

A Penny for Your Paper

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Introduction: The creation of the penny press paved the way for the modern daily newspaper.

- I. Colonial newspapers in America were different from those today.
 - A. They needed government authorization.
 - B. John Peter Zenger was tried for libel for criticizing the governor.
 - C. Freedom of the press became the focus of Zenger's trial.
- II. Early newspapers were different from ours in other ways, too.
 - A. Commercial papers had advertisements, ship schedules, product prices, money conversion tables.
 - B. Political papers contained stuffy political statements.
 - C. News in both types was out of date.
 - D. These papers were mainly for the wealthy.
- III. In the early 1800s, more people began to read newspapers.
 - A. They liked interesting items like the police court reports.
 - B. The nation was changing and growing.
 - C. The masses were ready for a new type of paper.

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Have you ever seen newsboys in a movie shouting “Extra! Extra! Read all about it!”? Have you ever wondered why newspapers include an entertainment section and an opinion page? Would you like to know who the first Washington news correspondent was? You can find answers to these questions by studying the start of the “penny press” in the 1830s. The creation of the penny press paved the way for the modern daily newspaper.

Before the Penny Press

Colonial newspapers in America were different from those today. For one thing, they could not be published without the approval of the government. In 1690, the publisher of the first newspaper in the colonies found this out the hard way. The government arrested him and destroyed all copies of his paper because he didn’t get proper approval. In another case, John Peter Zenger published articles in the New York Weekly Journal that criticized the governor. Authorities arrested Zenger and tried him for libel (Public). Freedom of the press became the focus of his

famous trial in 1735. He was eventually set free.

The early newspapers were different from ours in many other ways, too. Colonial papers were usually “4-page weeklies containing local ads, . . . local hearsay, and large, unedited chunks of . . . news from the London press” (Public). Even after the American Revolution, newspapers lacked interesting and timely news. Commercial papers “were filled with advertisements, ship schedules, . . . product prices, money conversion tables, and stale news,” and political papers “contained staid [stuffy] political discourses in addition to yesterday’s or last week’s or last month’s news” (Thompson 2). These newspapers were expensive and read mostly by wealthy citizens.

Because of increased literacy in the early 1800s, more people began to read newspapers. Common people paid special attention to the more interesting sections, especially the coverage of the police court (Thompson 2). This was also a time of great change for the nation. The country elected Andrew Jackson, the first unaristocratic president. More immigrants were entering the country, and cities were growing rapidly (Younes 14). The stage was set for the penny press, a new type of newspaper that would appeal to the masses.

The Rise of the Sun

In 1833, Benjamin Day, the owner of a printing company in New York, started the Sun, the first successful penny paper. Walking to work each day, he passed Chatham Street, where street vendors sold items for a penny (Thompson 8). Day thought he could make a penny newspaper to sell on the street. On September 3, 1833, he sold the first edition of the Sun. It was only a single sheet of paper, folded in the middle. On the front page, Day printed advertisements copied from other papers. The other three pages contained a mix of ads and news from other papers, two humorous tall tales, and the police report copied from the Courier & Enquirer (10–11). His paper was an instant success. Soon Day had enough new ads to make the paper profitable even with its penny price.

Day quickly realized that he needed help. While he managed the business, someone would have to attend the courts each day and write the police report. A man named George Wisner became Day's court reporter and partner (Thompson 13). Day and Wisner didn't always agree, and the paper reflected their different opinions (15–17). This debate of ideas set the Sun apart from the older, more conservative political newspapers.

Day also needed help selling the paper. He decided to use a system known as the "London plan." Under this

plan, he offered newspapers at a reduced rate to people who then sold their copies and pocketed the profit. The first person to join him was a 10-year-old boy. Before long, “newsboys” were selling the papers all over New York (Thompson 12–13), and the Sun became the most popular paper in the city.

The Trumpeting of the Herald

In 1835, James Gordon Bennett started another successful penny paper in New York called the Herald. Bennett had lived in many places, from Canada to South Carolina, and had gained valuable experience as a writer and an editor. Historians say that he was America’s first Washington news correspondent, for the New York Enquirer. These experiences helped prepare Bennett to start his own paper (Douglas 27–29). Bennett started out alone, in a dark cellar room, using a plank and two boxes as a desk. However, before long, the Herald would outsell the Sun. In fact, at its best, the Herald sold more copies worldwide than even the most respected European papers (Younes 16).

Bennett knew how to get the attention of readers. They liked the Herald because Bennett wrote opinion pieces that were “saucy, impertinent [disrespectful], and funny” (Thompson 34). Bennett also filled his paper with sensational news stories that made the Sun seem tame by comparison, and he placed these

stories on the front page to gain more attention. Many historians give Bennett the credit for the first “crisis news reporting,” based on his eyewitness news about New York City’s Great Fire of 1835 and his writing about the Jewett murder trial (Douglas 30). The Herald also quickly became the best source of Wall Street news (Thompson 59). Along with these stories, Bennett included entertainment news. All of these things helped make the Herald a great success.

The Conscience of the Tribune

In 1841, Horace Greeley started another penny newspaper in New York. It was called the Tribune. Like the Sun and the Herald, the Tribune relied on advertising for its main income, and it included sensational stories to attract readers. However, Greeley believed that a newspaper should do more than just make money. He thought it should keep people informed about important events and educate them about important ideas.

The Tribune gave readers crime stories and stories about local events, but it “downplayed sensational stories by placing them on inside pages” (Thompson 97). This paper also included poetry and literature by respected authors. Under Greeley’s direction, the Tribune showed “a social conscience in its news columns and reform-minded editorials” (98).