

American Bibliographical Notes

A QUERY BY ISAIAH THOMAS
ON THE NEW YORK PRESS

In his preface to *The History of Printing in America*, first published in 1810, Isaiah Thomas acknowledged the assistance he received from other printers, who provided him with information on the progress and development of the printing trade.¹ The largest contribution known to be made by one of Thomas's colleagues was that of the Philadelphia printer William McCulloch. Thomas began receiving McCulloch's additions and corrections to his work in 1812, two years after the first edition of the *History of Printing* had been published. These letters and memoranda were printed by the American Antiquarian Society in 1921. It was believed that a similar correspondence took place between Isaiah Thomas and other printers while he collected material for the book, but extant documentation of the printer's research methodology, in the form of letters of inquiry and responses, is scarce. In the introduction to the published McCulloch letters, Clarence S. Brigham noted that 'Although he [Thomas] must have received various written communications from other members of the craft, there is no such evidence remaining today; the Thomas correspondence now in the possession of the American Antiquarian Society, profuse as it is for the period of 1800-1810, contains no letters designed to aid him in his history of printing.'²

The Society has since acquired a few letters that were written specifically to assist Thomas in his research.³ In addition,

¹ Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 2 vols. (Worcester, 1810), 1:10-11.

² 'William McCulloch's Additions to Thomas's History of Printing,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 31 (1921):89.

³ In addition to William McCulloch's letters, the Isaiah Thomas Papers at the American Antiquarian Society (AAS) contain the following letters pertaining specifically to Thomas's inquiry on printing: I.T. to Wm. Bentley, Jan. 14, April 1, and

a letter written by Isaiah Thomas, revealing his disappointment with the paucity of material he had collected regarding printing in New York, was recently discovered among the papers of John Pintard at the New-York Historical Society. Thomas had addressed the query published below on the New York press to James Swords, a printer in partnership with his brother Thomas Swords in New York City.

Roxane AhKao

[1]⁴

(Massachusetts)
Sir,

Worcester, May 14, 1810

I have been long engaged in writing a History of Printing in America, and have nearly completed the very laborious work; one volume of which is printed.

I have not been so fortunate in collecting materials respecting printing in New York, as to give me entire satisfaction. I sometime since applied to [friend] Isaac Collins,⁵ who, after giving such answers to my queries, as was in his power, referred me to you. I, sometime since, addressed a letter to you on the

May 16, 1809; [Wm. Goddard] to I.T., n.d., and [Wm. Goddard] to [I.T.], April 15 and 22, 1811.

⁴ All underlining and other marks in the letter are Thomas's own, including crossed-out words, phrases, and punctuation. Square brackets are mine.

⁵ Collins was born in Delaware in 1746. He served part of his apprenticeship in his native state with James Adams in 1761, and the remainder of it with William Rind in Virginia (1766-67). Collins was employed by several printers in Philadelphia (one of whom was William Goddard) before he moved to Burlington, New Jersey, in 1770. That same year, Collins was also appointed printer to the king. In 1777, he began publishing *The New-Jersey Gazette* (1777-86). He moved to Trenton and lived there for several years before relocating in New York in 1796. He died in 1817 in Burlington. See Richard F. Hixson, *Isaac Collins: A Quaker Printer in Eighteenth-Century America* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1968), pp. 3, 13-17, 23, 32-34, 155, 180; Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 2 vols., vols. 5 and 6 of the Transactions of the American Antiquarian Society 6 (1874), 1:316-17; all subsequent citations from Thomas's *History of Printing* are to this edition.

subject, but have not been favored with an answer.

Will you, Sir, have the goodness to inform me, what you know respecting *Alexander and James Robertson*, who had a press in New York, in 1768; and, in 1769 printed a newspaper entitled the "*New York Chronicle*" to know when they began that paper when it was discontinued; and, to obtain title and imprint, the size of the paper

The Robertsons removed to Albany, previous to 1774, and published paper in that city. I have not been ascertain the time they set up Albany, nor the title of the printed there, nor when they quitted

[2]

you can inform me, I shall esteem it a great favor.⁶

⁶ Thomas was able to obtain a significant amount of information about the Robertsons. He learned that they were royalists and sons of a printer in Scotland. The Robertsons arrived in Boston from Scotland in 1764 and came to New York in 1768. Frequently relocating their business, they operated a press in the cities of New York, Albany, Norwich, and Shelburne, Nova Scotia (Thomas, *History of Printing*, 1:148, 305). See also Charles Hildeburn, *Sketches of Printers and Printing in Colonial New York* (New York, 1895), p. 98. Thomas was unable, however, to ascertain the beginning and ending publication dates of *The New-York Chronicle*. The New-York Historical Society (NYHS) has the first issue, May 8, 1769, and the last issue located, January 4, 1770, of this weekly and semiweekly paper. See also Clarence S. Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers 1690-1820*, 2 vols. (Worcester, 1947), 1:613.

After *The Chronicle* was discontinued, the Robertsons moved their press to Albany and published *The Albany Gazette* (1771-75) (Isaiah Thomas erroneously entitled the paper *The Albany Post-Boy*). This was the first introduction of printing in a part of the state other than New York City. While continuing this newspaper, they also ran a printing house in Connecticut where they published *The Norwich Packet* in partnership with John Trumbull (Thomas, *History of Printing*, 2:120, 126-27, and Brigham, *History and Bibliography*, 1:66-67). The Robertsons moved back to New York in 1776 where they published *The Royal American Gazette*. Isaiah Thomas did not note in his *History of Printing* that James Robertson had also published *The Royal Pennsylvania Gazette* (1778) during the British occupation of Philadelphia and *The Royal South-Carolina Gazette* (1780-82) while the British were in Charleston. James rejoined his brother in New York around 1782 (Brigham, *History and Bibliography*, 2:951, 1035-36; Hildeburn, *Sketches of Printers*, pp. 98-104). In 1783, the Robertsons moved to Shelburne. Alexander died later in 1784. James returned to Scotland in the 1790s (Douglas McMurtrie, *Royalist Printers in Shelburne, Nova Scotia* [Chicago, 1923], p. 5).

In 1768, a newspaper was published in New York entitled "*The New York Packet*." By whom this paper was printed, when it began, or when its publication ended, I have not learnt. Perhaps you can give me some account of it.⁷

Henry DeForeest, in 1746, published a newspaper, entitled "*The New York Evening Post*." I have made much enquiry respecting DeForeest, and his paper, but have not been able to procure any account of them. I wish to get

⁷ Thomas stated that the paper was published as far back as 1753, but that he did not know who had published it nor how long it had been in circulation prior to that date. Charles Hildeburn stated that the paper was printed by Benjamin Mecom in 1763. Cf. Thomas, *History of Printing*, 1:260, where the author gives a biographical sketch of Mecom, and Hildeburn, *Sketches of Printers*, p. 65. Issue no. 0 was published July 11, 1763; the first numbered issue appeared July 18 and the last issue located (no. 6) was published August 22, 1763. These issues can be found in NYHS collections. See also Brigham, *History and Bibliography*, 1:677.

Benjamin Mecom, nephew of Benjamin Franklin, was apprenticed to James Parker in New York in 1745, although Thomas claims he apprenticed with his uncle (Thomas, *History of Printing* 1:142). He moved to the West Indies in 1752 to operate the printing house his uncle had established there. See John Z. C. Thomas, 'Printing in Colonial New York, 1693-1763' (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1974), pp. 75-76, and Alan Frank Dyer, 'James Parker, Colonial Printer, 1715-1770' (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1977), p. 176. Isaiah Thomas stated that Mecom established the press in Antigua, West Indies, in 1748 (Thomas, *History of Printing*, 2:192). However, the *Dictionary of American Biography* notes that Franklin sent Mecom to Antigua in 1752, as does John Z. C. Thomas in 'Printing in Colonial New York,' p. 76. He went to Boston a few years later and then to New York in 1762. Mecom again relocated in Connecticut, Philadelphia, and then New Jersey, where he was employed by Isaac Collins. Isaiah Thomas names him as the first person in the country to attempt stereotype printing. In 1776, he was imprisoned for insanity and died soon after. For complete details see Thomas, 'Printing in Colonial New York,' pp. 75-76, 78, 81, 84.

⁸ Thomas learned that DeForeest was born in New York and served his apprenticeship with either William Bradford or John Peter Zenger (Thomas, *History of Printing*, 1:300). Cf. Thomas, 'Printing in Colonial New York,' p. 44, where the author establishes DeForeest's apprenticeship with Zenger rather than Bradford. Isaiah Thomas was able to approximate the issuing dates of the weekly *The New-York Evening-Post* as between 1746 and 1747. On the evidence of the printing specimen he had obtained, Thomas did not feel that DeForeest was an able printer (Thomas, *History of Printing*, 2:108). *The New-York Evening-Post* was established November 26, 1744. The first issue located is no. 4, dated December 17, 1744 (NYHS); the last issue located is no. 300, dated December 18, 1752 (AAS). The date when the paper was discontinued is uncertain. See Brigham, *History of American Newspapers*, 1:629-30.

DeForeest was employed as a bookbinder before entering into a partnership with William Bradford in the 1740s. After Bradford retired, DeForeest started his newspaper *The New-York Evening-Post*. He ran his printing house for approximately twelve years. He probably died in 1758. See details in Thomas, 'Printing in Colonial New York,' 44-46, 78, 81, 84.

information when DeForeest set up his press; when he began publishing, and when he discontinued the Evening Post, and what became of him; and if possible to get one of his papers.⁸

It is my intention to give a com-
 [torn][v]iew of the newspapers published in the British
 [torn] January 1775, and those published in the
 [torn]ter in January 1810. I wrote to one or
 [torn]ters of newspapers in New York, begging
 [torn] a correct list of all the newspapers pub-
 [torn] State in January, of the present
 [torn]ave had no return. Similar favors I have
 [torn]m most of the other states in the union.
 [torn][I] obtain it in New York?

I have account, I believe, of all [torn]
 [torn] and newspapers, in New York previ[torn]

[3]

That part of the work, for which the information I have mentioned is wanting, is now waiting at press. Permit me to request the favour of a few lines from you, as soon as convenient. Perhaps, Dr. Miller, or some other persons with whom you are acquainted, may possess files of old New York papers, among which may be those I have taken notice of.⁹

Any information you can afford

⁹ More than likely, Thomas is referring to the Reverend Dr. Samuel Miller (1769–1850), a prominent New York citizen, clergyman, educator and author. Perhaps Swords, as requested, forwarded Thomas's letter to Miller, who subsequently passed it on to John Pintard (1759–1844). Both men were founding members of The New-York Historical Society, and during the early decades of the nineteenth century, Pintard was involved in collecting materials for the Society's library. For biographical sketches see the entries for Miller and Pintard in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. It is also possible that Swords gave the letter directly to Pintard; for Pintard, an avid book collector and friend of Swords, frequented Swords's shop. In his diary entry for Thursday, August 7, 1800, John Pintard stated that he 'knew these persons [Thomas and James Swords] when journeymen printers to Mr. [Hugh] Gaine.' See entries in John Pintard's manuscript diary for July 19 – August 25, 1800, in Pintard Papers, NYHS Manuscript Department. Pintard also mentions the Swords in letters to his daughter. See *Letters From John Pintard to His Daughter, Eliza Noel Pintard Davidson, 1816–1833*, 4 vols. (New York, 1941–44).

me respecting the persons or newspapers I have mentioned, will greatly oblige me.

I am Sir, respectfully,
your humble servant,
Isaiah Thomas

Mr. James Swords¹⁰

[torn] [notes on Mr. Loudon, the NY Packet,
and Mercantile Advertiser written in
another's hand] [torn]

[illegible]

[4]

Isaiah Thomas

May 14, []

1810

rec^d June []

PAID

Mr. James Swords

Printer,

Newyork

¹⁰ James and Thomas Swords published theological works almost exclusively, particularly those of the Protestant Episcopal Church with which they maintained a close association. According to McMurtrie, the Swordses were in Nova Scotia with the Robertsons around 1784, and worked for *The Port-Roseway Gazeteer*; and *The Shelburne Advertiser*. In 1786, they established themselves on Pearl Street in New York City as 'T. and J. Swords,' and continued under that name for forty-six years. James Swords retired in 1832 and Thomas entered into a partnership with Edward Stanford, who had been employed by the firm for several years. Thomas died in 1843 and James in 1846. See Charles E. Butler, 'T. and J. Swords, Publishers,' *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 58 (1954): 89-93.

AN ANNOTATION TO BRIGHAM

The American Antiquarian Society, in conjunction with six other national repositories, is currently involved in the United States Newspaper Program. This program, under a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, is a long-term project intended to identify and catalogue all newspapers published in the United States. All material gathered for this program is entered into the OCLC database under a system of shared cooperative cataloguing. The American Antiquarian Society is cataloguing its collection, which begins with the first newspaper to be published in the United States (*The Boston News-Letter*, which made its debut April 24, 1704) and extends through 1876 with newspapers from all the states and territories. The work of the project and the research involved in creating the cataloguing records have uncovered evidence which permits a revision of two entries in Clarence S. Brigham's *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820*, 2 vols. (Worcester, 1947).

The entry for *The American Eagle* in Salem, Massachusetts, refers the reader to the entry for *The Salem Gazette*, 1790-1820+. That entry lists *The American Eagle* as the first issue of the 1790 *The Salem Gazette*, which was a continuation of *The Salem Mercury*.

The newspaper files at the American Antiquarian Society revealed no occurrence of the *American Eagle* title in the Salem collection. However, the files did show an issue of *The Salem Gazette*, called number 1 in 1790, and dated January 5 of that year. According to Brigham, this was the designation of the *American Eagle* title. Brigham listed eight institutions, in addition to the American Antiquarian Society, which had holdings for January 5, 1790.

The Library of Congress, the Boston Athenæum, the New York Public Library, the Wisconsin Historical Society, and Amherst College, along with the American Antiquarian Soci-

ety, reported copies of January 5, 1790 bearing the title *The Salem Gazette*. The copy at the Essex Institute was missing its masthead. Both the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the Houghton Library at Harvard reported copies of the *American Eagle* title, dated January 5, 1790.

A comparison between copies of *The Salem Gazette* and *The American Eagle* for January 5, 1790, showed that the two newspapers are identical in content, with the exception of the difference in masthead titles. They also appear to be printed from the same setting of type. A search of the Evans and Brigham correspondence files at AAS, and research in various local and county histories, including Harriet S. Tapley's *Salem Imprints* (Salem, 1927), revealed no apparent reason for the occurrence of the two distinct and separate titles for the same newspaper.

From the foregoing, the entries in Brigham for these two titles may be revised as follows:

[Salem] American Eagle, 1790

This was the title given to some copies of the first issue of "The Salem Gazette," January 5, 1790. Some other copies of no. 1 in 1790 have the title "The Salem Gazette." Except for the masthead title, the two copies of the newspaper appear identical in content. There was only one issue published under the "American Eagle" title. It was published by Thomas C. Cushing, and is a continuation of "The Salem Mercury." With no. 2, January 12, 1790, all copies were called "The Salem Gazette." For further information, see "Salem Gazette," 1790-1820+.

Harvard and Mass. Hist. Soc. have Jan. 5, 1790.

Salem Gazette, 1790-1820+

Weekly and semi-weekly. A continuation of "The Salem Mercury." The first issue with the title change was that of January 5, 1790. Some copies of no. 1 have the title "The American Eagle." Others have the title "The Salem Gazette." The newspaper was published by Thomas C. Cushing, and both titles are called no. 1 in 1790, and dated Jan. 5, 1790. (See entry for "American Eagle," 1790.) The next issues were all called "The Salem

Gazette," Jan. 12, 1790, "number 2 in 1790," published by Thomas C. Cushing. This was henceforth the title. With the issue of Jan. 4, 1791, the early system of numbering was resumed, that issue being numbered Vol. 5, no. 221. With the issue of Oct. 21, 1794, the paper was published by William Carlton. With the issue of June 3, 1796, it was published semi-weekly. With the issue of July 5, 1797, it was again published by Thomas C. Cushing. The word "The" in the title was omitted beginning with the issue of Jan. 3, 1806, but was restored with the issue of Jan. 1, 1818. The paper was continued by Cushing until after 1820.

The holdings statements may be amended as follows:

Am. Ant. Soc. and Lib. Congress have Jan. 5, 1790 ("The Salem Gazette")—Dec. 29, 1820

Boston Athenæum has Jan. 5, 1790 (The Salem Gazette)—Dec. 30, 1800.

Essex Institute has Jan. 5, 1790 (masthead is missing)—Dec. 29, 1820.

Harvard and Mass. Hist. Soc. have Jan. 5, 1790 (American Eagle)—Dec. 27, 1791.

N.Y. Pub. Lib. has Jan. 5, 1790 (The Salem Gazette)—Dec. 27, 1791.

Hist. Soc. Wis. has Jan. 5, 1790 (The Salem Gazette)—Dec. 18, 1790.

Amherst Coll. has Jan. 5, 1790 (The Salem Gazette)—Apr. 6, 1790.

Susan J. Wolfe

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