

New Light on "Publick Occurrences"

America's First Newspaper

BY VICTOR HUGO PALTSITS

THE first attempt at journalism in America, like other beginnings in human relations, has a fascination for the student of culture. Through several studies the subject has been removed from speculation and controversy. The purpose of this paper is to review the matter with some analysis, and to introduce new light from a most interesting letter written by Cotton Mather to his kinsman Reverend John Cotton, pastor of the Church in Plymouth, on October 17, 1690. This holograph letter was brought to my attention about twenty years ago by my friend, the late Robert Hoe Dodd, respected dealer in rare books and manuscripts. He had just acquired it, with other items, from the stock of Joseph F. Sabin of New York. At my suggestion, having pointed out to him the value of it in connection with *Publick Occurrences*, Mr. Dodd offered this letter to Mr. William Gwinn Mather for his Mather Library. Soon after its purchase by Mr. Mather I was invited by him to prepare a study of it for publication under his auspices. My studies, though far advanced, were interrupted by other professional obligations. When Mr. Mather disposed of his library I felt my purpose negatived. My data have now been restudied; and this paper is offered *con amore* to the American Antiquarian Society, of which I became a member in April, 1904.

THE EVIDENCES REVIEWED

In the year 1901 Dr. Samuel Abbott Green published the first satisfactory study of *Publick Occurrences* in his *Ten Facsimile Reproductions relating to Old Boston and Neighborhood*, pp. 1-4. He had learned long before that somewhere in London there existed a copy of "such a newspaper," which information he received from William Winthrop, United States Consul at Malta, where Dr. Green had met him. Using this clue, and "after long search among the files of various offices, in the year 1856," he "discovered the unique sheet in the Colonial State Paper Office [now a part of the Public Record Office of Great Britain] and made a copy which was printed later in the first volume (pages 228-31) of *The Historical Magazine* (Boston) for August, 1857." But before this publication by him, Dr. Green had become aware "that the late Reverend Joseph B. Felt already knew of this early print," and had indeed mentioned it in the second edition of his *Annals of Salem* (vol. 2, p. 14), published in the year 1849.

It was "some time after" the conversation between Winthrop and Green at Malta that Mr. Winthrop sent "an item in regard to the matter, signed W. W." to *Notes and Queries* (London), February 7, 1857. This brought forth "an answer in the same periodical on May 23," from one Cl. Hopper, "describing the sheet very fully, and telling where it could be found."

Dr. Green, or anyone else, has never located another copy of *Publick Occurrences*. He consulted several diaries of the period of its issuance; but only references by Chief Justice Samuel Sewall were located, in his *Letter-Book* (vol. 1, p. 112), under date of September 25, 1690, that "the first sheet of Occurrences . . . came out this day"; and three entries in the *Diary* (vol. 1, pp. 332-3), viz.:

Sept. 25 [1690]. A printed sheet entituled publick Occurrences comes out, which gives much distaste because not Licensed; and because of the passage referring to the French King and the Maquas [Mohawks].

Oct. 1. Print of the Governor and Council come out showing their disallowance of the Publick Occurrences.

Oct. 2. Mr. [Cotton] Mather writes a very sharp letter about it.

Dr. Green, in 1901, concluded that the broadside ordering the paper's suppression, and the entries by Sewall, contained "the only contemporary allusions to the offending paper, which have come down to the present time."

A year after the publication of Dr. Green's study of *Publick Occurrences*, a disturbing claim for American newspaper priority was made by William Green Shillaber (May 1, 1902) that "the first attempt at Newspaper Publication on the American Continent" was a printed sheet of 1689: *The Present State of New-English Affairs*. I well remember reading this reproduction of Shillaber when it appeared, and never considered it more than a broadside, in the nature of what the Germans called a *Flugschrift*, an issue (whether in writing or printed) to be scattered abroad for one occasion; a thing of practice from the fifteenth century, if not earlier. The Shillaber pretence was soon dissected by the late and able Albert Matthews, in *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, vol. 10, no. 2 (March, 1906), pp. 318-9. His paper is the most critical examination respecting the theories put forth about *The Present State of New-English Affairs* being a newspaper, a sheet, a broadside, a "Handbill, or Newspaper extraordinary," or a "Printed Broadsheet." He said: "The conclusion reached by me is that the sheet of 1689 is a broadside, but is not a newspaper."

Dr. Brigham, in his *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers 1690-1820*, Worcester, 1947, vol. 1, pp. 340-1, has not included the *New English Affairs*, even though a

copy of this rarity, formerly owned by the late I. N. Phelps Stokes, is now possessed by our Society. He begins his record of American journalism with *Publick Occurrences* as "the first genuine newspaper published in America," and as having "most of the attributes of a newspaper of that day, including a title of the newspaper type, a system of enumeration, a general smattering of news, and an announcement of continuous publication."

Dr. Green (*op. cit.*) pointed out that in the period before the issue of this newspaper it had been a custom in New England to "write long letters containing items of public interest rather than personal news, and to send them through private hands to friends and kinsfolk living either in the other colonies or in England. Such communications were called 'news letters' or 'letters of news'; and it was expected by the writers that they would be read in a wider circle than that of the family fireside." He had seen "several such letters which in their day had been filed and endorsed 'Publick Occurrences.'"

THE PROPOSALS OF BENJAMIN HARRIS

The colophon on page 3 of *Publick Occurrences* is thus: "Boston, Printed by R. Pierce, for Benjamin Harris, at the London-Coffee House. 1690." Harris's shop was at what is now "the south corner of State and Washington Streets" (Green *op. cit.*). As publisher his address to the reader said:

"It is designed, that the Countrey shall be furnished once a moneth (or if any Glut of *Occurrences* happen, *oftener*) with an Account of such considerable things as have arrived unto our Notice." This definitely announced publication periodically. On his part he promised to "take what pains" he could "to obtain a *Faithful Relation* of all such things"; and that he would "particularly make himself beholden to such Persons in Boston whom he knows to have been for their own use the diligent Observers of such matters." He advised his readers definitely of his objectives, thus:

"That which is herein proposed, is *First*, That *Memorable Occurents* [sic] of *Divine Providence* may not be neglected or forgotten, as they too often are. *Secondly*, That people every where may better understand the Circumstances of Publique Affairs, both abroad and at home; which may not only direct their *Thoughts* at all times, but at *some* times also to assist their *Businesses* and *Negotiations*. *Thirdly*, that some thing may be done towards the *Curing*, or at least *Charming* of that *Spirit of Lying*, which prevails amongst us, wherefore nothing shall be entered, but what we have reason to believe is true, repairing to the best fountains for our Information. And when there appears any *material mistake* in any thing that is collected, it shall be *corrected* in the *next*.

"Moreover, the Publisher of these *Occurrences* is willing to engage, that whereas, there are many *False Reports* maliciously made, and spread among us, if any well-minded person will be at pains to trace any such *false Report* so far as to find out and Convict the *First Raiser* of it, he will in this Paper (unless just Advice be given to the contrary) expose the Name of such person as *A malicious Raiser of a false Report*. It is suppos'd that none will dislike this Proposal, but such as intend to be guilty of so villanous a Crime."

These first proposals of journalism in America enunciated the highest ideals. No doubt the threat of exposing the raisers of malicious gossip or false reports struck consternation in some, and had some effect in the act of intolerance that suppressed the newspaper.

THE CONTENTS ANALYZED

The following abstract of the contents of this first attempt at journalism in America reveals that a good beginning was made in accord with the proposals of the publisher.

PLYMOUTH INDIANS—THANKSGIVING

Christian Indians at "Plimouth" have "a day of Thanksgiving to God for his Mercy in supplying their extream and pinching Necessities under their late want of Corn" and the "prospect of a very Comfortable Harvest." The comment is made that "Their Example may be worth Mentioning."

CANADA EXPEDITION—ENLISTMENTS

The withdrawal of many husbandmen for "the Forces lately gone for Canada" it was feared would hinder the harvesting; but the season was "so unusually favourable that they scarce can find any want of the many hundreds of hands, that are gone from them; which is looked upon as a Merciful Providence."

CHILDREN CAPTURED BY INDIANS AT CHELMSFORD

Two missing children "about Chelmsford" were supposed to have been captured by "barbarous Indians."

SUICIDE AT WATERTOWN

In the beginning of September "a very Tragical Accident happened at Water-Town." An old man "whose wife's discretion and industry had long been the support of his Family," and who had "newly buried his Wife," was filled with fear lest "he should now come to want before he dyed"; and "The Devil took advantage of the Melancholly which he thereupon fell into," and, though carefully looked after by "very careful friends," so that "he should do himself" no harm, he, nevertheless, evaded their vigilance, and "one evening escaping from them into the Cow-house," they pursued and "found him hanging by a Rope, which they had used to tye their Calves withal, he was dead with his feet near touching the Ground."

EPIDEMICS

"Epidemical Fevers and Agues grow very common, in some parts of the Country, whereof, tho' many dye not, yet they are sorely unfitted for their employments; but in some parts a more malignant Fever seems to prevail in such sort that it usually goes thro' a Family where it comes, and proves Mortal unto many."

BOSTON—SMALLPOX DISASTER

The smallpox epidemic in Boston is "very much abated." This epidemic was considered more widespread than one of twelve years before, but not so mortal. About 320 died, or "perhaps half so many as fell by the former." It raged most in June, July, and August. It attacked "all sorts of people," even "Children in the bellies of Mothers" who were supposed immune from having had the disease "many years ago." Some of these babes "were now born full of the Distemper." The suffering of Boston was indescribable. The contagion "now unhappily

spreads in several other places, among which our Garrisons in the East are to be reckoned some of the greatest Sufferers."

BOSTON—DISASTROUS FIRES; LOSS OF PRINTING PRESS

A "few weeks ago" Boston was visited "with a Disaster by Fire." About 20 houses "near the Mill-Creek" were consumed. Again "about midnight," in this month, on September 16-17, "another Fire broke forth near the South-Meeting-House," when 5 or 6 houses were consumed and "almost carried the Meeting-house it self, one of fairest Edifices in the Country, if God had not remarkably assisted the Endeavours of the People to put out the Fire." A young man perished in the house where this fire had started. Another disaster was, "that the best furnished PRINTING-PRESS, of those few that we know of in America, was lost; a loss not presently to be repaired." The loss of this printing-press obliged Harris to have the newspaper printed by R. Pierce, for him.

A VESSEL SEIZED BY PENOBSCOT INDIANS

A report was received of a vessel "bound from Bristol to Virginia," which "put in at Penobscot instead of Piscataqua, where the Indians and French seized her, and Butchered the Master, and several of his men."

SIR WILLIAM PHIPS EXPEDITION AGAINST CANADA

"The chief discourse of this month has been about the affairs of the Western Expedition against Canada. The Albanians, New-Yorkers and five Nations of Indians, in the West, had long been pressing of the Massachusetts, to make an Expedition by Sea, into Canada, and still made us believe, that they stayed for us, and that while we assaulted Quebeck, they would pass the Lake, and by Land make a Descent upon Mount Real. Accordingly this Colony with some assistance from our kind Neighbours of Plimouth; fitted out an Army of near five and twenty hundred men, and a Navy of two and thirty Sail; which went from hence the beginning of the last August, under the Command of the Honourable Sir William Phips.

"In the mean time the English Colonies & Provinces in the West raised Forces, the Numbers whereof have been reported five or six hundred. The Honourable General Winthrop was in the Head of these, and advanced within a few miles of the Lake; He there had some good Number of Maqua's [Mohawks] to joyn his Forces, but contrary to his Expectation, it was found that the Canoo's to have been ready for the

Transportation of the Army over the Lake, were not prepared, and the other Nations of Indians, that should have come to this Campaign, sent their Excuses, pretending that the Small-pox was among them, and some other Trifles. The General Meeting with such vexing disappointments, called a Council of War, wherein 'twas agreed, That it was impossible for them to Prosecute their Intended Expedition. However he dispatched away the Maqua's to the French Territories, who returned with some Success, having slain several of the French, and brought home several Prisoners, whom they used in a manner too barbarous for any English to approve. The General coming back to Albany, there happened a misunderstanding, between him and the Lieutenant Governour of New-york which occasioned much discourse, but produced not those effects which were feared of it. Where lay the bottom of these miscarriages is variously conjectured, if any people further West than Albany, have been Tampering with the Indians, to desert the business of Canada, we hope time will discover it. And if Almighty God will have Canada to be subdu'd without the assistance of those miserable Salvages, in whom we have too much confided, we shall be glad, that there will be no Sacrifice offered up to the Devil, upon this occasion; God alone will have all the Glory.

"Tis possible, we have not so exactly related the Circumstances of this business, but this Account, is as near exactness, as any that could be had, in the midst of many various reports about it."

INDIANS AND CAPTIVES

Destruction of a body of "French Indians." Return of two English captives who "escaped from the hands of the Indians and French at Pascadamoquady, came into Portsmouth on the sixteenth Instant" and reported massacres of forty captives held by the French. The aforesaid two captives "escaped into a Shallop" which the French, they said, had intended to employ as a decoy against English vessels.

FOREIGN NEWS AND RUMORS

"Portsmouth Sept. 20th." Arrival of "a small Vessel from Barbadoes" bringing a letter reporting that "Christophers is wholly taken from the French as also a small Island called Stacia"; also brought news of triumphal entry of King William in Ireland. "France is in much trouble (and fear) not only with us but also with his Son, who has revolted against him lately, and has great reason, if reports be true, that the *Father used to lie with the Sons Wife*. He has got all the *Hugonots*, and all

the dissatisfied Papists, with the great force of the D. of *Lorrain*, and are now against him, resolving to depose him of his life and Kingdom." Unconfirmed report from Cork, Ireland.

FORT PEJEPSCOT AND OTHER EXPLOITS

"From *Plimouth Sept. 22*. We have an Account, that on *Friday* the 12th Instant, in the night, our Forces Landing privately, forthwith surrounded Pegypscot Fort; but finding no Indians there, they March'd to *Amonoscoggin*. There on the Lords-day, they kill'd and took 15 or 16 of the Enemy, and recovered five *English* Captives mostly belonging to *Oyster-River*; who advised, that the men had gone about ten days down to a River, to meet with the *French*, and the *French Indians*; where they expected to make up a Body of 300 men, and design first against *Well's* or *Piscataqua*." Other reports of the doings of "the Army" at Macquoit, at Saco, at Pegypscot-Plains. Attack and exploit at Casco Bay, in which the English of Massachusetts-Bay "lost 9 men, and had about 20 wounded," and in the ambush "the blow chiefly fell on our dear *Friends*, the *Plimouth-Forces*, 15 being kill'd and wounded of Captain *Southworth's* Company."

THE NEWSPAPER SUPPRESSED

The Order by the Governor and Council that "suppressed and called in" *Publick Occurrences*, and "strictly" forbade hereafter "any person or persons . . . to Set forth any thing in Print without License first obtained" from governmental authority, is known in only two copies extant of the printed broadside; one being in the Massachusetts Historical Society. It referred to the newspaper as a "Pamphlet"; and in Cotton Mather's letter he refers to the Order as "a very severe Proclamation against ye poor Pamphlett."

BY THE
GOVERNOUR & COUNCIL

WHEREAS some have lately presumed to Print and Disperse a Pamphlet: Entituled, Publick Occurrences, both Foreign and Domestick: Boston, Thursday, Septemb. 25th. 1690. Without the least Privity or Countenance of Authority.

The Governour and Council having had the perusal of the said Pamphlet, and finding that therein is contained Reflections of a very high nature: As also sundry doubtful and uncertain Reports, do hereby manifest and declare their high Resentment and Disallowance of said Pamphlet, and Order that the same be Suppressed and called in; strictly forbidding any person or persons for the future to set forth any thing in Print without Licence first obtained from those that are or shall be appointed by the Government to grant the same.

By Order of the Governour & Council.

Isaac Addington, Secr.

Boston, September 29th. 1690.

It has already been shown that Chief Justice Sewall in his diary remarked that the publication of the newspaper gave "much distaste because not Licensed; and because of the passage referring to the French King and the Maquas." He also recorded, under date of October 2, that "Mr. Mather writes a very sharp letter about it." It would be interesting to have the text of *this* Mather letter, which apparently Dr. Green had not been able to find; but the Mather letter to Cotton, of October 17, now here first made public, is extraordinary for the new light it reveals on this matter. It also seems to me that Harris's address to the public was another factor in the suppression—the threat by him to expose by naming persons alleged to be purveyors of false reports. The reasons for disallowance were cumulative; but most of all because publication had proceeded without official license. There was no freedom of the press in English-America. That freedom was won in provincial New York for the commoners against the arrogance of political overlords in the case of John Peter Zenger, whose victory extended itself over all the English domain in the eighteenth century. Curiously enough, in Philadelphia, William Bradford *before* 1690 had been reprimanded and ordered by the provincial council of Pennsylvania not to print without license from it; and in 1687 was warned not to print anything about the

Quakers without their official consent. He was reprehended by Governor John Blackwell and his council in 1689 for printing Penn's Charter. Disgusted, Bradford returned to England; but was persuaded to return to Philadelphia. In 1692 he was released from his official printing contract, and became involved in the turbulence that had arisen by the schism led by George Keith, was arrested, his types, paper and other things seized by the sheriff. He refused to furnish security for his recognizance. At his trial he pleaded his own cause with great skill, maintaining the right of peremptory challenge of biased jurors in a libel action, and that the burden of proof was upon his prosecutors, whilst the jurors were judges of the law as well as of the facts. He won his case by disagreement among the jury and he was discharged. In 1693 his seized property was restored and he became public printer of New York. He was the first American printer to fight for the liberty of the press. This is important, as it shows the climate in which printers moved in Boston as well as elsewhere then in America. Strange it has long seemed to me that he, the pioneer in English-America in the fight for liberty of the art preservative of all arts, should in after years as a journalist have aided, or at least abetted, the partisans of Governor Cosby in the trial of Zenger, who had been his apprentice and as such had been influenced by him.

COTTON MATHER AND "PUBLIC OCCURRENCES"

That Mather had been suspected of being the promoter of the newspaper he himself acknowledges and refutes in his letter to John Cotton; that "People had & have a Notion, that I was the Author of it; but as it happened well, the Publisher had not one Line of it from mee, only as accidently meeting him on the high-way, on his Request, I show'd him how to contract & express the Report of the Expedition at *Casco* & the East." This refers of course to the forming

Phips expedition. The persistent rumors about Mather continued. He says: "However, the Government, knowing that *my Name* was tossed about it, & knowing nevertheless that there was but *one* Publisher, who pick't up here & there what hee inserted, they emitted a very severe Proclamation against the poor Pamphlett, the first Line whereof thunders against *Some*, that had published that scandalous Thing.— This Accident gave a mighty Assistance to the Calumnies of the People against poor *me*, who have deserved soe very Ill of the Countrey." It is apparent that Mather was nettled by the "very severe Proclamation." He informed Cotton that the reason why he had not sent to him a copy of *Publick Occurrences* was because "at first" he agreed in "Opinion with such as Disliked the two Passages of the Maqua's & the monster *Louis*"; but he had since changed his mind. Now he found there was "not a Word said Of the Maqua's, but what wee ought to say To them, or else wee bring Guilt upon Oursel[ve]s. As for the French Tyrant, nothing is mention'd of him, but as a Remote Report, and yett wee had the thing in Print long ago: and hee is permitting the Wickedest Libels in the World, to bee published of our K. Wm, and for us to talk (as his good Subjects here do) of being afraid of Offending him, when wee are taking from him the best Countrey hee has in America, is methinks a pretty Jest. But lett it go as it will; they that had a mind to make *mee* odious, have attained their End, with as much Injustice as could well have been used; & a few such Tricks will render mee incapable of serving either God or Man, in N. England."

The suppression Order had been put forth on September 29th, yet in his letter to Cotton on October 17th, Mather revealed his willingness to see the newspaper continued. His words are strong, were confidential, but risky. He

allows his letter is long and "Impertinent." Here he sums up: "I do not know, whether *Harris* will go on with his *Occurrences*, or no; but if hee do, I shall endeavour monthly to supply you. I look upon his Design, to bee a very Noble, useful, & Laudable Design; and some that you have heard Rail against it, might do well to endeavour themselves to do something that may render them worthy to bee accounted *Serviceable*, before they discourage such Honest men, as those three or four (whereof I tell you again I was None) Ingenious men, from whom *Harris* has his *Occurrences*.—"

There is also in his letter confirmation of what Dr. Green stated about the term used for a title of *Harris* newspaper being a common one in use at the time. Mather tells Cotton he has written thus "merely fo[r] want of Other *Occurrences*; whereof th[ere is] at this time a great Scarcity."

COTTON MATHER TO JOHN COTTON

Boston

17d. 8m. 1690.

Die ob Fratris mortem, et memora-
-bili, et miserabili.—

Reverend Sir,

Seeing of you, and (in the want thereof) Hearing from you, are things, which I count among none of my small Satisfactions. I do therefore particularly thank you for your last. I bless God, for that Faith, which has carried my Cousin *Roland* through his Late Exercises, unto such an Issue. Lett him not imagine, that hee shall bee a Looser by any self-denial for the Interest of God; the great God will see th[a]t hee shall bee no Looser: One *Sandwich* will pro[ve,] I am perswaded, worth Ten *Dedhams* to him, since hee has been determined by God, more by himself, in his acceptance of the calls that have been given him. Remember mee kindly to him.

The Late sheet of *Public Occurrences*, has been the Occasion of much Discourse, it seems, about the Countrey; & some that might as well have been spared. People had & have a Notion, that I was the Author of it; but as it happened well, the Publisher had not one Line of it from mee,

only as accidentally meeting him on the high-way, on his Request, I show'd him how to contract & express the Report of the Expedition at *Casco* & the East. However, the Government, knowing that *my Name* was tossed about it, & knowing nevertheless that there was but *one* Publisher, who pick't up here & there what hee inserted, they emitted a very severe Proclamation against the poor Pamphlett, the first Line whereof thunders against *Some*, that had published that scandalous Thing.—This Accident gave a mighty Assistance to the Calumnies of the People against poor *mee*, who have deserved soe very Ill of the Countrey. The Reason, why I sent you not one of the Papers, was because I did myself at first agree in my Opinion with such as Disliked the two Passages of the *Maqua's* & the monster *Louis*; but I have since changed my mind. I now find, there is not a Word said Of the *Maqua's*, but what wee ought to say *To* them, or else wee bring Guilt upon ourself[ve]s. As for the French Tyrant, nothing is mention'd of him, but as a Remote Report, and yett wee had the thing in Print long ago: and hee is permitting the Wickedest Libels in the World, to bee published of our K. Wm, and for us to talk (as his good Subjects here do) of being afraid of Offending him, when wee are taking from him the best Countrey hee has in America, is methinks a pretty Jest. But lett it go as it will; they that had a mind to make *mee* odious, have attained their End, with as much Injustice as could well have been used; & a few such Tricks will render *mee* incapable of serving either God or Man, in N. *England*.

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Sir, Forgive the Length of this Impertinent Letter. I write this meerly fo[r] want of Other Occurrences; whereof th[ere is] at this time a great Scarcity. God grant good ones when they come.

Remember mee, to Relations with you; and beleve that I am
Sir, No less

Your Servant
than Your Kinsman
C. Mather

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