

The News Was Old Before You Got It

The Challenge of Communicating in Colonial America



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Modern technology continues to surprise us with new ways of communicating. Cell phones, e-mail, faxes, web sites, online conferences, instant messaging, and “beaming” information between pda’s are all recent developments. But perhaps because there were fewer options available in the eighteenth century communications circuit, some of those options were exploited more fully in the 1770’s than they might be in the present day.

Most of the people residing in America in the year before the revolutionary identified themselves as English. Although they were eager for news from England, such information was rare. A letter from a relative or the return of a sailor or traveler would bring a report, but even then the “news” was likely to be less than fresh since the voyage from the mother country generally took at least three months (and during the winter months could not be made at all). A few members of the elite were willing to pay the expense of a subscription to an English newspaper or journal, and a few owners of taverns used their English publications as an enticement to prospective customers. Pay for your food and drink and get the news for free.

Cities and towns with active ports could get their news, whether in person, by mail, or in print via ship. For a broader dissemination of information, you needed an effective system of transportation and communication. This matter weighed heavily on the mind of Benjamin Franklin, who was busy attempting to establish a Society of Useful Knowledge in the hopes of bridging the gaps between the colonies by improving the circulation of information

The first Drudgery of Settling new Colonies, which confines the Attention of People to mere Necessaries, is now pretty well over; and there are many in every Province in Circumstances that set them at Ease, and afford Leisure to cultivate the finer Arts, and improve the common Stock of Knowledge. To such of these who are Men of Speculation, many Hints must from time to time arise, many Observations occur, which if well-examined, pursued and improved, might produce Discoveries to the Advan-

tage of some or all of the British Plantations, or to the Benefit of Mankind in general.

But ... from the Extent of the Country such Persons are widely separated, and seldom can see and converse or be acquainted with each other, so that many useful Particulars remain uncommunicated, die with the Discoverers, and are lost to Mankind...

One of Franklin’s Solutions to the “Old News” Problem

Franklin therefore proposed that “One Society be formed of Virtuosi or ingenious Men residing in the colonies,” and that their main job would be “to maintain a constant correspondence.” More specifically, they were to:

meet once a Month, or oftner, at their own Expence, to communicate to each other their Observations, Experiments, &c. to receive, read and consider such Letters, Communications, or Queries as shall be sent from distant Members; to direct the Dispersing of Copies of such Communications as are valuable, to other distant Members, in order to procure their Sentiments thereupon, &c.

It seems clear that Franklin was hoping to improve the intellectual -- and consequently practical -- conditions of America and to initiate a conversation among some of the leading figures of each colony so that they could become partners in a community of thought. Critical to the success of this plan, however, was the ability to convey letters to and from Philadelphia in a regular fashion. For this purpose, Franklin placed his hopes on the postal system, and hoped “That by Permission of the Postmaster-General, such Communications [would] pass between the Secretary of the Society and the Members, Postage-free.

Franklin's Other Solution: The Establishment of the American Postal System

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In 1710, the English Parliament passed the Post Office Act that called for the creation of a postal system in the American colonies. The network was designed to be controlled by the postmaster general of London with the aid of a deputy in New York City. This arrangement was altered in 1753 and Benjamin Franklin from Philadelphia and William Hunter of Virginia were appointed to serve jointly as postmasters general for the thirteen colonies.

The excerpt below from "Postal Services in the Colonies, 1592-1775," an article that appeared in March 1891 in *The Southern Philatelist* 2

The first Parliamentary Act for the establishment of a postoffice in the English American Colonies was passed in April, 1692, when a royal patent was granted to Thomas Neale for the purpose. He was to transport letters and packets 'at such rates as the planters should agree to give.'

Rates of postage were accordingly fixed and authorized, and measures were taken to establish a postoffice in each town in Virginia, when Hale [?] began his operations. Massachusetts and other Colonies soon passed postal laws, and a very imperfect postoffice system was established. Neale's patent expired in 1710, when Parliament extended the English postal system to the Colonies. The chief office was established in New York, where letters were conveyed by regular packets across the Atlantic.

A line of postoffices was soon after established on Neale's old routes, north to the present City of Portsmouth, N.H., and south to Philadelphia, and irregularly extended a few years later, to Williamsburg, Va. The post left for the South as often as letters enough were deposited to pay the expense. The rates were fixed, and the post-rider had certain privileges to travel. Finally an irregular postal communication was established with Charleston.

In 1753 Dr. Franklin was appointed Deputy Postmaster-General for the Colonies. It was a lucrative office, and he held it until 1774, when he was dismissed because of his active sympathy with the colonists in their quarrel with the Ministry. For a while the colonial postal system was in confusion. William Goddard, a printer, went from colony to colony, making efforts to establish a 'Constitutional Postoffice,' in opposition to the 'Royal Mail.'

When, in 1775, almost every vestige of royal power was swept from the Colonies, the Continental Congress appointed (July 26) Dr. Franklin Postmaster-General. In the autumn of 1776, when Independence had been declared, and Franklin sailed for France, the whole number of postoffices in the United States was 75; length of post routes, 1,875 miles; revenue for about fifteen months, \$27,985; annual expenditures, \$32,142. (pp. 87-88)

Conclusion

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The development of an effective circuit of communications was critical to the success of the revolution. For example, when the people of Boston met to discuss their concerns about the British embargo on imports into their harbor, the ideas generated by the meeting were committed to paper and sent to people throughout the colonies. Regular committees of correspondence were established and riders were assigned to carry documents between colonies. The effective exploitation of the postal system and other systems of communication enabled the revolutionary leaders to connect people who lived within distinctive cultures and dispersed across a vast landscape. This is what made it possible for Americans a shared way of looking at things and a sense of community that transcended local boundaries. This is, at least in part, what made it possible for people who had thought of themselves as "Englishmen" in America to come to see themselves as Americans.