, William Barrett, John Norman, all of Boston; John Russell of Springfield; and Nathaniel Coverly of Plymouth.<sup>3</sup> The stamp act was repealed, in part no doubt, as a result of the united opposition of the printers of the Commonwealth.<sup>4</sup>

The tax on newspaper advertisements which accompanied the repeal of the stamp act also met with the concerted oppo-

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 186-92. On both of these laws, see Rollo G. Silver, 'Aprons instead of Uniforms: The Practice of Printing, 1776-1787,' above, pp. 111-94.

<sup>3</sup> *Massachusetts Spy*, September 29, 1785. This petition has not been located in the House or Senate Files in the Massachusetts Archives, nor have any other petitions that might have been offered in opposition to the law.

<sup>4</sup> Claude A. Duniway, *The Development of Freedom of the Press in Massachusetts* (New York, 1906), pp. 136-37.

sition of Massachusetts printers and it is this opposition which is the subject of this note. Printed here are transcriptions of the documents contained in a collection denoted 'Senate. Bills and Resolves Not Enacted, Orders and Resolutions: Original Papers. No. 718 (1787),' in the Archives of the Commonwealth, State House, Boston. The documents, which Claude A. Duniway had seen seventy years ago but which apparently have not before been printed, all pertain to the advertising tax and the reaction of the printers thereto.<sup>5</sup>

The documents are of interest for at least three reasons. First, any concrete information relating to the economics of the printing trade in the eighteenth century is welcome, as any student of the subject will testify. For one reason or another, few printing records have survived from the period. It is ironic that printers, who considered themselves practitioners of the 'art preservative of all art,' should have been so careless in preserving the records of their own craft. Thus any information on the importance of advertising to the profitability of newspapers and any figures on the relative advertising strength of newspapers, such as are contained here, are most useful. Second, the documents demonstrate one more instance in which printers, who were among the first craftsmen to organize for their mutual benefit, banded together in defense of their common interests. A decade or so later, after newspapers had become polarized politically, it was not so easy. There was, for example, no concerted effort in 1798-99 on the part of Massachusetts printers—a number of whom signed these petitions of 1785-86—to oppose the prosecutions of the editor and bookkeeper of the *Independent Chronicle* under the federal Sedition Act and the common law of seditious libel, potentially even greater threats to their liberty and livelihood than the advertising tax. Yet seeds of later journalistic rivalries and jealousies are evident in the indepen-

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

dent petition of John Russell of Springfield with its appeal to the legislature to trim the advantages of the metropolitan press in general and the special privileges of the *Independent Chronicle* of Adams and Nourse, the 'Printers to the General Court,' in particular.<sup>6</sup> Third, the petitions of the printers, especially John Russell's, tell us much about the image that printers had of their calling and their prospects in early republican America, however overstated that view may have been.

As the last document printed here shows, the legislature did not immediately grant the petitioners' wishes, but rather deferred decision until the next session of the General Court. The legislature eventually did vote in favor of the printers when, by an act of March 26, 1788, the tax on newspaper advertisements was repealed.<sup>7</sup>

In the transcription of these documents, sentence-ending punctuation has been modernized and superscript letters have been brought down to the line, but original spelling and capitalization have been retained. The documents are here printed in chronological, or narrative, order, rather than in the serial order (718, 718.1, 718.2, etc.) in which they are arranged at the Archives. They are published here with permission. I am indebted to Leo Flaherty, Helen Flaherty, and Richard Kaplan of the Massachusetts Archives Division and to Rollo G. Silver of Boston for their help or advice while I was preparing these manuscripts for publication.

John B. Hench

<sup>6</sup> Russell was then publisher with Gad Stebbins of the *Hampshire Herald*. He was a brother of Benjamin Russell of the *Massachusetts Centinel*. An intense journalistic rivalry was carried on between the *Centinel* (renamed the *Columbian Centinel*) and the *Chronicle* during much of the 1790s, when John Russell was an assistant to Benjamin. As editor of *Russell's Gazette* from 1798 to 1800 and the *Boston Gazette* from 1800 on, John Russell carried on his own rivalry with the *Chronicle*.

<sup>7</sup> *Acts and Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* [1786-87], repr. ed. (Boston, 1893), pp. 619-20.

[718.5 Petition of John Russell printer for relief. Feb. 3d, 1786.]

To the Hon. the Senate, and the Hon. the House of Representatives, in General Court assembled, February, one thousand seven hundred and eighty six.

The Petition of the Subscriber, Printer, in Springfield, humbly and respectfully sheweth:

That by an act, passed in a late Session of the General Court, intituled, "An act, imposing duties on Vellum, Parchment, &c." newspapers among a variety of other articles was subjected to a duty; that although on the united application of the Printers of this Commonwealth, the said act, in a subsequent Session was repealed, yet another, equally grievous, in its OPERATION was substituted in its place; and while the newspapers was NOMINALLY exempted from, it was still in *reality* subjected to a tax by the duty imposed on all private advertisements inserted therein.

Your petitioner begs leave to observe, that the profits heretofore accruing to the Printer from Advertisements, enabled him to afford his papers at such a moderate price, that it easily circulated among all ranks of people, even among those of the lowest fortune, and consequently a duty on advertisements will produce all the evil effects as the aforesaid duty on newspapers, both to distress the printer, and to prevent the circulation of that political Intelligence, which is manifestly necessary to the virtue, freedom and happiness of the people; and therefore all the reasons urged in the joint petition of the Printers, for a repeal of the clause imposing a duty on newspapers, plead as strongly, in your Petitioner's humble opinion for a repeal of the clause now in question.

Your petitioner's experience fully confirms him in an opinion, which reason had itself before suggested, that such a duty could add nothing to the public revenue, and consequently could answer no useful purpose whatever; for the general abhorrence which people have conceived against taxes of this kind, added to the idea of a small saving, will make the number of Advertisements so small, that the revenue arising from them, will be but a contemptible object. The advertisements of farmers, which before were sent to the Press, are now usually posted up at taverns. Many traders who used to favour us with their custom, now advertise their Goods in the papers of neighbouring States, where the presses are still happily free. The few advertisements now sent us are so very concise as to scarcely afford either a perquisite to the printer, or a duty to

Government. Thus the act, considered as a revenue act, defeats itself—it turns to other States the business and the profits which naturally belong to the subjects of this State, and by attempting to draw an ADDITIONAL tax from the Printer, disables them from paying so great a proportion of the ORDINARY tax. This grievance, your petitioner feels, perhaps, more sensibly than his brethren, as he is situated in the vicinity of some presses in Connecticut, from whence issue papers on the same day of the week, at the same price, and for the same circulation as his paper.

Farther, there is not perhaps a more speedy and effectual expedient for the recovery of property that is either stolen or lost, than to publish in various papers, and disperse in printed handbills, descriptive and promissary advertisements; and probably the apprehension of detection from this method, is one of the greatest terrors to thieves and robbers, and one of the best securities to our property. And surely it cannot be thought just, that the man, who has unfortunately suffered by theft or robbery, should be subjected to a TAX or FINE for using the NECESSARY means of recovering his right and detecting the villain. This would not only be oppression to the sufferer, but also, an encouragement to the plunderer.

While your petitioner suggests these feelings, which, in some measure, arise from private interest, he cannot forbear to offer a sentiment, perhaps, more liberal and disinterested—a sentiment, which in his opinion, concerns the public tranquility. The acts and Laws of the General Court, are, most of them, published by authority, only in two Boston papers, whose circulation is chiefly confined to the metropolis and its environs, for which service the printers are paid at the publick expence. But in these two western Counties, where the said Boston papers never circulate generally, and whither only now and then one straggles singly, the good people have no direct means of speedy information concerning the acts of Court, unless your petitioner will publish them in his paper GRATIS. And it deserves a thought, whether some disturbances that have taken place in this part of the State, so remote from the seat of government, have not arisen from a neglect to give the people due information from the real proceedings of the Court, in consequence of which they have been liable to misinformation and imposition, rather than from any evil disposition in the people themselves.

Your petitioner fears he shall trespass on the time and patience of your Honours. He cannot, however, forbear to observe, that there is a law which requires all advertisements of land exposed to

public Sale for the payment of taxes, to be inserted in the newspaper called the INDEPENDENT CHRONICLE, which law, in your petitioner's apprehension, operates unhappily.<sup>8</sup> It confines to a single press a considerable profit which might otherwise be diffused among all; deprives other presses of their contingency in this perquisite; puts it in the power of one printer to state without a check, his own demands; subjects collectors to unnecessary expence and trouble in sending advertisements to a distance; thus eventually accumulates cost on the proprietor, and fails of fully answering the just and benevolent intention of the Legislature, which is by giving timely information, to prevent the sale of the lands thus advertised: for the Chronicle seldom reaches those parts where the largest bodies of unimproved lands lie, and the greatest number of proprietors of such lands must be supposed to dwell. Your petitioner, therefore, in regard to himself, and his fellow-citizens, humbly prays for such an alteration in said Law, that collectors may be allowed a discretionary liberty to insert advertisements of lands to be sold for taxes, in such paper or papers, as, in their opinion, will most speedily and effectually convey intelligence to the proprietors.

Your petitioner would also suggest, whether duties on newspapers, advertisements &c in one State, while nothing of the kind is adopted by other States, can be of general utility, or have any other effect than to distress the industrious citizens of such State, by diverting their business and means of support in a wrong channel. Whatever duties or taxes may be necessary to the general happiness, your petitioner bears cheerfully in common with his fellow-citizens; but acts, which operate partially, to the prejudice of a particular State, or to the discouragement of particular classes of men, he submits to with patriotick reluctance.

The reasons before suggested, and many others, which cannot escape the wisdom of the honorable Court, your petitioner is moved most humbly to solicit, and emboldened most confidently to expect a repeal of that clause in the act herein referred to which imposes a duty on all private advertisements.

If this humble solicitation of your petitioner's should appear too trifling and impertinent, or too bold and assuming, he begs your honors to attend a moment to his painful situation: Be pleased most

<sup>8</sup> 'Resolve Appointing Nathaniel Willis, Printer to the General Court . . .,' *Acts and Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* [1780-81], repr. ed. ([Boston], 1890), pp. 301-2.

revered FATHERS and PATRONS to conceive a youth, just emerged from a long apprenticeship and entering on the theatre of life, with some liberality of sentiment, and with an honest ambition to shine in his profession—to rise above mediocrity—to be useful in society, and contribute to the preservation of his Country's freedom, independence, and happiness, by an art, which lately bore a most distinguished part in rescuing her from slavery—and enjoyed the patronage of former assemblies—conceive this youth as having not only expended all the means in his power, but incurred a considerable debt to lay a foundation for eminence in his business, and as having no other worldly prospects than barely those which his business affords him—conceive him as having pursued his calling a few months with growing success, and perhaps with increasing reputation—and as just beginning to anticipate the future enjoyments of that temporal felicity, which usually prompts the industry of youth, and as just venturing on a large and expensive plan for the more reputable and successful prosecution of his laudable and promising design—conceive him when raised to the pinnacle of expectation, as having all his fair prospects suddenly clouded, and the object of his hopes, at once thrown out of sight and haggard poverty, useless inactivity, and despicable insignificance rising full to view in all their horrid forms, and with their HIDEOUS train of fatal TEMPTATIONS—conceive him as finding his business swiftly decaying, and the honest profits which it began to yield, snatched from his hands and thrown to other's who can plead no equal claim; and all this effected by an act of that honorable Legislature, on whose patronage he thought himself warranted to place the most absolute reliance.

Be pleased to *indulge* these conceptions, and you will have a just idea of the situation and feelings of your humble petitioner, and he assures himself your Honors will be induced not only to pardon, but to relieve his painful anxiety, by granting his most ardent request.

For the happiness of the Hon. the Legislature, and the prosperity of the Commonwealth, your petitioner, as in duty bound, will ever pray.

Springfield, Commonwealth of Massachusetts }  
 Feby. 3, 1786. } John Russell

[718.3 Statement of the duty on advertisements in this commonwealth, Feb. 9th 1785.]

Impost & Excise Office  
Suffolk County 9th Feby. 1786

This certifies that the Duty on Advertizements as exhibited to the Collector by the several Printers for the first six months is as follows

Viz. Messrs

B. Edes & Son	£9.2.0
S. Hall	3.12.0
Powars & Willis	15.19.0
J. W. Folsom	7.19.6
Adams & Nourse	29.4.0
Warden & Russell	19.8.0
P. Edes	4.7.8
J. D. Griffith	6.8.0
	£96.0.2

Attest. S[amuel] Henshaw [Esq.]  
Collector for said County

[718 Petition of a committee in behalf of the printers of Newspapers in the commonwealth. Feb. 10th 1785.]

Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

To the Hone. the Senate, and the Hone. the House of Representatives.

The Petition of the several Printers of News Papers in the Commonwealth aforesaid, respectfully shews:

That, during the last six Months, they have unfortunately experienced, that a Part of the Act lately passed, laying a Duty on Advertisements, is, in its Operation, much more to the Detriment of your Petitioners, than they conceive the Legislature expected at the passing of the same, or intended they should be subjected to, considering the trifling Revenue derived therefrom to Government. That the Revenue arising from the said Duty is *small indeed*, fully appears by the Certificate of the Excise Master, ready to be ex-

hibited to this Honorable Court; and yet, to shew the Inability of your Petitioners to bear it, they beg leave to observe to your Honors, that in consequence of the Profits arising from the Insertion of private Advertisements; the Printers have formerly been enabled to afford their News Papers at a Price much below their real Value & Cost; by which Means, the poorest among the People, as well as the Rich, have had it in their Power to acquire that political Intelligence, which has been so remarkable in the People of this Commonwealth in Times past, and which is deemed so essential to the Preservation of their invaluable Rights & Liberties. The spreading Intelligence thro' this Channel, must, in a great Measure, cease, if the Duty is continu'd: For, from the Decrease of Advertisements, in consequence of the Duty, the Printers not being able to afford their Papers at the present Price, must, necessarily, greatly enhance it. The Decrease above mention'd, by a Comparison of the Number of Advertisements inserted six Months immediately prior to the Commencement of the Duty, with those inserted in the like space of Time, since, your Petitioners can affirm, that the latter does not amount to more than one to three of the former: and this Diminution, they can convince your Honors, is in consequence of the said Duty. It hath been customary with the several Printers, throughout the United States, for the Encouragement of Literature, to publish *gratis* the Proposals in either States for the Publication of Books, &c. but the Printers in *this* Commonwealth are now prevented from doing this for others (*they only* being liable to pay a Duty therefor) and this Consequence is, that the Printers in other States will not publish for them. They likewise beg leave to inform your Honors, that heretofore the Advertisements respecting the Academies, and the Medical Society, and also Proposals for forming beneficial Institutions, &c. of which the Ohio Company is a recent Instance, have been inserted *gratis* at the Request of Individuals, but cannot be so done in future, because the Printers are chargeable by Law, with the Duty, and are bound (in due Obedience,) by their Oaths to pay the same.

Wherefore, as the Hon. Legislature, have been pleased solemnly to declare their Determination to encourage Arts & Manufactures of every Description, within the Commonwealth, & are ready to redress all Grievances of this Nature, your Petitioners look up to your Honors, being fully persuaded, that, taking their Case under your wise Consideration, such Relief will be granted them, as in

your Wisdom & Justice shall seem meet; and as in Duty bound, they will ever pray.

Edes & Son	} In behalf of the Printers in the Commonwealth
Samuel Hall	
Warden & Russell	
Peter Edes	
Jno. W. Folsom	
Adams & Nourse	
James D. Griffith	
Powars & Willis	

[718.4 Report of the committee of the house on the petition of printers of Newspapers in this commonwealth.]

The Committee of the house to whom was Referred the Petitions of a Number of Printers of News Papers; Ask leave to Report a state of facts as appears from a Representation of a committee of said Printers; Viz. That the emolument arriseing from Printing News Papers was about two thirds from Advertizements previous to the late Duty; that since a Duty was laid on Advertizements there is not more than one third the Number encerted in their papers that were before; making a loss to the Printers of nearly one half of their profits.

That from a certificate from the Empost & Excise office in the County of Suffolk it appears that the Printers have paid £96, for six months past, That the other Printers in the Commonwealth will probable be £30 more making about £250 pr. annum.

[718.2 Report of the committee of both houses on the petition of printers of Newspapers in this commonwealth.]

The Committee of both Houses to whom was Committed the petition of John Russel, and the petition of Edes and Son, and others—printers belonging to this Commonwealth—have attended the business assigned them, and are of Opinion from the best information they have been able to obtain on the Subject, that the Revinue arising to Government from the Duties on advertisements in newspapers is very Inconsiderable, and that the Said Duties operate in many instances to the Disadvantage of the printers.

The Committee therefore beg leave to report, that it would be

expedient to repeal the clause contained in an act passed July 2nd 1785 for imposing Duties on certain papers, commissions, Instruments, and processes, which imposes the aforesaid Duties on advertisements in newspapers.

which is Submitted

Tompson J. Skinner pr order

[718.1 Petition of Printers of the Newspapers in this commonwealth. Petition committed Novr. 6th, 1787.]

To the hone. Senate, & hon. House of Representatives. The Petition of a number of Printers of Newspapers, in behalf of themselves and the other printers in the State, Respectfully shews:

That during the last year, your petitioners presented to the honourable Legislature a petition, praying that the duty laid on advertisements might be taken off, and that they might have liberty, before a Committee of the honourable Court, to exhibit their reasons therefor: That your petitioners were accordingly heard before a joint Committee, which, they have cause to believe, reported in their favour. But owing to the late period of the Session in which it was brought forward, it still continues on the files of the hone. Senate. Your Petitioners, therefore, again pray that the duty above-mentioned be taken off. And to express their desire, that so, the publick Revenue may not be im[pair]ed, that adequate duties be laid on types &c. imported.<sup>9</sup> They are induced to this by a variety

<sup>9</sup> The customs collector at Boston had previously collected a five percent ad valorem tax on types imported from London by Isaiah Thomas in 1787. The five percent tax was based on the clause in 'An Act to Raise a Public Revenue by Impost,' passed November 17, 1786, that dealt with 'all other goods, wares and merchandize of foreign growth or manufacture'; types were not specifically enumerated. See *Acts and Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* [1786-87], repr. ed. ([Boston], 1899), p. 118. Thomas protested collection of this duty in a petition to the General Court dated April 25, 1787. The House of Representatives voted to allow Thomas's request. See House. Bills and Resolves Not Enacted, Orders and Resolutions: Original Papers, No. 2405 (1787), Archives of the Commonwealth. State House, Boston. No record of Senate concurrence has been found. For the acknowledgement of Thomas's order for the types, together with a bill, see Edmund Fry of Joseph Fry & Son, Letter-Founders of London, to Thomas, August 16, 1786. Isaiah Thomas Papers, American Antiquarian Society.

Even though the Massachusetts printers (including Thomas) suggested in the petition printed here that a duty on imported types be substituted for a tax on advertise-

of reasons, which they doubt not would be satisfactory to the hone. Legislature, could they have an opportunity of making them known. And as in duty bound, shall ever pray, &c. &c.

Adams & Nourse

Benj'n Russell

John W. Allen

Isaiah Thomas pr B Russell

[718.6 Report of Committee on petition of printers in this Commonwealth—petition referred to next Session. Nov. 23d, 1787.]

Commonwealth of Massachusetts

The Committee of both Houses to whom was refered the Petition of the Printers ask leave to report that the said Petition be refered to the next Sitting of the General Court, which is submitted.

J B Varnum per order

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ments, they frequently protested such laws when passed. For a description of protests against such duties passed by the federal government under the Constitution, see two works by Rollo G. Silver, 'Printers' Lobby: Model 1802,' *Studies in Bibliography* 3(1950-51):207-28; and *Typefounding in America, 1787-1825* (Charlottesville, 1965), pp. 125-30.

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