

**AN ACCOUNT OF THE
NEWSPAPERS AND OTHER
PERIODICALS PUBLISHED IN
SALEM FROM 1768 TO 1856**

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BY GILBERT L. STREETER.

[From the Proceedings of the Essex Institute.]

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1856.

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Life of the Essex Institute,

Salmon

NEWSPAPERS AND PERIODICALS OF SALEM.

• —o—

WE propose to give some account of the several newspapers and other periodicals, which have been published in Salem since the first introduction of the art of printing into this town until the present time. The review will carry us back nearly a century, to the period immediately preceding the war of the Revolution; and in glancing at the special purposes of the various periodicals since that time, we shall obtain glimpses of the successive states of public opinion in this place. The list of serials during these years is a long one, embracing *fifty* separate and distinct publications, of various degrees of interest and importance. We shall mention them in the order of their commencement, designating each by its appropriate numeral.

Salem was the third town in the Colonies, in the order of time, to enjoy the advantages of a public printing press. It was preceded in this respect by both Cambridge and Boston. The former place contained a printing press as early as 1639, and as the infant University was located there, as well as the local government of the colony, the persons concerned in it were encouraged by grants of land from the General Court. But the Puritan authorities, although ready to patronize this enterprise to some extent, still regarded the freedom of printing with a jealous eye, and accordingly, in 1662, two of the most worthy and highly approved of the clergymen of the colony were authorized by the General Court to act as licensers of the press. Thus the dispensations of grace on the part of the authorities in the matter of land were not without their equivalents in the more important matter of free printing. The press in *Boston* was first established in 1674, in accordance with leave specially granted by the General Court, which had previously ordered, in 1664, that there should be no other press than that at Cambridge.

From this time until the introduction of the printing business into Salem was nearly a century. In the mean time the press had been relieved from the supervision and control of the clergy, and its absolute independence was nearly established. Several newspapers had been commenced in Boston, and there was a general disposition to encourage and sustain such publications.*

The person who undertook to establish the printing business in Salem was SAMUEL HALL, a young man, a native of Medford, and one who, from his qualities of mind and energy of character, was well suited to perform the task of a pioneer in this matter. He was a practical printer, and had learned his trade of his uncle, Daniel Fowle, who was the first printer in New Hampshire. Before coming to Salem he had been concerned with Mrs. Anne Franklin, sister-in-law of Benjamin Franklin, in the publication of the Newport (R. I.) Mercury, a newspaper originally established by James Franklin, and which has been continued until this time.

Mr. Hall opened an office here in April 1768. It was located on Main street, a few doors above the Town House—about where Kinsman's new building is situated. This was then, as now, near the centre of business.†

* The first attempt to establish a newspaper in North America, was made, in 1690, when (Sept. 25) a single number of a small sheet was printed in Boston, by Richard Pierce, for Benj. Harris. It was condemned at once by the public authorities, and it is believed that a second number was never issued. The only copy known to be in existence is in the State Paper office, in London, where it has been examined by Rev. Joseph R. Felt. The first newspaper actually established in the country was the Boston News-Letter, commenced April 24, 1704, by John Campbell, the postmaster of that town.

† The Town House was a wooden building of two stories, next above the First Church, on the spot between the present church and the parapet of the railroad tunnel. It was where the town meetings were usually held, (in the lower story) and was also occupied, in the second story, as a Court house. It was afterwards called the State House, as the Provincial Assembly of Massachusetts convened therein in 1774, with John Hancock as president. It was a building of humble pretensions, its chief claim to notice arising from the circumstance that it was a *painted* building, which was an uncommon distinction in those days. In front of the building, extending on either side the door, was a wooden bench, where the elderly men of the town were accustomed to assemble to gossip and converse on public and private matters.

1. Mr. Hall soon resolved to commence a paper here, and in July of the same year issued proposals for publishing one to be entitled *THE ESSEX GAZETTE*, to be issued weekly, on Tuesday, at 6s. 8d., per annum. The prospectus was full and explicit in regard to the character of the proposed paper; and as indicating the spirit in which the enterprise was started, we quote the following passage:

"I shall exert myself to obtain as general and fresh a Collection of News as will lay in my Power, both Foreign and Domestic, and insert it with accuracy and in due order; and I shall at all times assiduously endeavor to procure and carefully publish, as I may have room, any Compositions that may have a tendency to promote Religion, Virtue, Industry, good Order, a due sense of the Rights and Liberties of our Country, with the Importance of true and genuine principles of patriotism, and whatever may serve to enliven and animate us in our known Loyalty and Affection to our gracious Sovereign. In short, any Pieces that may be productive of Public Good, or contribute to the innocent Amusement and Entertainment of my Readers, will be inserted with Pleasure; and any writings of a Contrary Nature, will, if offered for Insertion, be instantly rejected."

These comprehensive, patriotic, and emphatic statements of his intentions, with more of a similar character, constituted Mr. Hall's introduction to his readers. And all that he here promised he thoroughly performed, for he was prompt and faithful in the execution of all his contracts, devoting himself with great energy and spirit to the discharge of his duties.

The first number of the paper appeared Aug. 2, 1768, and was a very creditable publication in its typographical execution, and the general character of its contents. It was printed upon a crown sheet, folio, 10 × 16 inches, three columns to the page. This diminutive sheet, less than half the size of the Gazette of to-day, was spoken of in the prospectus as "four large pages, printed in folio." It was doubtless considered as large at that time. The head was adorned by a rude wood cut, comprising the figures of two Indians, with a codfish overhead, and a dove with a sprig in its bill in the centre. This device bears some resemblance to the Essex County seal, and was probably intended to be emblematical of peace, the fisheries, and successful emigration.* The head-line assured the reader, in the common phraseology of that day, that the sheet contained "the

*A portion of this device is contained in the seal of the city of Salem.

freshest advices, both foreign and domestic." It bore as a motto a quotation from Horace, "Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci."

The contents of the paper were such as were looked for in public prints at that time, chiefly items of political news from various parts of the world, very concisely stated, and selected with care and good judgment. Foreign news occupied a large share of the columns. Domestic news was given simply, under the names of the several towns in the colonies, whence it was received. A few advertisements filled out the sheet. The contents were mostly selected, but few original pieces, either editorial or contributed, appearing in the columns in those days. The public did not estimate so highly at that time as they seem to now, the off-hand remarks, speculations, and effusions generally, of editors and their correspondents.*

Mr. Hall was eminently qualified for the task he had undertaken. He possessed business talents, enterprise, ability, editorial tact and judgment, and withal sympathized entirely with the state of the public mind at that time with respect to the mother country. He had commenced his paper at an important season. The causes were then actively at work which soon eventuated in the Revolution. A spirit of independence was growing up in the breasts of the people, and the principles of civil and political liberty were undergoing a thorough discussion. With this condition of popular feeling Mr. Hall sympathized warmly and earnestly.

Subscribers to his Gazette were obtained, not only in this town, but also doubtless in most of the principal places in the colony; for a newspaper at that period was a much more important fact than at the present day, when such publications abound in all directions. There were then but five papers in the state, all of which were in Boston.† There was none at the east-

* Among the contributors to Mr. Hall's paper, was Col. Timothy Pickering jr. He published a series of able and elaborate articles upon the importance of a reorganization of the Militia, which had great influence in arousing attention to the subject, and which suggested complete plans for increasing the efficiency of that branch of the public service. His father, Dea. Timothy Pickering, also frequently communicated with Mr. Hall's readers, usually to rebuke some growing evil in the community, or to encourage some good work.

† The News-Letter, Evening Post, Gazette, Chronicle, and Advertiser.

ward, except at Portsmouth. Mr. Hall's eastern subscribers were supplied by a post-rider, who left the office on publication mornings for the towns between here and Newburyport, depositing the papers on the way.* To obtain the most recent news from Boston he incurred the expense of a special messenger from that town, on the previous day, who brought the latest papers. The news from New York was a week old, from Philadelphia a fortnight, and from London two months.

In 1772, Mr. Hall admitted his younger brother, Ebenezer, into partnership with him. Their business connection continued until the death of Ebenezer, in Cambridge, Feb. 1776, aged 27.

The Essex Gazette was published here nearly seven years, a period which embraced the most important events that immediately preceded the Revolution. All the great questions which agitated the colonies during that time were discussed in its columns. The odious taxes imposed by the king—the non-importation agreements—the Boston Massacre—the Boston Port Bill—the Tea troubles—the doings of the people in their town meetings, and other primary assemblies—the popular hatred of the officers of the crown, and other similar topics, were laid before Mr. Hall's readers in the succession of their occurrence.

In October, 1770, an attempt was made to injure the subscription of the paper, on account of an alleged partiality in its columns towards the non-importation agreements. But the effort was unsuccessful, and seems to have resulted in the increase rather than diminution of the list. The number of subscribers at this time was about seven hundred.

As indicative of the spirit of the paper, we may quote an article which appeared March 5, 1771. This was the anniversary of the Massacre in State street, Boston. The columns on this occasion were draped in black. On the first page was a

* Among the most active distributors of Mr. Hall's print was Thomas Dimas. This person's name is often mentioned by our oldest citizens when the topic of ancient carriers is introduced. He set out every Tuesday, at eight o'clock, for the towns on the Eastern route as far as Newburyport, dispensing his news to eager inquirers all along his way. They looked upon him as an important personage in the service of gratifying their curiosity. His employment wore off the corners of his self-diffidence, and rendered him not at all bashful among "the head men," to whose pleasure he so much contributed. *Felt's Annals.*