

The Press in North Carolina History

Nineteen ninety-eight marked the 125th anniversary of the founding of the North Carolina Press Association by a gathering of editors in Goldsboro. Almost 125 years before the organization began, James Davis started the long tradition of newspaper publishing in North Carolina with the publication of the *North Carolina Gazette* on August 9, 1751. In the face of wars, technological changes, and challenges to their freedom, North Carolina newspapers have retained great importance in the public life of the state.

The North Carolina Museum of History joined with the North Carolina Press Association to present 250 years of the rich heritage of *The Press in North Carolina History*. Read the updated version of that history below.

The Political Press

As early as the 1787 constitutional debates, North Carolina newspapers began to take sides on political issues. As the most important source of information, newspapers played a crucial role in the public life of the state. Political parties founded their own papers. Editors were political partisans, openly advocating one party or another. However, this tie to rather fragile political movements early in the nineteenth century made political papers equally frail. Many papers failed, were sold, or changed names as their political patrons fell from favor.

The most ominous political divide came later in the nineteenth century, over the issue of secession. North Carolina's newspapers supported secession by a two-to-one margin.

Portrait of a Journalist

William Swaim (1802–1835) - Although North Carolina native William Swaim lacked a formal education, he had a sharp wit and a keen mind and read voraciously. He apprenticed with a newspaper printer in Baltimore and soon became an assistant editor. Swaim returned to North Carolina, where he bought the *Patriot and Greensborough Palladium* in 1829.

Swaim openly espoused manumission of enslaved persons and constitutional reform "by revolution if necessary." His editorials delivered his opinions in straightforward language with much wit and sarcasm. Swaim's untimely accidental death prevented a long and productive journalism career.

Newspaper Focus

The *Fayetteville Observer-Times*: North Carolina's Oldest Newspaper

The *Carolina Observer* began publication in Fayetteville in 1816. In 1824 Edward Jones Hale bought the paper and transformed it into a Whig publication. The *Fayetteville Observer* opposed secession, but once the Civil War began, Hale supported the Confederate cause. General William T. Sherman's troops destroyed the press on March 11, 1865. Publication of the paper was discontinued, but it revived when Hale's son returned to Fayetteville from New York in 1883.

In 1923 the firm was purchased by W. J. McMurray of New York and incorporated as the Fayetteville Publishing Company. In 1977 the *Fayetteville Times* was started, and it combined with the *Observer* in 1990 to create the *Fayetteville Observer-Times*. The newspaper later returned to its original name, *Fayetteville Observer*.

The Political Press in the Kirk-Holden War

During the post-Civil War Reconstruction era, bitter recriminations exchanged by rival Raleigh newspapers fueled the so-called Kirk-Holden War. Josiah Turner's *Sentinel* fiercely opposed the policies of Republican governor William W. Holden and accused his administration of despotism and corruption. The *North Carolina Standard*, formerly published by Holden, defended him and accused Turner's Democratic supporters of lawlessness and of having ties to the Ku Klux Klan.

The rivalry played out during the election season of 1870 in the form of violence, widespread arrests, and martial law. The Republicans lost the election of 1870, which enabled the new Democratic General Assembly to impeach Holden and remove him from office. Ironically, without each other as foils, both newspapers failed.

Portrait of a Journalist

William Woods Holden (1818–1892) - William W. Holden combined two careers: journalism and politics. In 1842 Holden purchased the *North Carolina Standard* in Raleigh and began to contribute articles that staunchly supported minorities and reform. He became the journalistic voice of the Democratic Party in the state.

After the Civil War, Holden helped to create the Republican Party in North Carolina and was elected governor in 1868. During his administration, he worked to rebuild the state's reputation. However, he was caught in the vicious conflicts between Democrats and Republicans during Reconstruction and was impeached. He returned to journalism, writing for Charlotte and Raleigh newspapers.

Making a Newspaper

Improvements in Technology - The arrival of steam-powered presses by 1852 and the rotary press by 1865 increased the speed of newspaper production from two hundred to thousands of pages per hour. The new printing presses could also print on both sides of the paper at once.

Other technological advances such as the typewriter made the journalist's job easier. However, the telegraph changed journalism more than any other innovation, making instantaneous news transmission possible. Within ten years of the telegraph's 1844 introduction, 23,000 miles of telegraph wire spanned the country. "Wire services" such as the Associated Press began to deliver national news quickly to local papers.

Journalism Becomes a Profession

In the early days of North Carolina newspapers, the printer handled all the jobs. He served as reporter, writer, and editor as well as printer. As newspapers grew in size and complexity during the first half of the 1800s, these tasks began to separate. And as the public increasingly placed importance on newspapers, editors' influence in their communities grew.

Since the 1700s, journalists had come from professions that required education, such as teaching and the clergy. But as journalists' tasks became increasingly sophisticated, the need for professional standards and formalized training in the field became apparent. In 1909 the English Department of the University of North Carolina taught its first class in journalism. By 1924 journalism had developed into a separate department. Under the guidance of O. J. "Skipper" Coffin, the department became the School of Journalism in 1950.

Portrait of a Journalist

Oscar Jackson "Skipper" Coffin (1887–1956) - As the first dean of the School of Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, O. J. Coffin was something of a maverick. He preferred that the school's professors teach from experience, not from a textbook. Coffin quoted the Bible frequently, and his determination to use proper English made him a respected journalist and teacher.

Before his tenure at the university, Coffin worked as a reporter for the *Asheboro Courier*, a sports editor for the *Winston-Salem Journal*, and news editor for the *Charlotte Observer*.

Making a Newspaper

Printing Presses Come of Age

In 1885 Ottmar Mergenthaler invented the linotype machine, which used a series of matrices to cast type a line at a time, instead of a letter at a time as typesetters had done theretofore. This revolutionary method of composition is called hot type because it required that the type be cast from molten lead. The innovation decreased the amount of time it took to compose a page, thus enabling a newspaper to delay its press time.

Linotype machines cast the lines into curved printing plates, which fit on a rotary press. Instead of just one page at a time, newspapers could print up to sixteen pages in a single impression.

Public Service

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of North Carolina journalism is its dedication to public service. In the early 1800s, newspapers supported the campaign for internal improvements. In the early 1900s, they supported Governor Charles B. Aycock's education program and the Good Roads movement. Papers such as William Saunders's Elizabeth City *Independent* openly challenged the Ku Klux Klan.

By the turn of the century, North Carolina boasted a strong community of thriving black-owned newspapers. These papers advocated public service, civil rights, and other progressive causes.

It is no coincidence that of the ten Pulitzer Prizes awarded to North Carolina newspapers, six have been awarded for public service.

Portrait of a Journalist

John Campbell Dancy Jr. (1857–1920) - Born to the family of a former slave, John C. Dancy Jr. became a political activist and an important voice for the North Carolina Republican Party. Dancy began his newspaper career in his teens as a typesetter at the *Tarboro Southerner*, later attending Howard University. Returning to journalism in 1882, Dancy founded and served as editor of the *North Carolina Sentinel* in Tarboro until invited in 1885 to become editor of the *Star of Zion* in Salisbury.

Dancy became increasingly active in politics and served as a delegate to the Republican national conventions in 1884 and 1888. In 1891 he received the prized political appointment of customs collector for the port of Wilmington.

Newspaper Focus

The *Watauga Democrat*: Excellence in the Mountains

The *Watauga Democrat*, a weekly publication from Boone, is Watauga County's oldest business. The *Watauga Democrat* was founded in 1888 by Joseph Spainhour and John S. Williams. On July 4, 1889, R. C. Rivers Sr. and D. B. Dougherty bought the paper. But by the end of the year, Rivers had become sole owner.

The elder Rivers was succeeded as publisher by his son, R. C. Rivers Jr., and granddaughter, Rachel Rivers Coffey and her husband Armfield Coffey. The newspaper has won several awards for excellence in community journalism. The NC Scholastic Media Association awards for outstanding young journalist are named for Rachel Rivers Coffey. Jones Media Inc. currently owns the *Watauga Democrat* and other northwestern North Carolina publications.

Challenges

For 150 years no media existed that seriously challenged newspapers' supremacy as providers of information to the public. But beginning about 1910, theater newsreels and, later, radio news broadcasts began to do just that. In the 1950s, television arose as the most serious challenge to newspaper dominance.

Although television programming reduced newspaper circulation and lured advertisers away, the surviving papers adapted to the new environment. Improved technologies allowing better photographs, color designs, and eventually color photographs enabled newspapers to continue to compete. Publishers changed their content to include more local news, human-interest material, lifestyle stories, and other entertaining sections.

Nationally, newspapers economized by expanding syndicated columns. North Carolina papers seemed resistant to this trend and continued to include a large number of locally written columns.

Portrait of a Journalist

Joseph Pearson Caldwell (1853–1911) - Joseph P. Caldwell, a Statesville native, had no formal education. Instead, he learned his craft at various Piedmont newspapers. At the age of fourteen, Caldwell worked as an apprentice at the *Iredell Express*. Thus began a journalism career that culminated in Caldwell's 1892 purchase, with business partner Daniel A. Tompkins, of the newspaper that they named the *Charlotte Observer*.

Caldwell and Tompkins worked to establish the paper as one of the most respected in North Carolina. Many of Caldwell's colleagues considered him "the greatest in his profession in the state."

Making a Newspaper

The Wave of the Future

During the late 1970s and the 1980s, newspapers experienced the biggest technological revolution of the twentieth century. Cold type, a new method of printing, exploded onto the scene. Instead of using molten lead to cast printing plates, composers pasted completed stories onto pages. They then photographed the pages and burned the images onto flexible plates for printing.

In the late 1980s, newspapers began installing computers in their newsrooms. Reporters and editors now use computers to compose and edit stories and to lay out and print pages. Many newspapers have their own Web sites. Readers with Internet capabilities can access them from around the world. In addition, the increased quality of newspaper photographs and the use of color printing have drastically changed the look of newspapers.

A Free Press

From the very beginnings of their state, North Carolinians recognized the importance of a free press. The Halifax Resolves of 1776 emphatically state that "a free press is the bulwark of all our liberties."

Over the years, however, the press has faced restrictions on its freedom. For nearly twenty years, North Carolina newspapers, led by the *Raleigh News and Observer*, struggled to gain greater access to government. Through the 1950s and 1960s, the press battled legislative secrecy. In 1973 the General Assembly opened all meetings to reporters, without restrictions. During the same period, the North Carolina Press Association fought to gain access to courtroom proceedings. This work established today's standards for courtroom reporting.

Portrait of a Journalist

Rena Bingham Lassiter (1886–1960) - In 1908 Rena Bingham married Thomas Lassiter, half-owner and editor of the *Smithfield Herald*, a leading semiweekly. Lassiter died in 1920, and his widow assumed leadership of the newspaper. Rena Lassiter managed the paper alone until her two sons, William and Thomas, joined her in the 1930s.

The *Smithfield Herald* twice won the Savory Loving Cup for news coverage, editorial work, and community service. William and Thomas Lassiter played prominent roles in the press's fight against government secrecy in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The McClatchey chain now operates the newspaper.

Acknowledgments

North Carolina Press Association - 125th Anniversary Committee

Gayle Smith, Chairman, *Charlotte Observer*, Charlotte; Margit Blekfeld-Sztraky, *Smoky Mountain Sentinel*, Hayesville; Jeffrey Byrd, *Tryon Daily Bulletin*, Tryon; Morgan Dickerson III, *Wilson Daily Times*, Wilson; Joe Doster, West End; Ambrose Dudley, Associated Press, Raleigh; Bill Foster, *King Times-News*, King; Brownie Futrell, *Washington Daily News*, Washington; Kate Henry, *Graham Star*, Robbinsville; Jason Lesley, *Salisbury Post*, Salisbury; Scott Scheer, Isothermal Community College, Spindale; George Summerlin, *Mount Airy News*, Mount Airy; Hal Tarleton, *Wilson Daily Times*, Wilson; Roberta Wilson, *Shelby Star*, Shelby; David Woronoff, *Pilot*, Southern Pines; Carl Worsley, Rocky Mount; Ramon Yarborough, *Fayetteville Observer-Times*, Fayetteville

North Carolina's Pulitzer Prize–Winning Newspapers

Meritorious Public Service

1953: *Whiteville News-Reporter* and *Tabor City Tribune*, for coverage of and editorial stands against the Ku Klux Klan

1971: *Winston-Salem Journal and Sentinel*, for a series on environmental preservation

1981: *Charlotte Observer*, for a series on tobacco and brown lung disease

1988: *Charlotte Observer*, for reporting on television evangelist Jim Bakker and his PTL ministry

1990: *Washington Daily News*, for coverage of cancer-causing chemicals tainting the area's drinking water

1996: *Raleigh News and Observer*, for coverage of growth of the corporate hog farms in Eastern North Carolina, their threat to the environment, and the influence the industry has wielded over state regulators and legislators

Criticism or Commentary

1983: Claude Sitton, *Raleigh News and Observer*

1989: Michael Skube, *Raleigh News and Observer*

Editorial Cartooning

1968: Eugene Gray Payne, *Charlotte Observer*

1988: Doug Marlette, *Charlotte Observer*, *Atlanta Constitution*

The North Carolina Museum of History and the North Carolina Press Association thank the following individuals and institutions for their help in research for this exhibit.

Roy Parker Jr., *Fayetteville Observer*; Daisy Maxwell, *Fayetteville Observer*; Dr. Barbara Semonche, School of Journalism, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Timothy Pyatt, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Sandy Cook, Newspapers in Education Program, North Carolina Press Association; Cape Fear Museum; State Archives, North Carolina Division of Archives and History; Marion Paynter, *Charlotte Observer*; Chris Hardesty, *News and Observer*; Sue Hendricks, *Winston-Salem Journal*; Jill Ford, *Greensboro News and Record*; North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Kim Hord, *Wilmington Star*

North Carolina Museum of History Staff

Allen Hoilman, Curator; Sandra Hasson-McEwen, Designer; Obelia Exum, Graphic Designer; Kelly Eubank, Researcher; Ellen Fitzgibbons, Researcher; Rachel Yahn, Researcher.

Prepared with support from the North Carolina Press Association on its 125th anniversary, and updated in 2007.