

## “A Constitutional Conveyance of Intelligence, Public and Private”: The Post Office, the Business of Printing, and the American Revolution

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This essay argues that American printers motivated by a deep commercial interest in fast and effective communication worked to overturn the British imperial postal service in 1774 and 1775. Printers enlisted merchants and members of the revolutionary elite, who also relied on long-distance communication through the post office for their own commercial and political purposes, to provide financial and political support. In making their case, printers mobilized a broad array of political ideology and imagery already familiar to colonists during the decade-long imperial crisis, emphasizing the political necessity of replacing the imperial institution. At the same time, they uncontroversially asserted that a new American post office would safeguard their precarious commercial ventures. The essay therefore demonstrates that printers were not “mere mechanics” but actively shaped the political debates leading to the American Revolution as part of a process that scholars have recently highlighted in a work on the economic and commercial influences on the Revolution. Furthermore, it grants the post office its due as part of the Habermasian public sphere; although understudied, the post office—both as a physical space and as a network through which information could travel—was a crucial means by which Americans developed a national infrastructure for political communications. Exploring the overthrow of the British post office, and the creation of an American post office, reveals an understudied but crucial episode to explain the symbiosis between politics and commerce during the American Revolutionary era.

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On August 20, 1773, William Goddard, a Philadelphia printer who had just opened a print shop in Baltimore, published the first issue of the *Maryland Journal*. In an address to the public, Goddard apologized and gave several excuses for a purported delay in the appearance of the newspaper. He devoted an entire paragraph to his most pressing concern: the need to hire a “*special Post*” to ride between Baltimore and Philadelphia—on a schedule he proposed—“*for the Purpose of bringing down, in due Season, the latest Papers*”.<sup>1</sup> Goddard did not explain in the essay that he needed to hire his own post rider because he could not gain access to the British Post Office as a result of a dispute with the Philadelphia postmaster, a rival printer and newspaper publisher in that city. Goddard emphasized the importance of the post office because it could often prove crucial to the survival of a printing business. Printers throughout the colonies relied on the post office for two parts of their newspaper business: the circulation of news to insert in their newspapers and the distribution of their papers to subscribers and other readers. Whenever these channels were obstructed, whether by weather, financial problems, or imperial officials, printers were among the first to feel the effects and to complain loudly.

These issues had cropped up periodically throughout the colonial era, and they rarely generated more than passing local interest. But Goddard’s conflict with the post office came in the midst of the imperial crisis, a time when a large number of colonists were protesting the actions of imperial officials and the right of Parliament to legislate for the colonies. Therefore, a dispute that might have petered out in a few weeks or months instead became a broad-ranging movement among printers and their radical allies to replace the British Post Office with a new American “Constitutional Post”. Printers—often portrayed as “meer mechanics” who served only as conduits for the political ideas of others—leveraged their commercial interests in the free flow of information into a powerful political force to create an intercolonial (and eventually interstate) communications network.<sup>2</sup> In doing so they deployed the rhetoric of resistance to realize the concrete goal of creating an independent American infrastructure for the circulation of political news and correspondence.

A number of scholars have pointed to printers as a group whose business decisions had import for the American Revolution. The most widely cited of these scholars is Stephen Botein. He argues in a series of articles that printers shaped their business strategies during the

1. *Maryland Journal*, August 20, 1773.

2. On the concept of printers as “meer mechanics”, see Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics’ and an Open Press”.

colonial period to avoid political conflict.<sup>3</sup> They preferred to operate “free presses”, that is, ones open to all parties, because the small size of the print market in any given town prevented printers from obviously taking sides in partisan disputes: to do so would have meant the loss of too much business to survive. During the Revolutionary era, Botein suggests, printers were forced to take sides in the imperial crisis by radical leaders who were unwilling to permit the publication of any pro-British materials. To maintain the stance of neutrality, which had served printers relatively well for decades, became the mark of Toryism, and cause for harassment of printers and the destruction of their offices. This article builds on Botein’s argument that printers reconciled their commercial and political positions, but suggests that printers exercised a greater degree of control over their own fates. A group of printers contributed the guiding energy in the case of the post office, deploying political language and goals to create a communications infrastructure they believed would benefit their businesses, and in the process overthrowing a major imperial institution in the North American colonies.

This article therefore contributes to a growing literature on the influence of economic and commercial concerns in the coming of the American Revolution. Several recent scholars have advanced new claims about how the popular mobilization that precipitated the Revolution occurred. T.H. Breen, for example, pointed to a growing consumer culture that linked colonists throughout North America as a vital connection that facilitated the effectiveness of consumer boycotts against imperial policy. Others, including Woody Holton, Michael McDonnell, and Terry Bouton, have pointed to class analysis as a crucial measuring stick for the progress of the Revolution.<sup>4</sup> This article, in turn, re-examines historians’ assumptions about the relationship between the business of print and the circulation of political news and debate.

The post office dispute is a particularly useful way to examine the nexus of commerce, political action, and political discourse in the Revolutionary era. Despite its importance for communications, the American post office has suffered from a dearth of scholarly work.<sup>5</sup>

3. Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics’ and an Open Press” and “Printers and the American Revolution”.

4. Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*; Holton, *Forced Founders*; McDonnell, *The Politics of War*; Bouton, *Taming Democracy*.

5. Much of the scholarship on the post office in colonial North America appeared before 1950. See, for example, Ellis, *The Post Office in the Eighteenth Century*; Hemmeon, *The History of the British Post Office*; Rich, *The History of the United States Post Office to the Year 1829*; Robinson, *The British Post Office*; Smith, *The History of the Post Office in British North America*. More recent studies include Fuller, *The American Mail*; Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail*; John, *Spreading the News*.

Recent work has begun to remedy this problem. Richard R. John, for example, has written the definitive account of the post office in the early Republic. He argues that the post office was the single most pervasive part of the federal government through the country, and thus the most common point of contact between the average American and the government. In addition, the 1792 Post Office Act laid ground rules for a communications system that privileged the circulation of newspapers through an advantageous rate structure. These policies, according to John, enhanced the public sphere by facilitating the circulation of political news to all corners of the new nation.<sup>6</sup> John, however, devotes little attention to the development of the postal system prior to 1792. This article extends some of the implications of John's work backwards in time to the Revolutionary era, when the new American post office was already beginning to take the shape that would emerge fully after the ratification of the Constitution.

Ever since Habermas argued that eighteenth-century commercial life encouraged the activities and institutions that made the formation of a public sphere possible, historians and other scholars have taken a great interest in identifying the specific kinds of places that were hospitable to political debate and the formation of public opinion, including the coffeehouse, the tavern, and the salon.<sup>7</sup> The colonial post office, oddly, has received little attention as such a place prior to the Revolution, despite its close connection with another main pillar of the Habermasian public sphere, print and print media. The post office served two important roles. First, people gathered in the post office in each town to receive, read, and debate news and politics. More fundamentally, the post office was crucial circuitry that could facilitate debate that transcended local and face-to-face interactions. The post office was a translocal but geographically bounded institution through which one can trace the emerging webs of communication that linked towns and regions to one another in a spatially extended public sphere. Colonists of all stripes, moreover, argued that a properly functioning post office was necessary to the conduct of free political debate (in this, they anticipated Habermas).

6. John, *Spreading the News*. Konstantin Dierks also makes an argument for the importance of the postal system as a mechanism for providing a military advantage during the Revolutionary War. In *My Power*, chapter 5. On the broader implications of policy decisions for the development of communications, see Starr, *Creation of the Media*, and Headrick, *When Information Came of Age*.

7. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*. Since the translation of Habermas' book in 1989, the literature has grown exponentially. Some of the most relevant work includes: Warner, *Letters of the Republic*; Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*; Brewer, "This, that and the other"; Weintraub and Kumar, *Public and Private in Thought and Practice*; Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy*. For a useful counterargument, see Gross, "Print and the Public Sphere in Early America".

This article will show that printers had a direct financial and business interest in promoting a post office to their liking both because it distributed their newspapers and other print goods and because they were the chief beneficiaries of a patronage system centering on the post office. As historian John J. McCusker has shown, newspapers in both Europe and colonial America developed when commercial information such as customs entries and prices current became valuable commodities in the eyes of merchants.<sup>8</sup> Printers' political outlooks and commercial interests similarly blended. In this respect, Benedict Anderson, with his explicit emphasis on "print capitalism" as the underpinning of national identity, is a better guide to the role of print and newspapers in the politics of the Revolution than Habermas, who tended to view economic interest as a contaminating force that degraded political debate.<sup>9</sup> Anderson, of course, did not intend to offer a detailed account of how concrete business interests operated in North America during the Revolutionary era to promote nationalism. But radical American printers and their allies did just that when they established a new post office. Not only did they create an institution that could distribute political news (and the products of their commercial press) on an intercolonial basis but also their arguments on behalf of the alternative post—arguments which they circulated in the newspapers they controlled—explicitly appealed to their readers' growing sense of unity with other Americans. In short, printers promoted sentiments that could fairly be called at least proto-nationalist.

For both Habermas and Anderson, print is the crucial mechanism that binds the networks of people who constitute respectively the "public sphere" and the "nation". Trish Loughran has recently challenged this account as applied to the Revolutionary and early national eras. She argues that America consisted of a patchwork of fragmented print networks too decentralized to support anything like a unified national print culture, and that these conditions persisted until the era of the mass commercial press in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> This article's discussion of the post office and more informal networks of distribution and communication suggests that Loughran overemphasizes the fragmentation of late colonial-era printing and systems of distribution. Printing was decentralized, but it was not insular. When printers and their Patriot allies fashioned a new "Constitutional" and then Continental Post Office, they created a truly intercolonial and then interstate institution that had special significance for the distribution of newspapers and the political news they

8. McCusker, "The Demise of Distance".

9. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

10. Loughran, *The Republic in Print*.

contained and for the printers who relied on it. In so doing, they laid the groundwork for a more raucous public sphere that operated through newspapers and other print media and shaped national political culture during the early republic.<sup>11</sup>

### The Imperial Post Office in the Colonies

Until the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, two parallel communications networks operated in colonial North America. The first was the formal British Post Office, which operated a series of routes and offices along the Atlantic seaboard. It claimed a legal monopoly over the circulation and transmission of letters, newspapers, and other materials between towns in the colonies. Yet colonists had developed alongside it an informal communications system that skirted the official Post Office and operated in myriad webs of connection along the coastlines, into the interior, and around the Atlantic.

The imperial Post Office grew during the course of the eighteenth century from a rickety provincial scheme with just a few riders into an important institution within the British imperial communications network. In the seventeenth century, several colonial governors had attempted to develop postal routes to link the new settlements along the Atlantic seaboard, particularly between New York and New England, but none succeeded. The General Post Office in London on its part showed little interest in extending the postal system among the colonies, as the imperial government's needs for communication were met by ships traveling between colonial capitals and the metropolis. The wars of empire changed all that. In 1710, at the height of the War of the Spanish Succession, Parliament passed a Post Office Act and for the first time brought North American mail delivery under the direction of the imperial post. Under the terms of the Act, mail delivery was a state monopoly controlled and regulated by the Postmasters General in London. The Act provided for a central post office in New York and dictated a schedule of rates for correspondence among colonial towns determined by the distance a letter traveled and how many sheets of paper it used. The rate structure sharply discounted letters sent by boat; a single-sheet letter sent from New York would cost one shilling to go to London—the same price as a letter sent from New York to Boston.<sup>12</sup>

11. Pasley, "Tyranny of Printers"; Daniel, *Scandal & Civility*; Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*; Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street*; Estes, *The Jay Treaty Debate*.

12. Butler, *Doctor Franklin*, 1–20; *A Collection of the Statutes Now in Force*, 3–74.

Until mid-century, the Postmasters General in Britain developed the North American system mostly to serve imperial needs, which is to say very little as it concerned inland communications. Post roads in America never extended south of Virginia, where the distance between major towns was particularly long and where routes could not avoid the numerous rivers and streams. Beginning with the Act of 1710, Parliament explicitly planned to utilize the post office to generate revenue. The Act expected the postal system in Britain to provide £700 per week to the Exchequer beginning in 1711. Until the 1750s, however, the postal system over all was a drain on the Treasury. During the Seven Years' War, the Post Office responded to the concerns of colonial governors for greater communication by initiating the first regular packet service to operate monthly between Falmouth and New York, and established a post office at Halifax. Merchants involved in Atlantic trade found the packets useful, but it took years for these packet services to run reliably and on a predictable schedule, hindered as they were by war, high costs, and a lack of boats—the same problems that had doomed an attempt half a century earlier.<sup>13</sup>

Although Parliament paid little attention to the post office in the colonies, many colonists found the post office a fruitful pathway into imperial administration. Benjamin Franklin, who would transform the postal system in North America after mid-century, was the apotheosis of the patronage system. Ever the cultivator of connections, Franklin sought the postmastership of Philadelphia in 1737, when Deputy Postmaster General Alexander Spotswood ousted Franklin's main rival in printing, William Bradford, from the post.<sup>14</sup> Within a few years, he rose through the ranks to become comptroller of the North American post office. As early as 1751, when rumors of the declining health of the incumbent began to spread, Franklin began an overt campaign for an appointment as Deputy Postmaster General. In 1753, he received the appointment, to be held jointly with Williamsburg printer William Hunter. True to form, Franklin used the position to bestow patronage on family and business associates. His son, William, became Comptroller; after him, longtime Franklin associate James Parker of Woodbridge, New Jersey, took the job. Other Franklin associates took post office positions: William Dunlap, a printer and cousin of Franklin's wife, became postmaster of Philadelphia after the death of the previous postmaster, Franklin's brother

13. Butler, *Doctor Franklin*, 21–42, 61–63; Rich, *History of the United States Post Office*, 23–31, 36; Smith, *History of the Post Office*, 22–25, 33–35.

14. Butler, *Doctor Franklin*, 33–4.

Peter; Franklin's cousin Tuthill Hubbard served as Boston's postmaster; Peter Timothy, son of Franklin's first associate in Charleston, South Carolina, served that city. William Goddard, who later led the effort to overthrow the British post office, first benefitted from it through his connection to Franklin, gaining an appointment as postmaster of Providence, Rhode Island. A position as local postmaster ensured a printer of first access to news coming from other colonial towns, and often therefore the earliest warning of news from Britain, which was a key component of eighteenth-century newspapers. The position of local postmaster also came with the franking privilege, which allowed the postmaster to send and receive mail without paying postage. This perk would be vital for printers. After news from Britain, newspaper exchanges with other printers contributed most to the production of newspapers in North America, and printers relied heavily on the post office for these exchanges.<sup>15</sup> By carefully managing his connections, Franklin tried to ensure success that would gain him attention from his superiors, solidified his own position to his subordinates, and gave them a firm grip on the circulation of news.

After the Seven Years' War, Parliament undertook a massive reorganization of imperial administration, including the post office. Just as Parliament had attempted to streamline the collection of sugar and molasses tariffs, and tried to raise revenue through a series of stamp duties, so Parliament passed a new Post Office Act in 1765 to reform the North American postal system to make it a more effective arm of imperial administration.<sup>16</sup> As with the duties established by the Sugar Act of 1764, the new postal rates were in fact lower than they had previously been. The new Act added stricter penalties and enforcement measures in an attempt to implement the postal system's theoretical monopoly. Parliament also tried to comprehend into the system the new islands and territories that Britain had won in a half century of imperial conflict. In order to accomplish that goal, it divided the North American post office in two. Franklin and John Foxcroft, Deputy Postmasters General for North America, would now serve only for the Northern Department, which comprised Britain's colonies from Virginia north into Canada. The Southern Department, which included the Carolinas, Georgia, the Floridas, and the West Indian islands, was now headed by Benjamin Barons, and headquartered at Charleston, South Carolina, with printer Peter Timothy as

15. Clark, *The Public Prints*, 185–89. On Franklin's network and patronage, see Frasca, "From Apprentice to Journeyman".

16. *A Collection of the Statutes Now in Force*, 105–37. On Parliament's administrative restructuring in the 1760s, see Thomas, *British Politics and the Stamp Act Crisis*.

its secretary.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, gaps in the service remained, some of them gaping. North Carolina, for example, petitioned Franklin in 1765 to extend postal service to the colony, and offered a commitment of £100 from the Assembly to establish a post.<sup>18</sup>

Aside from revenue generation, the post office also served an imperial desire to maintain control over the circulation of politically sensitive information and to provide surveillance of groups and individuals who opposed the government. The 1710 Act granted officials the power to intercept and open mail, creating the potential for imperial officials to censor political opposition and making the post an insecure means of transmitting letters for political dissenters.<sup>19</sup> Opening the mail of political enemies had been a common practice since the reign of Charles II, when the post office was used primarily for spying and disseminating propaganda by the government. The government would open letters and forbid the transmission of oppositional newspapers. Such activities reinforced the government's monopoly and discouraged the use of the post for private correspondence. Prior to the 1760s, there were few documented cases in the colonies of intercepted political correspondence. Still, the colonists' participation in transatlantic information networks meant that they were closely attuned to breaches of the mail's confidentiality and construed these breaches as assaults on private property.<sup>20</sup>

Censorship and surveillance also played an important role in the relationship between printers and the government in the North American colonies. During the seventeenth century, in those colonies that had printing houses, governments typically required printers to seek approval of texts before printing them. As the eighteenth century progressed such formal censorship waned, but struggles continued over what constituted libel and other forms of *post facto* censorship.<sup>21</sup> Printers who were commissioned to print government documents were reluctant to jeopardize their lucrative businesses, but even those printers who operated independently often muted their political opinions to avoid conflict. Benjamin Franklin experienced censorship firsthand as an apprentice to his brother

17. *Georgia Gazette*, May 2, 1765; *Newport Mercury*, May 6, 1765; *Boston Gazette*, May 13, 1765; *South-Carolina Gazette*, Oct. 19, 1765; *Boston Evening Post*, Nov. 25, 1765.

18. Thomas Lloyd to Benjamin Franklin, May 2, 1765, *PBF* 12: 121–22.

19. *A Collection of the Statutes Now in Force*, 67.

20. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style".

21. Brown, "The Shifting Freedoms of the Press in the Eighteenth Century", in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, 367; Smith, *Printers and Press Freedom*. The same held true in England before the lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695 opened the printing trade to newcomers. See Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century*, chapter 1.

James in the 1720s. During a smallpox epidemic, James ran afoul of Massachusetts authorities over the publication of several essays in his *New England Courant* that opposed inoculation and accused the colony's government and Boston's ministers of being complicit in causing the epidemic. James was jailed and forbidden from continuing to print the newspaper.<sup>22</sup> Because of the possibility of such censorship, and because the government provided a large percentage of printing business in colonial America, other printers more cautious than James Franklin often self-censored to ensure that their shops could remain open and profitable.<sup>23</sup>

The structure and design of the British Post Office limited its effectiveness as a tool of communication. Most importantly, the Post Office connected primarily the coastal towns in the colonies (see Figure 1). In addition, mailing a letter was quite expensive. Even after Parliament reduced postage rates in 1765, the cost of sending a letter remained extremely high for most people (see Table 1).<sup>24</sup> Colonists therefore exploited loopholes in the Post Office Act to avoid the legal monopoly and high postage rates. Many colonists simply did not use the post, preferring to send letters via traveling friends or servants. For instance, Dr. Alexander Hamilton, while visiting New London, Connecticut on his tour of the colonies in the 1740s, met with the printer Timothy Green, and agreed to carry "a paquet for his son Jonas", the printer in Annapolis.<sup>25</sup> Rates for mailing parcels were low compared to letters, and colonists took advantage of this by attaching letters to packages that were sometimes no more than "little bundles of chips, straw, or old paper".<sup>26</sup> In utilizing alternative pathways, colonists created webs of connection that were more comprehensive and had greater reach than the imperial post office.

Printers operated in both the formal and informal circuits of communications. For instance, they needed to distribute their newspapers as broadly as possible. They therefore developed several coping mechanisms that took advantage of the neglect of the official postal system by imperial officials. Because there was no penny post in any American town, printers employed young boys at a menial wage

22. Clark, *The Public Prints*, 123–40; Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 1: 109–43.

23. Botein, "Printers and the American Revolution".

24. *A Collection of the Statutes Now in Force*, 26–34, 105–37. Postage rates on letters remained high until a series of postal reforms in the mid-nineteenth century. Henkin, *The Postal Age*.

25. Bridenbaugh, ed., *Gentleman's Progress*, 161.

26. Smith, *History of the Post Office*, 25, 51–4; Dierks, "Letter Writing, Gender, and Class in America, 1750–1800". American colonists were not the only ones who avoided paying postage; on the evasion of legal payments in France, see Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*, 16–20.

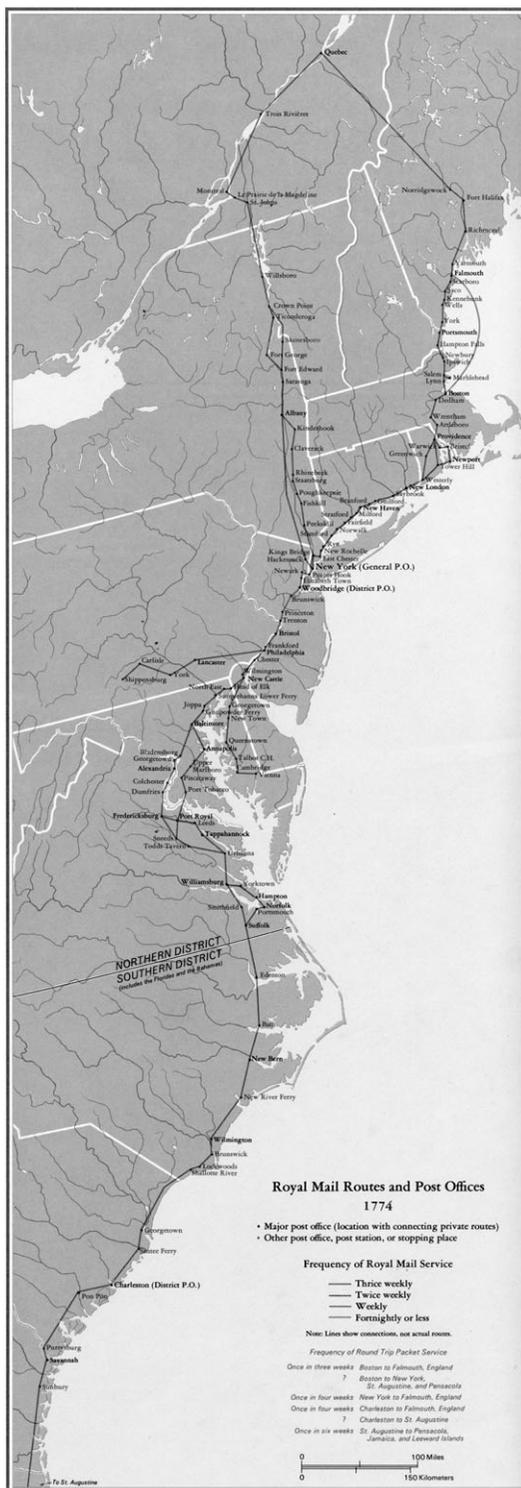


Figure 1 Royal Mail Routes and Post Offices, 1774. (CAPPON, LESTER J.; *ATLAS OF EARLY AMERICAN HISTORY*. © 1976 Princeton University Press, 2004 renewed PUP Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.)

Table 1 Rates of postage per sheet of paper in North America, 1710 and 1765

1710		1765	
London to New York	1s.	London to America	1s.
West Indies to New York	4d.	Between American ports by sea	4d.
Within 60 miles of New York	4d.	Within 60 miles of Chief Post Office	4d.
New York to Perth Amboy, NJ/100 miles	6d.	Between 60 and 100 miles from Chief Post Office	6d.
Within 60 miles of Perth Amboy or Burlington, NJ	4d.		
New York to New London or Philadelphia	9d.	From 100 to 200 miles from Chief Post Office	8d.
Within 60 miles of New London or Philadelphia	4d.	For each additional 100 miles	2d.
From 60 to 100 miles from New London or Philadelphia	6d.		
New York to Newport, Providence, Boston, Portsmouth, Annapolis	1s.		
Within 60 miles of the above-mentioned cities	4s.		
From 60 to 100 miles from the above-mentioned cities	6d.		
New York to Salem, Ipswich, Piscataway, Williamsburg	1s. 3d.		
Within 60 miles of the above-mentioned cities	4d.		
From 60 to 100 miles from the above-mentioned cities	6d.		
New York to Charleston	1s. 6d.		
Within 60 miles of Charleston	4d.		
Within 100 miles of Charleston	6d.		

Source: *A Collection of the Statutes Now in Force*, 26–34, 105–37.

to deliver newspapers locally. Hugh Gaine, for example, paid several boys to deliver papers to his local subscribers in New York.<sup>27</sup> For delivery outside of town, many printers hired their own riders to deliver their newspapers to subscribers. In many cases, these riders supplemented rather than competed with the imperial postal system, which at the time only ran along the coast. In the 1750s, when James Parker and John Holt opened the first printing office in New Haven, Connecticut, they attempted to get the Post Office (already headed by their patron, Benjamin Franklin) to pay for a post rider to the interior of the colony in Hartford. Franklin refused, so they hired their own post rider to travel from New Haven to Hartford to carry the *Connecticut Gazette* and private correspondence.<sup>28</sup> Subscribers came to expect

27. Hugh Gaine receipt book. MssCol 1102, NYPL.

28. McAnear, “James Parker versus John Holt [I]”, 79–80. See also Brown, “It Facilitated the Correspondence.”

from these private post riders prompt service and delivery. Residents of Paxton, Pennsylvania, and neighboring towns, for example, complained to printer Thomas Bradford in Philadelphia that they were not receiving their newspapers, and threatened to cancel their eighty subscriptions unless he hired another post rider.<sup>29</sup>

Even so, printers were among the post office's primary users because their commercial print operations relied upon the postal system to gather and circulate news and newspapers. As Ian Steele noted in his work on the English Atlantic communications system, "the posts, the papers, and the mail packet boats were all services designed specifically to transmit news."<sup>30</sup> The post office was a vital link in the interdependent world of printers and the news they circulated. Its infrastructure was vital to the intercolonial commercial networks that printers had created in the North American colonies, both on the mainland and in the West Indies. The production of newspapers relied on the circulation of news among printers for fresh content, and sales depended on the timely distribution of the newspapers themselves. And, of course, printers circulated their newspapers as a for-profit venture.

Because of its centrality to their business success, printers tangled with postmasters (and therefore frequently with one another) about the absence of a standard policy regarding the distribution of newspapers and their pricing. Over the years, a tradition of exchanging a single copy of one's newspaper with other printers developed in Britain, a practice that carried over to America. Typically these newspapers were sent with franking privileges. However, power to grant this privilege was not uniform: it rested in Britain with "clerks of the road" and in America with the deputy postmaster in each town.<sup>31</sup> Such an ad hoc system left printers at the caprice of the local postmaster for their ability to exchange newspapers with printers in other areas, and disputes occasionally arose about whether a particular printer had the right to send his newspaper free of charge to other towns. In towns that had rival newspapers, one published by the postmaster and others not, the postmaster's discretionary powers could create serious conflicts of interest (as they would for William Goddard himself). Further complicating matters, postmasters used a variety of standards for charging printers to mail their newspapers to subscribers. Some even charged the per-ounce price for mail, which was four times as high as the cost of sending a single-sheet letter. Postage

29. John Harris to Thomas Bradford, March 1, 1771, Bradford Family Papers.

30. Steele, *English Atlantic*, 113. See also Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail*; Eberhard, "Press and Post Office in Eighteenth-Century America".

31. Smith, *History of the Post Office*, 62–3.

for a newspaper could thus greatly increase the cost of annual subscriptions and threatened to eat into the printers' business significantly.<sup>32</sup>

As of 1773, therefore, the communications infrastructure in the colonies existed on two parallel tracks. The first, the imperial, was in principle a strictly regulated entity intended to serve the mandates of the metropolitan administration. It emphasized revenue generation, close surveillance of correspondence, and intergovernmental communication, and only encouraged the circulation of other information and news as a happenstance or convenience. The other infrastructure was more informal and ad hoc. Colonists made their own arrangements to fill in the gaps in the imperial post office or to avoid acquiescing to its rules. Printers especially made their own plans to ensure that they would have a steady stream of news coming into their offices, and a reliable means of delivering their newspapers to their subscribers. At the same time, printers tried to take advantage where they could of the post office's structures, and many worked from the inside to make changes advantageous to themselves. Nonetheless, the disjuncture between the goals of the empire and the ways in which colonists actually used the post became the source of open conflict at the height of colonial resistance to imperial policies.

### William Goddard and the "Constitutional Post"

Because Parliament and the General Post Office focused their energies on imperial communication, intercolonial correspondence and the circulation of news among the colonies remained a nebulous zone of regulation. Franklin attempted to curtail the postmasters' practice of crippling their own newspaper's competitors by issuing an order in 1758 to standardize the rates charged for newspapers to prevent riders or postmasters from charging large sums.<sup>33</sup> But the attempt at standardization did not entirely resolve the abuse of fee structures among rival printers. There was little oversight on the local level, and so long as the colonial postal system produced adequate revenues, imperial authorities were indifferent to questions of fairness. The post office ignored activity on the periphery that did not affect the government's

32. In the late 1760s, for example, William Goddard charged ten shillings for an annual subscription to the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*. But a subscriber in New York could also be charged postage as high as two shillings eight pence per issue, which would cost nearly £7 annually, and rates would be higher for greater distances.

33. Rich, *History of the United States Post Office*, 31, 36–7; "Appendix: Franklin's Order on Circulation of Newspapers in the Mails". Richard Kielbowicz noted that newspapers would be charged nine pence per year per fifty miles transported. "The Press, Post Office, and Flow of News in the Early Republic", 256.

ability to raise funds or conduct international warfare. Once the imperial crisis hit in the 1760s, its weakness on the ground made it an easy mark for attack.

Into this situation stepped William Goddard, a young printer who made a habit of irritating his superiors.<sup>34</sup> Having sold his first printing office in Providence, Goddard arrived in Philadelphia in 1767 at the behest of allies of Benjamin Franklin, including the speaker of the Pennsylvania Assembly, Joseph Galloway, and prosperous merchant Thomas Wharton. With them as silent partners, Goddard established a printing office and newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, to rival David Hall's *Pennsylvania Gazette* and William Bradford's *Pennsylvania Journal*—neither of which, according to Galloway and Wharton, fairly represented the position of their political faction. As a staunch anti-imperialist, Goddard almost immediately came into conflict with his more cautious pro-British benefactors, and the partnership quickly descended in a spiral of acrimony and accusations of unpaid debts. Goddard even published a seventy-two-page pamphlet, *The Partnership*, in 1770, accusing his onetime partners of attempting to destroy his business.<sup>35</sup> In return, Galloway and Wharton had Goddard imprisoned for debt several times in the early 1770s. Goddard was also a veteran of the imperial post office, but knew its limitations. He saw postal operations up close for many years during his youth. His father, Dr. Giles Goddard, had served as the postmaster for New London, Connecticut; in the 1740s, he served as an apprentice to James Parker when he was postmaster in New Haven in the 1750s, and he himself served as postmaster of Providence from 1764 to 1769.

His ambitions in Philadelphia apparently thwarted, Goddard prepared in 1773 to open a second printing office in Baltimore, leaving behind his sister, Mary Katherine Goddard, to operate the Philadelphia office. To ensure the success of the new office and the *Maryland Journal*, the newspaper that would accompany it, Goddard planned to use news gleaned largely from the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*. His efforts were stymied, however, by William Bradford, the Philadelphia post-

34. Goddard's reputation in the historiography is mixed. Konstantin Dierks has recently credited Goddard for "the articulation of a new political ideology of communications extending... to freedom for all private and public communication" and for "the politicization... of letter writing." *In My Power*, 189. Daniel J. Boorstin in the 1950s described Goddard as "a prototype of the American businessman". Richard R. John strongly disagreed, arguing that "the influence of Goddard's venture on American postal policy" had been overstated. Boorstin, *The Americans*, 338; John, *Spreading the News*, 292–3. For a profile written by one of Goddard's contemporaries, see Thomas, *History of Printing in America*, 534–40. There was also an interesting but largely uncritical biography of Goddard written in the 1960s. See Miner, *William Goddard*.

35. Goddard, *The Partnership*.

master and printer of the rival *Pennsylvania Journal*. Goddard alleged that Philadelphia's official post rider was overcharging him and argued publicly that this "severe indisposition" had delayed the publication of his Baltimore newspaper. He even claimed that the post rider's demands for payment were "so enormous" that he could not continue operating his press in Philadelphia.<sup>36</sup> Faced with the choice of paying the burdensome fees or bypassing the British postal route, he hired his own post rider between Philadelphia and Baltimore and labeled the new route the "Constitutional Post".<sup>37</sup> By itself this was not particularly controversial; many printers faced with similar obstacles in gathering news had been doing the same thing in North America for decades. Goddard, however, had grander plans which would turn the conventional process of circulating information on its head. Already by late 1773, he wrote to John Lamb in New York that he was working on the "Sketch of a Plan... to give a firm Opposition to a certain unconstitutional Act of Parliamt. now operating in the Colonies."<sup>38</sup>

Described by one historian as a "political knight-errant always avid for new adventures", Goddard used what he perceived to be an attempt to undermine his printing business by a commercial rival to catalyze political opposition to the imperial postal system.<sup>39</sup> Without a satisfactory resolution to his distribution problem, he closed his Philadelphia shop in February 1774, ended the *Chronicle's* run, and left his Baltimore operation in the hands of his sister.<sup>40</sup> From Philadelphia he then headed north, writing in the last issue of the *Chronicle* that he was "engaged in" "a Matter" "of a very interesting Nature to the common Liberties of all *America*, as well as to myself, as the Printer of a Public Paper."<sup>41</sup> Stopping first in New York, then in towns in Connecticut and Rhode Island, he finally arrived in Boston on March 14, where he presented a plan for a new postal system to the Boston committee of correspondence. Thus he launched a campaign among radical printers and their political allies in other east coast cities to expand his grandly named "Constitutional Post" to cover the Atlantic seaboard at least as far south as Williamsburg and to serve as an extra-legal alternative to the British Post Office.<sup>42</sup>

36. *Maryland Journal*, August 20, 1773; *Massachusetts Spy*, March 17, 1774; *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven), March 25, 1774.

37. *Maryland Journal*, August 28, 1773; November 20, 1773.

38. William Goddard to [-], Baltimore, December 16, 1773, Lamb Papers, N-YHS.

39. Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence*, 192.

40. *Maryland Journal*, February 17, 1774.

41. *Pennsylvania Chronicle* (Philadelphia: William Goddard), February 8, 1774.

42. Various other scholars have briefly discussed the Goddard proposal. See for example, Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence*, 190–95; Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts*, 181–84; Marston, *King and Congress*, 228–30; Smith, *History of the Post Office*, 60–3; Rich, *History of the United States Post Office*, 44–6.

Goddard was now tapping into a broader effort to create more unified intercolonial resistance to British imperial policies. The Boston committee of correspondence, created in November 1772 to shape public opinion in Massachusetts in a dispute over judges' salaries, had recently begun to expand its role by corresponding with other colonies in order to coordinate resistance to the Tea Act and was specifically seeking other issues that would coalesce colonial resistance.<sup>43</sup> In mid-April 1774, a subcommittee of the Boston committee of correspondence, whose members included politicians such as Samuel Adams and local merchants such as Nathaniel Appleton and Joseph Greenleaf, hammered out the details of a comprehensive post office plan, with support and suggestions that Goddard had gathered from New York, Newport, and Providence radicals on his journey north.<sup>44</sup>

After two weeks' work, the committee produced what was now called "*The PLAN for establishing a New American POST-OFFICE*". The proposal drastically altered the business model that the post office had followed for decades. Rather than a state monopoly that existed to generate revenue for the government's use, Goddard envisioned a bottom-up institution run by subscribers, whose revenues were directed back into the post office itself. The plan proposed to raise funds "for the necessary Defence of Post-Officers and Riders employed in the same" by subscription, and to put the post's subscribers in charge of its management.<sup>45</sup> A committee of subscribers in each colony would choose postmasters, "regulate the Postage of Letters and Packets", including "the Terms on which News-Papers are to be carried", and oversee the operations of the post offices and post riders. To ensure transparency and security, the plan carefully noted that post office "Regulations shall be printed and set up in each respective Office" and that mail would be kept "under Lock and Key, and liable to

43. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts*, chapters 7 and 8. The Boston committee made limited attempts to open communication with like-minded merchants in Montréal and Québec. Members drafted a letter that they sent to Montréal and Québec requesting that they join the union, and more specifically that they send representatives to the Second Continental Congress, which was to be held in May 1775 in Philadelphia. Montréal representatives replied in April, but declined to join the congress because their town was quite divided. Moreover, sympathizers with the radicals' cause were afraid that French settlers and the government would conspire against them if they tried to help the older British colonies. BCC to Inhabitants of the Province of Québec, February 21, 1775, in *Writings of Samuel Adams*, III: 185; Inhabitants of Montréal to the Committee of Safety, in *Journals of Each Provincial Congress*, 751–52.

44. Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL, April 21, 1774, IX: 752; "Nathaniel Appleton", in Shipton, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 12: 355–59.

45. "Subscription Paper relative to Post Office March 1774; (Indorsed by W. Cooper)", Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL.

the inspection of no Person but the respective Post-Masters to whom directed." The committees would collectively select the Postmaster General, who would be responsible for the finances of the overall system.<sup>46</sup> In contrast to the British postal system, the plan called for a self-sufficient post office controlled by those with a direct financial stake in it—primarily printers and merchants. It also included significant protections for political correspondence and for newspapers. Furthermore, by establishing the post office as an extra-legal institution, Patriots closely aligned it with political resistance groups already familiar to them, such as the Stamp Act Congress, the Sons of Liberty, the non-importation associations, and the committees of correspondence.<sup>47</sup>

In stark contrast, the operational details of the post office that Goddard proposed differed little from those of the existing imperial system. The plan proposed no new routes, nor any new way to provide postal service to correspondents. As Thomas Young noted to John Lamb in May 1774, "We would not be under the least difficulty in this Colony" in making the transition from imperial to "constitutional" post, "as there would be no change in the persons employed."<sup>48</sup> Even so, it marked a radical departure from the British Post Office. For example, it extended only within the bounds of the older colonies in North America. Neither Goddard nor the Boston committee ever contemplated a post office that would circulate news north to Canada, south to Florida, or out into the Atlantic, either to the British West Indies or to Europe. The new post office also placed considerable power in the hands of its users, which would prevent the abuses of a heavy-handed centralized administration that Goddard felt he suffered. In particular, Goddard's plan did not attempt a grand resolution of the question of how to deal with newspapers. Instead, it charged each colony's committee with deciding how to approach the cost of newspaper distribution. Nonetheless, this was a step beyond the imperial post, whose organizing statutes made no mention whatsoever of newspaper carriage.

To gather financial and public support, the Boston committee employed political strategies radicals had refined over more than

46. "The PLAN for establishing a New American POST-OFFICE". The broadside was reprinted in such papers as: *Boston Post-Boy*, April 25, 1774; *Connecticut Journal*, April 29, 1774; *Boston Gazette*, May 2, 1774; *Massachusetts Spy*, May 5, 1774; *Providence Gazette*, May 7, 1774; *Essex Gazette*, May 10, 1774; *Newport Mercury*, May 16, 1774; *Connecticut Courant*, May 31, 1774; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), June 2, 1774.

47. Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution*; Brown, *Revolutionary Politics*; Morgan and Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*.

48. Thomas Young to John Lamb, May 13, 1774, quoted in Leake, *Memoir of the Life and Times of General John Lamb*, 86.

a decade of protests. It first contacted prominent commercial centers, towns that were already in touch with the Boston committee about the growing political tumult in the colonies. The plan to create a new post office fit comfortably with the Boston committee's efforts to mobilize commercial towns on behalf of intercolonial resistance to imperial policies. And, as Richard Brown has argued, the Boston committee saw the post office as one facet of its efforts to foster intercolonial cooperation.<sup>49</sup> The committee used a variety of tactics to seek broad support: letters of endorsement from prominent men; travel and personal visits (mostly by Goddard himself); the use of subscription plans as an organizing device; and, when radicals sought to reach the widest possible audience, printing their arguments in newspapers.

Printers were critical to the success of the new post's operations, but its financial underpinnings depended on investments by wealthy merchants. Boston and other committees strongly emphasized the importance of men of commerce to the post office plan. When Goddard arrived in Boston on March 14, 1774, the Boston committee immediately began to assess support among the town's elite and from pro-Patriot activists generally in nearby towns. After an initial meeting to discuss the proposal among its membership, the committee designated two men to meet with local merchants. The next committee meeting included "a number of the principal Merchants of the Town" as invited guests to discuss the plan's feasibility, and the committee selected from its number John Pitts, a merchant, to head the subscription effort.<sup>50</sup> The Portsmouth committee later wrote to Boston that it "had several Meetings of the Merchts. & Traders in this Town, who in general esteem the Undertaking much, & are now subscribing for the Purpose of carrying it into Execution here."<sup>51</sup> The Boston committee emphasized in a response to Newport and Providence that it was consulting first with "Maritime Towns" and "Trading Towns".<sup>52</sup> Although the transport by the post office of what they called "private letters of friendship and commerce" was a secondary concern for the radicals, they actively sought to attract merchants, who often conducted business through the post. As users of the post office and as men experi-

49. Brown, *Revolutionary Politics in Massachusetts*, 184.

50. March 22 and 24, 1774, Minute Book IX: 733–4, 739, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL. "John Pitts", in Shipton, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 14: 197–201.

51. Portsmouth committee to Boston committee, April 11, 1774, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL.

52. Boston committee to Providence and Newport committees, March 29, 1774, Minute Book IX: 748–9, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL.

enced in financing new projects, merchants and other commercially interested men would be vital to the post office's chances for success.

With the support of their hometown merchants in place, the Boston radicals began to use their longstanding tactics for encouraging support from more distant places. The first of these was the solicitation of letters of endorsement from the most prominent men in other towns, in particular those towns that had already established committees of correspondence as part of Boston's envisioned intercolonial resistance network. In fact, Boston originally took an interest in Goddard's proposal in part because of the letters of support Goddard had received on his way north from the committees in New York, Newport, and Providence. These initially unpublished letters were also the original medium for articulating reasons for opposing the British post. The New York committee jumped on the bandwagon first. It argued that the imperial post was "an internal tax" and that "our News Papers in a time of public danger may be stopt" and characterized the situation as "a State too dangerous for Americans to rest in, without a struggle."<sup>53</sup> Newport's committee then wrote that it would join the plan if it had the consent of other colonies, and it used the New York endorsement letter as part of its basis for lending its support.<sup>54</sup> With both of those letters in hand, Providence assured Boston that it would "cheerfully second every rational plan... for the effecting so laudable a work."<sup>55</sup>

When Goddard originally presented his plan in Boston, the committee acknowledged these letters as one of its main reasons for hearing him out and lending support. It also used them as a rationale when writing to others. Its letter of March 24 to several towns in Massachusetts and New Hampshire opened by stating that "Mr. William Goddard has brought us Letters from our worthy Brethren the Committee of Correspondence of New York Newport and Providence recommending to our consideration the... effort to constitute and support a Post throughout America."<sup>56</sup> By listing the other towns as backers, the Boston committee was creating a sense that the alternative post office

53. New York committee to Boston committee, February 20, 1774, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL, March 29, 1774, Minute Book IX: 742–6.

54. Newport committee to Boston committee, March 10, 1774, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL, March 29, 1774, Minute Book IX: 746–7.

55. Providence committee to Boston committee, March 17, 1774, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL, March 29, 1774, Minute Book IX: 747–8.

56. Boston committee to Marblehead, Newburyport, and Portsmouth, March 24, 1774, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL, Minute Book IX: 734.

enjoyed a broad base of support.<sup>57</sup> It also asked the committees to send letters directly to Philadelphia and New York in order to enhance momentum in those two towns. Finally, just as the Boston committee had done at home, it asked the other committees to gauge the opinion of “the Gentlemen of your Town, and more particularly the Merchants and Traders.”<sup>58</sup> In this way it hoped to extend the network of possible subscribers and prominent supporters.

Lobbying in person was also an important political tactic for drumming up support. Armed with a letter of introduction from the Boston committee, Goddard himself carried the endorsement letters from town to town. He spoke in person on behalf of the plan and used his personal story to reinforce the urgent need for a new post office. The Boston committee stated in introducing Goddard that he seemed “to be deeply engaged [sic] in this attempt, not only with a view of serving himself, as a Printer, but equally from the more generous motive of serving the common cause of America.”<sup>59</sup> For the committee, Goddard’s personal economic motives intertwined uncontroversially with the broader common cause of political resistance. Goddard crisscrossed the colonies over a period of fifteen months starting in February 1774 to push for his plan. It was Goddard who brought the news of the new post office to the maritime towns of Massachusetts and New Hampshire in March and April. Goddard must have met with success, because when the Boston committee then sent him back to New York, its letter of introduction warmly testified to his skill at gaining adherents to the plan. He returned to Newport, and then traveled again through Connecticut before arriving in New York at the end of May.<sup>60</sup> In each town, Goddard met with the committee of correspondence or other prominent radicals and worked to produce a letter endorsing the new post office. By August, Goddard had traveled through Philadelphia to Baltimore and as far as Williamsburg to promote the plan.<sup>61</sup>

57. See New York committee to Boston committee, February 20, 1774. Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL, March 24, 1774, Minute Book IX: 742–6; Samuel Adams to James Warren, March 31, 1774, Samuel Adams papers, MssCol 20, NYPL.

58. Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL, March 24, 1774, Minute Book IX: 734–6.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Boston committee to New York and Philadelphia committees, May 5, 1774, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL, Minute Book X: 811–12; William Goddard to John Lamb, May 16, 1774, John Lamb Papers, N-YHS.

61. *Providence Gazette*, April 2, 1774; *Boston Post-Boy*, April 4, 1774, April 11, 1774, April 18, 1774; *Essex Journal*, April 6, 1774, April 20, 1774; *Newport Mercury*, April 18, 1774; *Essex Gazette*, April 19, 1774; *Norwich Packet*, April 21, 1774; *Connecticut Gazette*, April 22, 1774; *Connecticut Journal*, April 29, 1774; *Connecticut Gazette*, April 29, 1774; *New-York Journal*, June 2, 1774; *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), July 21, 1774; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), August 4, 1774.

Meanwhile, the Boston committee also began the work of financing the new post office. The committee met to discuss the post office twice more within a week of Goddard's arrival and appointed a subcommittee to meet with several prominent Boston merchants to begin the process of collecting subscriptions and to gather their opinions about the plan.<sup>62</sup> Printers and political leaders used subscription lists to underscore support for the new post office, as they had done for non-importation agreements in the 1760s against the Townshend Acts and in 1773 against the Tea Act. These lists were not just a crucial financing mechanism for printers, and were more than registers of supporters and sympathizers. Because economic resistance depended on the cooperation of merchants, political leaders used the subscriptions lists as tools of public opinion formation, rewarding those who signed them and punishing those who refrained, as T.H. Breen has argued.<sup>63</sup> The subscription lists allowed printers to trumpet the patronage they received from affluent and prominent men in the town. For example, when Goddard arrived in Boston, the *Massachusetts Spy* published a series of pieces on the post office. In recounting Goddard's trials with the Philadelphia postmaster, one piece emphasized that "[n]early the whole town of Baltimore, [and] the first Merchants and Gentlemen in Philadelphia" had helped him establish a post rider between those towns.<sup>64</sup> After Goddard's trip to New Hampshire, Samuel Cutts wrote on behalf of the Portsmouth Committee of Correspondence that "the Merchts. & Traders in this Town... in general esteem the Undertaking much, & are now subscribing for the Purpose of carrying it into Execution here."<sup>65</sup> Promoters of the new post office rarely identified individuals by name, but they referred explicitly to merchants, just the men whose financial backing would be absolutely necessary to the plan's success.

The radicals' use of subscription lists took advantage of merchants' ability to fund the new post office and their general concern with the flow of information. Richard Brown has argued that merchants were at the center of their towns' information systems because of their need to communicate across a broad geographical range, and suggested that in many ways merchants thus exerted great control over what was considered newsworthy.<sup>66</sup> Their interest in and importance for the

62. March 17 and 22, 1774, Minute Book IX: 733–4, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL.

63. Breen, *Marketplace of Revolution*, 254–67.

64. *Massachusetts Spy*, March 17, 1774; *Essex Gazette*, March 22, 1774; *Connecticut Journal*, March 25, 1774.

65. Samuel Cutts to the Boston Committee of Correspondence, April 11, 1774, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL.

66. Brown, *Knowledge is Power*, chapter 5.

post office confirms this assessment. Merchants also had a great interest in ensuring the security and timely delivery of their correspondence. For example, when Canada came into British hands in 1760, merchants in Montreal and Quebec immediately sought the introduction of post offices in these towns to provide a secure conveyance for their business correspondence.<sup>67</sup> In 1773, as part of a survey of the imperial post office, Hugh Finlay traced a postal route from Quebec to New England at the request of merchants. One newspaper article drafted in Quebec and printed in Philadelphia in October 1773 described the post road as “a Thing so long in Agitation, so much desired, and that must be of such mutual Advantage to both Provinces.”<sup>68</sup> Although merchants had several options for getting their correspondence delivered, including the use of their own systems for transporting goods, they had a strong interest in a properly functioning post office. They also wanted one that protected the confidentiality of their business communications.

These personalized approaches generated significant support, but the most effective way for radicals to circulate and distribute their arguments to a broad intercolonial public was to publish them in newspapers with the help of printers. Goddard and the Boston committee maximized their connections to generate broad publicity for the pro-American post office. Committee allies Isaiah Thomas and Edes and Gill took the lead in publishing materials in Boston. Goddard tapped into a group of expatriates from the Franklin network, most notably John Holt, the printer of the *New York Journal*. Holt was the son-in-law of William Hunter, who had served as Deputy Postmaster General with Franklin until his death in 1761. Also apparently through Holt, Goddard’s post office scheme reached the Williamsburg firm of Alexander Purdie and John Dixon. Purdie was Williamsburg’s imperial postmaster but readily signed on to the new post office. In New England, Goddard rekindled old contacts among the Green family of printers, including Thomas Green in New Haven—also a former Holt partner—and Timothy Green in New London, as well as Daniel Fowle in New Hampshire, who was distantly related (professionally) to the Greens.

67. Toby Ditz, “Secret Selves, Credible Personae”; Smith, *History of the Post Office*, 37–44.

68. Finlay, *Journal*, 1–16; *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, October 11, 1773; *Pennsylvania Packet*, October 11, 1773; *New-York Gazette*, October 11, 1773; *Boston Post-Boy*, October 11, 1773; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 13, 1773; *Boston News-Letter*, October 14, 1773; *Connecticut Journal*, October 15, 1773; *Boston Gazette*, October 18, 1773; *Newport Mercury*, October 18, 1773; *Essex Gazette*, October 19, 1773.

Newspapers used the same tactics as had the unpublished letters of endorsement. In fact, on occasion newspapers simply reproduced letters of endorsement that Goddard carried with him or that had appeared in the newspapers of other towns when he visited them. Print coverage of Goddard's plan thus tended to follow him as he traveled to promote it, creating waves of attention both in his wake and ahead of his visits. To gain as much support as possible, the letters amplified the personal endorsement of leading men. For example, a letter dated February 28, 1774, from a "Gentleman at New York" to a friend in Boston outlining the main arguments for the new post office, was reprinted in several newspapers, including the *Massachusetts Spy*, the *Connecticut Gazette*, the *Connecticut Journal*, the *New-Hampshire Gazette*, and the *Virginia Gazette*. The author of that letter urged his friend to "use all your influence in the town of Boston" to gather support for the plan. A second letter printed alongside it in some newspapers noted that the post in Baltimore and Philadelphia was "supported by the most eminent merchants & other gentlemen in those places."<sup>69</sup>

Newspapers underscored the broad geographical support for the plan. One article argued that support for the plan was "so universally acknowledged by the Inhabitants of this Town and Neighbourhood" that it was near certain that all the colonies would adopt the plan.<sup>70</sup> Another author published in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire newspapers noted that subscriptions had already been started in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York, and argued that the "Southern colonies" (by which he meant Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia) would quickly set up post offices once they knew that the New England colonies were interested.<sup>71</sup> By their nature, newspapers emphasized a sense of intercolonial unity; a Philadelphian picking up the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* could read news originally printed in Boston, New York, Williamsburg, and Charleston in addition to his native town. By forging such a tangible communications link among

69. *Massachusetts Spy*, March 17, 1774; *Boston Evening Post*, March 21, 1774; *Connecticut Courant*, March 22, 1774; *Essex Gazette*, March 23, 1774; *Norwich Packet*, March 24, 1774; *Connecticut Gazette*, March 25, 1774; *Connecticut Journal*, March 25, 1774; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, March 25, 1774; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), April 14, 1774.

70. *Boston Evening Post*, March 21, 1774; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, March 25, 1774; *Boston Post-Boy*, March 28, 1774; *Essex Gazette*, March 29, 1774; *Connecticut Gazette*, April 1, 1774.

71. *Boston Post-Boy*, March 21, 1774; *Connecticut Courant*, March 22, 1774; *Essex Gazette*, March 22, 1774; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, March 25, 1774; *Connecticut Gazette*, March 25, 1774; *Connecticut Journal*, March 25, 1774; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, March 25, 1774; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), Aprch 14, 1774.

the colonies, newspapers proved a vital mechanism for radicals to disseminate their arguments against British imperial policies. All of these techniques—mobilizing support among each town's elite, soliciting letters of endorsement, personal visits, the use of subscriptions, and the use of newspapers—aided greatly in giving arguments on behalf of the new post office a chance to succeed.

With so many backers apparently primed for action, radicals and printers systematically used newspapers to attempt to convince the public that creating a new post office was the right thing to do. To buttress the new post's credibility as an anti-imperial institution, Goddard and his allies made a series of arguments about the imperial Post Office as an oppressive arm of the British ministry. While some of these arguments were particular to the post office and to the intersection of the postal service and the printing trade, others flowed directly from the ideological opposition to British imperial policies that had developed since 1763. As a government institution with relatively broad reach across the colonies, revolutionary leaders found the British post office a ready and potent symbol of imperial oppression and maladministration. Proponents of the new post used three main lines of attack against the British institution. First, they argued that the post office had to be replaced because it represented unconstitutional taxation, illegitimately generating revenue for the British ministry. Second, Patriots contended that British officials used the post to censor their communication, both by opening their correspondence and by preventing newspapers from circulating. Finally, they suggested that a new post office, free of these constraints, would better facilitate intercolonial union.

The idea that the post office signified unjust taxation featured prominently in Patriots' arguments, taking advantage of colonists' familiarity with the issue. The Boston committee put it bluntly and simply: the Post Office Act was "to all intents & purposes a Revenue Act" and the post office itself an institution designed primarily to raise money for the empire.<sup>72</sup> On the one hand, this claim was remarkably banal—the 1710 Act that created a post office in North America anticipated a revenue flow into the Exchequer, and legal scholar William Blackstone used the post as an example of revenue generation.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, Franklin went on record in 1766 arguing against the position that the post office was designed primarily to raise a revenue: he claimed that postage was simply a fee "for a ser-

72. Boston committee to Newport and Providence committees, March 29, 1774, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL, Minute Book IX: 748–9. These questions had been raised as early as the Stamp Act crisis of 1765.

73. Blackstone, *Commentaries*, 1: 311–12.

vice done” and hence distinct from the hated Stamp Act.<sup>74</sup> This appears, however, to have been a classic Franklinian rhetorical pivot designed to deflect the argument of the Stamp Act’s supporters that the stamps were no different from the long-accepted post office rates. By 1774, Franklin had fully converted to the anti-imperial orthodoxy about the post office. Others warned that the post’s revenue could be a source of political chicanery. Arthur Lee, a colonial agent in London, speculated to Samuel Adams that the post office generated £5,000 annually, revenue that “coud furnish most fearful means of corruption.”<sup>75</sup>

Patriot printers and their allies therefore placed the post office in a growing line of oppressive imperial institutions. For example, the *New York Journal* argued that the post office fell into the same category as customs houses, vice-admiralty courts, and other instruments of restrictive laws and duties.<sup>76</sup> By 1774 most colonists were familiar with Patriot arguments about these issues. It was only a small additional step for colonists to see opposing the post office in a similar vein. In fact, some now argued retrospectively that the British post office had been a precedent for the reviled Stamp Act and the more recent Tea Act. A Boston writer argued in the *Connecticut Gazette* that the post office was “a parliamentary Establishment, that hath been the Foundation of, and Precedent for a Stamp-Act, a declaratory Law for binding the Colonies in all Cases whatsoever, a Tea Duty, and other Attempts to extort our Money from us, and infringe on our Rights and Privileges.”<sup>77</sup> The link between the post office and other recent imperial crises accomplished two goals for the Patriots. It allowed them first to raise the stakes of the debate, to explain to the reading public why a new post office was so necessary. In addition, the connection served as a shorthand, a way to make the case for Goddard’s post by inference and assertion rather than through detailed argument.

Revolutionary leaders also reappropriated current events as signs of British oppression through the post office. In April, news arrived in America that Franklin, the Deputy Postmaster General for over twenty years, had been fired in January for his role in publishing secret letters written by Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson.

74. *The EXAMINATION of Doctor BENJAMIN FRANKLIN*, 12. On Franklin’s position in the Stamp Act crisis, see Botein, “Printers and the American Revolution”; Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, chapter 3.

75. Arthur Lee to Samuel Adams, February 8, 1774, Samuel Adams papers, MssCol 20, NYPL.

76. *New-York Journal*, February 24, 1774.

77. *Massachusetts Spy*, March 24, 1774; *Boston Post-Boy*, March 28, 1774; *Essex Gazette*, March 28, 1774; *Connecticut Courant*, March 29, 1774; *Essex Journal*, March 30, 1774; *Connecticut Gazette*, April 1, 1774; *Providence Gazette*, April 2, 1774.

Despite the fact that many Patriots doubted Franklin's politics and saw him as an ambitious place seeker within the imperial structure, they took up his cause.<sup>78</sup> One writer argued in a piece that circulated through New England that Franklin's removal was "a most injudicious Step of Administration" and that it "may teach the Colonies what is the Design of Ministry..., and what Americans are to expect from the present set of Placemen and Pensioners."<sup>79</sup> Distrusted just months before, Franklin's suffering at the hands of imperial officials now served as a harbinger of how other Americans would be treated.

The other two major ideological objections raised about the post office centered on the circulation of information. Protecting the confidentiality of correspondence was vital to the success of radical printers' political activities and their businesses. The Boston committee made just that point, claiming that the Post's "Officers have it in their power to intercept our communications, to extort whatever they please, and to apply them to divide us, and then to enslave us."<sup>80</sup> In some cases, Whig leaders had first-hand evidence that their letters were not secure. Franklin knew from his service with the imperial post that mails were routinely opened, and in 1774, he warned correspondents (including his sister) that their letters might be intercepted.<sup>81</sup> There were also reports in the colonies that letters would be seized, as when the *New-York Journal* reported in the same year that "our Assembly have received advice from the best authority, that Doctor Franklin's successor in office, is authorized to open all letters directed to Committees of Correspondence, and inspect their contents."<sup>82</sup> Peter Timothy, a Charleston printer and political leader, warned Samuel Adams that letters addressed to the South Carolina committee of correspondence would not reach him unless hand deliv-

78. Wood, *Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, chapter 3. When Goddard began promoting his plan in February 1774, several of Franklin's correspondents, including his son William and Boston postmaster Tuthill Hubbard (a cousin), wrote to warn him of the threat to the imperial post office; ironically, Franklin had already lost his position before the letters had been written. Tuthill Hubbard to Franklin, March 31, 1774, *PBF* 21: 160–1; William Franklin to B. Franklin, May 3, 1774, *PBF* 21: 206–7; Franklin to Thomas Cushing, June 1, 1774, *PBF* 227–30.

79. *Boston Gazette*, May 9, 1774; *Boston Evening Post*, May 9, 1774; *Essex Gazette*, May 10, 1774; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, May 13, 1774; *Connecticut Gazette*, May 13, 1774.

80. Boston committee to Newport and Providence, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL, March 29, 1774, IX: 749.

81. Benjamin Franklin to Thomas Cushing, September 15, 1774, *PBF* 21: 306; Franklin to Jane Mecom, September 26, 1774, *PBF* 21: 317.

82. *New-York Journal*, June 9, 1774. Another writer refuted this allegation; see *New-York Journal*, June 30, 1774.

ered by a trusted agent.<sup>83</sup> With reports of mail tampering from the colonies and Britain, Patriots had every reason to believe that no letters sent by the British post were secure. They would have found little consolation in discovering they were right; as Secretary of State, Lord Dartmouth regularly received transcriptions of letters intercepted at the General Post Office in London until the disruption of regular packet service in the autumn of 1775.<sup>84</sup>

The logical endpoint of Patriots' concerns about censorship was that the British would deliberately use the imperial post office to block their efforts at intercolonial union. The Boston committee argued that the colonists should run their own post office because of "the importance of a Post, by which not only private Letters of friendship and Commerce but publick intelligence is conveyed from Colony to Colony." By noting the danger to both private and public correspondence, the committee emphasized the risks associated with continuing to use the imperial post office, not only for high-profile revolutionary leaders but also for ordinary merchants and others who might or might not be politically active. The letter argued that imperial censorship through the post office proved that "the British Administration and their Agents have taken every step in their power to prevent an Union of the Colonies which is so necessary for our making a successful opposition to their Arbitrary designs." The new "constitutional" post office would thwart these efforts and would sustain the intercolonial unity necessary to resist them. Successful opposition, they wrote, "depends, upon a free communication of the Circumstances and Sentiments of each to the others, and their mutual Councils."<sup>85</sup> The new post office was, in short, essential to political unity and resistance.

However, the "Constitutional Post" was not universally popular. In May, news spread that a servant of the post rider that Goddard had hired to carry mail between Baltimore and Philadelphia, either Stimson or Stinson, had stolen money from the new post office. Printers

83. Peter Timothy to Samuel Adams, June 13, 1774, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL. Adams' correspondence is riddled with warnings of possible interception and advice for the safe conveyance of correspondence. See, for example, Samuel Adams to James Warren, January 10, 1774; "Mentor" [William Lee] to Samuel Adams, May 14, 1774; Alexander McDougall to Adams, June 27, 1774; all in Samuel Adams papers, MssCol 20, NYPL.

84. Flavell, "Government Interception of Letters".

85. Boston committee to Marblehead, Newburyport, Portsmouth, March 24, 1774, Boston Committee of Correspondence records, MssCol 343, NYPL, Minute Book IX: 734–6. One legal scholar has even suggested that the Constitutional Post's insistence on the secrecy of the mails is the basis for the Supreme Court's extension of Fourth Amendment protections from searches to the arena of communications privacy. See Desai, "Wiretapping Before the Wires".

favoring the new post office attempted to dismiss the theft as an isolated event, arguing that it “by no means discourages the friends of the new institution.” They also published alongside the discouraging news of the theft a piece reporting that the British Postmasters General had announced the loss of almost five hundred letters from ships.<sup>86</sup> Goddard himself was a somewhat divisive figure, and reports began to circulate out of Philadelphia over the summer of 1774, likely at the behest of Galloway and Wharton, that a group of merchants there opposed the plan. Galloway and Wharton wielded enormous influence among Philadelphia’s merchants and were of course also Goddard’s disgruntled former patrons. A letter published in the *Virginia Gazette* lamented that the writer wanted a new post office as much as anyone else, but that “Mr. G-----d’s scheme seems to bear but an indifferent prospect of success.” According to the letter writer, Goddard presented the post office to a group of mechanics in Philadelphia, and they rebuffed him, “observing America had business enough upon her hands without meddling with the affairs of a post-office.”<sup>87</sup> Even so, Goddard attempted publicly to maintain his optimism, penning an essay in the *Maryland Journal* that assured Baltimore merchants that the plan was “liberally encouraged” and “nobly patronized” by merchants in New England.<sup>88</sup>

Whatever its success on the ground, the activity caught the attention and concern of British post office officials. Foxcroft wrote in May to London about the new post office scheme. Foxcroft at the time was contemplating of bringing a prosecution against Goddard for defrauding the King of his revenue, but doubted whether the charges would stick because of technical jurisdictional issues. He assured Anthony Todd, the Secretary of the General Post Office, however, that Goddard was nothing more than a deeply indebted gadfly and that his supporters were “a Set of licentious people of desperate fortunes whose sole consequence, nay even Dependance, is on their fishing in troubled water.”<sup>89</sup> Foxcroft’s confidence obscured the impending obsolescence of the British post office in North America.

The new post office, as envisioned by Goddard, the Boston committee, and other radicals, demonstrates the importance to radicals of securing favorable mechanisms of intercolonial political communication. Because printers and radicals could not rely on the imperial post, they readily adapted the model of extra-legal institutions estab-

86. *Boston Post-Boy*, May 2, 1774; *Connecticut Journal*, May 6, 1774; *New-York Journal*, May 19, 1774; *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie and Dixon), June 2, 1774.

87. *Virginia Gazette* (Rind), July 21, 1774.

88. *Maryland Journal*, June 4, 1774.

89. John Foxcroft to Anthony Todd, April 5, 1774, PRO T1/409/36. My thanks to Molly Warsh for transcribing this letter.

lished by the Sons of Liberty, committees of correspondence, and other resistance organizations. Although the British post officially continued to operate in the colonies until the end of 1775, radicals had produced a systematic alternative, using fund-raising and organizational techniques familiar to them from prior business and political experience. Despite their comfort in operating extra-legally, however, radicals and printers never intended the post office to remain outside government control for long. They quickly began to agitate for the post office to become a governmental institution while preserving the idea of the post as a “channel of publick intelligence” and a locus of patronage for printers.

### Making the Post Office an American National Institution

The path to an American post office was not smooth, as radicals encountered several obstacles and complications in late 1774 and early 1775. Goddard returned to Philadelphia in September 1774 in order to present his plan to the Continental Congress for its adoption. But Congress set aside his proposal with no recorded debate. It was not yet ready to assume the mantle of responsibility for long-term government institutions.<sup>90</sup> Goddard then spent much of the winter and spring of 1775 in prison for debts related to his former partnership with Galloway and Wharton.<sup>91</sup> The outbreak of war, however, brought new urgency to the need for secure political communication. In the absence of a directive from the Continental Congress, plans for post offices proliferated from the ground up after the battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775. Goddard himself immediately rekindled a New York-to-Philadelphia route, several New England colonies started provincial postal services, and numerous individuals, including several onetime postmasters and post riders, offered their services.<sup>92</sup> Calls also began to pour in for the Second Continental Congress, set to convene in Philadelphia on May 10, 1775, to take over postal service. For example, the resolution creating a post office in Massachu-

90. Goddard's attempt also met resistance from Pennsylvania delegate Joseph Galloway. *JCC* 1: 55 (October 5, 1774); Diary of Silas Deane, October 5, 1774, *LDC* 1: 143.

91. *Pennsylvania Archives*, ser. 8, Votes of Assembly 1775, February 21, 1775, 8: 7187; March 3, 1775, 8: 7201; March 10, 1775, 8: 7214–5; Colonial Records series, Minutes of the Provincial Council, March 11, 1775, 10: 239.

92. *New-Hampshire Gazette*, May 19, 1775, June 2, 1775; *Connecticut Gazette*, June 9, 1775; *New-York Journal*, June 1, 1775 (reprinted weekly until July 27, 1775); William Bradford, “An Account for Postages, May 11, 1775–July 27, 1775”, Bradford Family Papers; Thomas Wharton to Samuel Wharton, May 13, 1775, Dartmouth American Papers (SRO), D(W) 1778/II/1267.

setts included a clause stating that its provisions would remain in effect “until the Continental Congress, or some future Congress or House of Representatives of this Colony, shall make some further Order relative to the same.”<sup>93</sup> With explicit support from provincial congresses and a heightened need for military communications, Congress seemed ready to act.

Congress thus faced in the summer of 1775 a vastly changed landscape from its meeting the previous fall. Boston was occupied by British troops and under a near siege by local militias. Boston’s printers (except for the Loyalists) had scattered throughout Massachusetts. Staunch patriots and post office supporters Benjamin Edes and Isaiah Thomas had evacuated to Watertown and Worcester, respectively. A coordinated intercolonial postal system was now a military imperative. Within three weeks of convening, therefore, Congress appointed a committee to examine the postal system and then adopted its report at the end of July.<sup>94</sup> Congress appointed Franklin as Postmaster General, ensuring some continuity in the post office’s leadership. The committee’s report no longer exists, but the new Congressional post was different in at least two respects from Goddard’s proposal. First, the Continental Post Office was designed on the model of a government institution, which meant that it no longer anticipated operating via subscription. Second, Congress insisted that the post be a national infrastructure that operated from Maine to Georgia; Goddard never envisioned that his post would extend further south than Williamsburg, Virginia. In fact, providing reliable service in the southern colonies had always proven elusive—even the main route from Charleston south to Savannah and St. Augustine ran monthly at best.<sup>95</sup> Congress now wanted a truly comprehensive postal system.

The composition of the committee appointed by Congress to develop a postal system revealed the continuing interest in the post office among printers, merchants, and political activists. Its membership included Benjamin Franklin, the former printer, who had more experience with the postal service than any other delegate, and Samuel Adams, the head of the Boston committee of correspondence and a leader in the push to promote Goddard’s post office proposal. Also on the committee were several merchants: Thomas Lynch of South Carolina, Thomas Willing of Pennsylvania, and Philip Livingston of New York, as well as Virginia planter Richard Henry Lee.<sup>96</sup> Of that group, all but Lee hailed from the most urban areas of the colonies—

93. *New-Hampshire Gazette*, June 2, 1775.

94. *JCC* 2: 71 (May 29, 1775); *JCC* 2: 208–9 (July 26, 1775).

95. Finlay, *Journal*, 51–71.

96. Biographies of these members of Congress are available at <http://bioguide.congress.gov>; accessed May 6, 2010.

Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston. The influence of politicians and merchants with considerable experience in the post office helped to preserve much of the structure of Goddard's plan and of the old imperial system.

Printers and others connected to the post office fully expected that the new national infrastructure would continue to rely on the patronage practices of the old imperial system. Franklin, as the new Postmaster General, apparently thought so, as he appointed to the new Continental Post Office a number of printers and former postmasters associated with the old imperial system. For example, in Rhode Island, Newport printer Solomon Southwick held the postmastership, while in Providence, John Carter, the longtime printer of the *Providence Gazette*, shifted his service from the British post office to the American one.<sup>97</sup> In Williamsburg, Alexander Purdie, who printed one edition of the *Virginia Gazette*, shifted his duties from the imperial post to the new American post.<sup>98</sup> Even women, who occasionally ran printing offices, received consideration for the post office. Mary Katherine Goddard, who ran the Baltimore printing office of her brother William while he was traveling the colonies, was named postmaster of Baltimore. She would hold the job for fourteen years until she lost her position in 1789 to a new postmaster more closely connected to the new Federal Postmaster General.<sup>99</sup> Patronage positions in the post office thus continued to be vital to printers.

The printers most centrally involved in the "Constitutional Post" also sought positions but often encountered difficulty because they were perceived as too financially interested in the post to serve the public effectively. In anticipation of action by Congress, John Holt openly campaigned for the job of New York City postmaster in an essay in his own newspaper, writing that "many Gentlemen among the most hearty and able Friends to America" had encouraged him as "a proper person to hold the Office of Post Master in this Colony" because of his long association with the post office.<sup>100</sup> Holt crafted the essay as a careful appeal to the provincial congress for the local postmaster's position, referring to his own knowledge of the post office as a printer and businessman and endorsements from prominent men. As with

97. Samuel Ward to Franklin, August 12, 1775, *PBF* 22: 167–9; Note, *PBF* 22: 183.

98. *Virginia Gazette* (Purdie), October 13, 1775.

99. Young, "Mary K. Goddard"; John and Young, "Rites of Passage", 109–14. Mary Katherine was not the first Goddard woman to run a printing office; Sarah Goddard, William's mother, took over his duties in Providence when he left for Philadelphia in 1766. Henry, "Sarah Goddard"; Chudacoff, "Woman in the News".

100. *New-York Journal*, June 1, 1775 (reprinted weekly until July 27, 1775). On Holt's life, see Murphy, "John Holt".

Goddard's plan, he made his application through the public venue of a newspaper, relying on the premise that the provincial congress would hear of his interest in the job through public discussion.<sup>101</sup> Even as he was applying for the official position, Holt was also involved in an informal post operating between New York and Philadelphia.<sup>102</sup> Amidst the *rage militaire* of 1775, however, Holt's open lobbying appeared insufficiently patriotic. Thomas Bradford, William's son and partner, scolded Holt (and, by extension, Goddard) for thinking of the post office in proprietary terms. "We always tho't the post belonged to the public & not to you," he wrote to Holt on the very day Congress approved the Post office, for "we tho't we were serving the Public, instead of one or two private people."<sup>103</sup>

Also mounting a failed campaign for a position in the post office was William Goddard himself. For a time, he held a small glimmer of hope that he might be appointed Postmaster General and consoled himself when Franklin snagged that position with the sense that surely he was entitled to an appointment as Secretary and Comptroller, the second-ranking position in the post office. That job carried a three hundred forty dollar salary, which would have alleviated the severe financial hardship he claimed he suffered as a result of his work on the earlier plan.<sup>104</sup> Congress left the decision to Franklin, who chose his son-in-law Richard Bache. Goddard was named Surveyor instead and charged with traveling throughout the colonies to set up post offices, just as he had done the previous year. Despite losing out on his chosen position, he set off on his task immediately.<sup>105</sup> He would serve the post office for only about eighteen months, however. In June 1776, he petitioned Congress for a place in the army, where he thought he could better recoup the financial losses he claimed to have suffered since 1774. He also never forgave Franklin. He later excoriated him

101. Unfortunately for Holt, his efforts proved for naught as the job went to Ebenezer Hazard, who would become Postmaster General in the 1780s. Others fared better in seeking positions in the post office, as Franklin relied on the recommendations of others and his own network to staff the post. Examples abound: Ebenezer Hazard requested (and received) the postmastership of New York City; Samuel Chase wrote on behalf of the postmasters of Baltimore and Annapolis, and to recommend someone as a rider from Philadelphia south; Benjamin Gale of Connecticut wrote to recommend an acquaintance and a son-in-law for postmaster positions. Franklin to Ebenezer Hazard, August 3, 1775, *PBF* 22: 146–7; Samuel Chase to Franklin, August 4, 1775, *PBF* 22: 148–9; Benjamin Gale to Benjamin Franklin, August 7, 1775, *PBF* 22: 157–8.

102. *Massachusetts Spy*, May 10, 1775; *New-Hampshire Gazette*, May 19, 1775.

103. Thomas Bradford to John Holt, "draft", July 27, 1775, Society Collection, HSP.

104. Miner, *William Goddard: Newspaperman*, 135.

105. Franklin to Silas Deane, August 27, 1775, *PBF* 22: 183–5.

in a letter to friend and fellow printer Isaiah Thomas: in 1811 he accused the now long-dead Franklin of underhanded dealings and treason.<sup>106</sup> Insofar as printers established tightly knit networks for distributing information and patronage, rivalries among them could be bitter and deeply personal.

The new post office structure left in place many of the operational policies of the imperial system. After all, the men who led the charge against the imperial post office were agitating against imperial control; no one aimed for major innovations in the delivery of mail. The policy on newspaper delivery—or, more accurately, the ongoing lack of a consistent one—continued to dog printers for years to come. In early 1776, John Holt pleaded with Samuel Adams to get Congress to pay more attention to newspaper delivery. He argued that newspaper delivery was vital to “more than twenty times as Many Persons as the Carriage of Letters is” and pointed out that newspapers over the past decade had been the primary vehicles for circulating news about the “tyrannical Designs formed against America” among the colonies.<sup>107</sup> However, Congress and the Post Office devoted most of their energies during the war to facilitating urgent military communications. For example, Congress frequently passed resolutions to establish expresses between Philadelphia (or wherever Congress was sitting) and the locations of various segments of the Continental Army.<sup>108</sup> Congress also considered the post office vital enough that it exempted postmasters and post riders from military duty.<sup>109</sup>

The issue of newspaper circulation arose again during the confederation period, and agitation persisted until the passage of the Post Office Act of 1792. The Articles of Confederation as drafted in 1777 and approved in 1781 granted Congress the power to regulate the post office, and it passed several ordinances to accomplish that goal. Yet only after the major fighting had concluded did Congress begin to address the issue of newspaper circulation. In a 1782 ordinance, Congress gave the Postmaster General the power to “license every post-rider to carry any newspapers to and from any place or places

106. “Memorial of William Goddard to Congress”, June 21, 1776, and Richard Bache to John Hancock, January 18, 1777, Papers of the Continental Congress; William Goddard to Isaiah Thomas, April 15, 1811, Papers of Isaiah Thomas. See also Wetherell, “Brokers of the Word”, 149–50.

107. John Holt to Samuel Adams, January 29, 1776, Samuel Adams papers, MssCol 20, NYPL.

108. See, for example, discussions on establishing communication with New York, July 5, 1776, *JCC* 5: 522; with the southern colonies, August 29, 1776, *JCC* 5: 717–8; with Fort Ticonderoga, September 3, 1776, *JCC* 5: 732, November 5, 1776, *JCC* 6: 926–7; with the army, October 31, 1776, *JCC* 6: 916. Dierks, *In My Power*, 206–14.

109. July 8, 1776 and August 8, 1776, *JCC* 5: 526, 638.

within these United States” but left it to the Postmaster General to determine the “moderate rates” to charge.<sup>110</sup> The Continental Congress approved a new set of post office regulations early in 1787. These new regulations were far more explicit. They established rates for the carriage of newspapers based on the distance the newspaper was sent—an analogous arrangement to how letter postage was determined. In addition, Congress explicitly permitted printers to exchange copies of their papers without charge.<sup>111</sup>

The intensity of the debate over ratification of the new Constitution led some printers to question the effectiveness and impartiality of the exchange policy. As the states were debating ratification during the winter of 1788, some anti-federalists charged that the post office was stopping their newspapers from being transported among the states and thus preventing delegates to the state conventions from reading their arguments against the Constitution. Eleazer Oswald, a Philadelphia printer, suggested that postmasters and post riders, “in violation of their duty and integrity have prostituted their offices to forward the nefarious design of enslaving their countrymen, by thus cutting off all communication by the usual vehicle between the patriots of America.”<sup>112</sup> For anti-federalists, having the post office at their disposal to circulate their dissenting arguments was particularly crucial. As Saul Cornell has argued, print was all that unified the anti-federalists because their political concerns about the Constitution were so diverse, and their economic and political background were so varied.<sup>113</sup>

Even William Goddard, the old adversary of despotic postal services, entered the fray. In February 1788 he wrote to Philadelphia publisher Mathew Carey to suggest that once again an opposition post office might be founded, this time to counter the one run by Congress. He also argued publicly that the new policies restricted the free flow of newspapers through the states, and reminded readers of his *Maryland Journal* that “A similar Measure, previous to the American Revolution, was very severely reprobated and resented throughout the Continent, as having a manifest Tendency to endanger Public Liberty, (as well as greatly to injure Individuals) by shutting up the Channels of Public Information.” He closed with a warning: “The present Post-Office Administration would do well to reflect on the Fate of their Predecessors.”<sup>114</sup> An

110. October 18, 1782, *JCC* 23: 677.

111. February 14, 1787, *JCC* 32: 55–6.

112. *Independent Gazetteer* (Philadelphia: Eleazer Oswald), January 16, 1788, in *Documentary History*, 16: 543.

113. Cornell, *The Other Founders*. See also Main, *The Anti-Federalists*.

114. William Goddard to Mathew Carey, February 28, 1788; *Maryland Journal*, February 29, 1788; both in *Documentary History*, 16: 553.

incendiary statement indeed, especially for a man whose sister served as postmistress in Baltimore, their shared city of residence.

Goddard did not follow through on his threat, which lacked the appeal it had engendered against the British Post Office in the 1770s for several reasons. First, printers as a group largely supported the new Constitution, which meant that opposition to the post office fizzled beyond a close group of friends.<sup>115</sup> Second, the castigation of the post office as an evil entity did not have rhetorical appeal for any established political group, as the Boston Committee of Correspondence had embraced Goddard's quest as part of its anti-imperial agenda in the 1770s. Finally, the Continental Congress did address the problem. In May 1788, Congress passed a resolution that reaffirmed that printers were "allowed to exchange their papers with each other by means of the public mail without any charge of postage," so long as the paper was dry, and the newspaper was not concealing any other letters or newspapers.<sup>116</sup> These debates only died away in 1792 when the second Federal Congress passed a Post Office Act that provided a broad and uniform policy for the shipment of newspapers through the mail. In so doing, it set the stage for the rapid expansion of the American communications infrastructure and ended disputes over the post office that had run through the entire eighteenth century.<sup>117</sup>

By establishing a standard policy, the 1792 Act effectively established newspapers as the main source of news in the United States and affirmed the post office as the main network for the circulation of political debate. With no apparatus on which to rely in between elections, partisans of the burgeoning Federalist and Republican parties utilized the news media to coordinate their activities and strategies. Because of the efforts of printers like Goddard during the Revolution, newspapers became the central focus of party activity in the 1790s, and printers and their networks the infrastructure for the news political parties.<sup>118</sup> Newspapers—traveling through the networks of post offices—also served as a forum in the public sphere for the development of American nationalism through accounts of public rituals such as parades, educational treatises, and political debates over such issues as the ratification of the Constitution and the Jay Treaty debates.<sup>119</sup> By the 1790s, therefore, printers had established their commercial interest as the arbiters of political news and debate.

115. Main, *Antifederalists*, 250–2.

116. May 7, 1788, *JCC* 34: 144.

117. John, *Spreading the News*, 31–42.

118. Pasley, "Tyranny of Printers"; Daniel, *Scandal & Civility*.

119. Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*; Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street*; Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers*; Estes, *The Jay Treaty Debate*.

The British imperial Post Office was but a shell of its former self by 1775. As a new infrastructure grew up around it, the imperial post office continued to operate, or at least attempt to do so. John Foxcroft and Hugh Finlay, who replaced Franklin as Deputy Postmaster General, continued through 1774 to hold board meetings, at which they commissioned new postmasters and attended to the system's finances. Foxcroft even appointed a new post rider to serve between Philadelphia and Baltimore—the very route that had sparked the controversy in the first place.<sup>120</sup> Packet boats continued to operate between Falmouth and New York through the fall of 1775. The Continental Congress debated in October of that year whether to shut down the imperial post, and though the idea enjoyed support from the most radical members, such as Samuel Adams, the Congress adopted the position of Robert Treat Paine of Massachusetts that “the ministerial post will die a natural death; it has been under a languishment a great while; it would be cowardice to issue a decree to kill that which is dying.”<sup>121</sup> In December 1775, the last packet sailed from New York, and the imperial post office was at an end in the rebellious colonies.<sup>122</sup>

Printers and their Patriot allies made the challenge against the British post office into a centerpiece of their resistance strategy after 1773. Their success hinged on the status of the post office as a nexus of political and commercial concerns and discourses. Printers and their political allies argued against the British post office as an oppressive imperial institution that limited the free circulation of news and correspondence. At the same time, printers were immediately concerned about the commercial viability of their businesses, which relied on the circuitry of the post to generate material for their newspapers and other publications. Without the post office, their newspapers would be barren. Although they anathematized the British post as “tyrannical”, they were quick to preserve much of its operational structure. Even so, the wartime post office lacked the organizational capacity to address properly the concerns of printers; the decentralized nature of administration from the Continental Congress on down and the paramount concern of communicating with the Continental Army obscured the news circulation function of the postal system. Establishing a new post office placed the levers of information circulation in the hands of Americans. Both printers and

120. “Minutes of proceedings of John Foxcroft and Hugh Finlay, Deputy Postmasters General, relative to regulating the postal service in North America”, Nov. 24, 1774, Miscellaneous Collections: U.S. States and Territories, MssCol 3103, NYPL; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 3, 1774, August 10, 1774.

121. Debate notes of John Adams, October 7, 1775, *JCC* III: 488–9.

122. Smith, *History of the Post Office*, 65.

the Congress vested the new post office with their own aspirations for producing and transmitting news throughout the new states. In addition, the patronage provided by the post office continued to be an enormous opportunity for printers, both in terms of the ability to receive and publish news more quickly and for the boost it provided to their families' finances. Forming a "continental" post office that could properly embody an intercolonial union and its resistance to imperial tyranny was crucial to Patriot mobilization at the height of the imperial crisis, and it would become a priority for the Continental Congress in 1775. For that, Patriot printers and their radical friends were primarily responsible.

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