

Charlotte Observer ^[1]

Charlotte Observer

by Wiley J. Williams, 2006

The *Charlotte Observer*, founded in 1869, has the largest circulation of any [newspaper](#) ^[2] in North Carolina. A consistent advocate of economic progress in [Charlotte](#) ^[3] and the surrounding region, the paper, in the mid-twentieth century, also became a strong voice for racial and gender equality in the South.



Charlotte Observer building, 1951. Image from [Archive.org](#).

^[4]At the close of the [Civil War](#) ^[5], four Confederate veterans and now-unemployed printers moved to Charlotte from nearby towns and began doing business as Smith, Watson & Company. Their firm first issued the *Observer* on 25 Jan. 1869. Unlike many other newspapers, this publication was politically independent and tended to avoid the controversies of the day. Nevertheless, the paper clearly disapproved of [Reconstruction](#) ^[6], the policies of Reconstruction governor [William W. Holden](#) ^[7], and the [Fourteenth](#) ^[8] and Fifteenth Amendments. From the beginning, the *Observer* linked its future to that of Charlotte and the [Piedmont](#) ^[9] Carolinas.

In September 1872 James H. Smith, the last of the four founding printers to retain an interest in the *Observer*, sold the paper to Johnstone Jones, a lawyer and newspaper publisher. Jones's [progressive](#) ^[10] editorials promoted industry and commerce, public schools, and public improvements. They envisioned a reviving South, a conception soon embraced in the New South creed pioneered by Henry W. Grady's *Atlanta Constitution* and Henry Watterson's *Louisville Courier-Journal*. Jones also introduced [telegraphic](#) ^[11] news, replaced a hand press with a rotary press, and, by hiring Joseph P. Caldwell as city editor in 1872, greatly enhanced local and regional news coverage.

In the depths of the depression caused by the panic of 1873, the *Observer* was sold in the spring of 1874 to Col. Charles R. Jones and Fred H. Pendleton. Restless under the stand-pat policies of state [Democrats](#) ^[12], Jones editorially applauded the rise of independent journals across the country and the advantage they enjoyed over party newspapers. He continued to openly fight against Democratic leadership and early in 1886 announced his candidacy for Congress as an Independent. Acting on the advice of Democratic leaders, William S. Hemby founded the *Charlotte Chronicle* (March 1886) as an evening alternative to the morning *Observer*. Hemby's paper soon switched to a morning daily in order to compete directly against Jones and the *Observer*. The strategy worked, and the *Observer* ceased publication on 1 Aug. 1887.

When the *Chronicle's* fortunes began to decline, the paper was sold (in January 1892) to Joseph Caldwell, the former city editor of the old *Observer*, and Daniel A. Tompkins, an engineer, financier, and promoter. On 13 Mar. 1892 the *Chronicle* appeared without warning as the *Charlotte Daily Observer*. With Caldwell as editor and Tompkins as publisher, the *Observer* underwent an expansion that propelled it from country reporting to modern journalism. The two men recruited a staff of fine writers and reporters; installed the latest news-gathering and printing equipment; broadened coverage to include [books](#) ^[13], music, drama, finance, [architecture](#) ^[14], and [medicine](#) ^[15]; and made their paper a vigorous advocate of education and industrialism. They promoted manufacturing but opposed [labor unions](#) ^[16], urged a diverse agriculture but rejected the agrarian [Populists](#) ^[17] (who supported William Jennings Bryan for president), and befriended individual blacks but endorsed white supremacy laws that denied blacks the right to vote and ultimately produced a harsh segregation. Caldwell, as editor, maintained extremely high editorial standards, and by 1904 the *Observer* was considered the state's

best newspaper.

In June 1912, a few months after Caldwell's death, Wade Harris ^[18] was appointed the paper's editor, a position he held until his own death in 1935. His editorials, however, were never as forceful as Caldwell's; often they were mere news summaries with scant opinion. After Tompkins died in October 1914, the paper was briefly owned by two bankers, George Stephens ^[19] and Word H. Wood, founders of the American Trust Company. They sold the *Observer* in 1916 to Curtis B. Johnson, owner of the *Knoxville Sentinel* and widely admired as a conservative southern publisher. (That year, "Daily" was also dropped from the paper's name.) Under Johnson, the *Charlotte Observer* became the largest newspaper in the Carolinas, with circulation rising from nearly 13,000 daily (over 16,000 on Sundays) in 1916 to about 134,000 at the time of the publisher's death on 6 Oct. 1950. Johnson made these gains by modernizing the paper's plant, expanding its delivery system (and consequently enhancing Charlotte's reputation as a distribution center), and improving its news coverage and features. His efforts to make the *Observer* the newspaper of record in the Carolinas earned it the appellation "the *New York Times* of the South."



Charlotte Observer building, 2008. Image from Flickr user juggernautco (Daniel X. O'Neill).

^[20]Johnson's widow then assumed active leadership of the *Observer*. At her urging, it became one of a handful of southern newspapers to react positively to the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* on 17 May 1954. The paper's call for compliance was another step in its long, slow departure from the South's oppression of blacks, and it helped to strengthen the climate for moderation in Charlotte.

In 1955 the *Observer* was bought by Knight Newspapers, Inc. (which became Knight-Ridder Newspapers in 1974), for \$7.5 million, becoming one of several North Carolina papers owned by large conglomerates. From 1955 to 1990 the *Observer* supplied editorial and managerial talent to many other newspapers across the country, including chief executive officers for Knight-Ridder and McClatchy chains; publishers in Philadelphia, Akron, Providence, Winston-Salem ^[21], and Anderson, S.C.; and editors in Wichita, Miami, Philadelphia, and other cities.

The *Charlotte Observer*, through its constant promotion, has helped make Charlotte a business capital and the largest city in the Carolinas. The paper has also received high praise from the journalism community, receiving four Pulitzer Prizes ^[22]—two for meritorious public service (its 1981 series on brown lung disease, which afflicted textile workers in the Charlotte area, and its 1988 coverage of the scandal surrounding the "Praise the Lord" ministry of Jim and Tammy Bakker). In the early 2000s the *Observer* had a daily circulation of about 235,500 (291,000 on Sundays), 1,200 employees, 5 regional bureaus in North Carolina (Hickory, Gastonia, Concord, Monroe, and Statesville), a regional bureau in York, S.C., and offices in Raleigh, Columbia, S.C., and Washington, D.C.

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Additional Resources:

The Charlotte Observer official website: <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/> ^[23]

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"Modern home of The Charlotte Observer, State's largest newspaper. Recent extensive renovation and equipment cost in excess of a million dollars. Further enlargement of the building is planned." *The E.S.C. Quarterly* 9. No. 1-2. Winter-Spring 1951. p.24. <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/e.s.c.-quarterly-1951-winter-spring-v.9-no.1-2/4239121> [24] (accessed September 11, 2012).

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