

Newspapers Part 2: Political Affiliations of Nineteenth-Century Newspapers

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Newspapers

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Political Affiliations of Nineteenth-Century Newspapers

The promotion of [political causes and parties](#)^[5] by North Carolina's newspapers began in earnest in the late 1780s, when debate over the ratification of the U.S. Constitution was at its peak. In the succeeding decades, numerous papers were founded to serve as organs for political, economic, and religious interests, becoming primary participants in the state's public life. Because many newspapers were subsidized by political parties or by partisan organizations, they experienced an enormous turnover in ownership. Moreover, it was not unusual for publications to fail once their political cause had become obsolete. After about 1820, newspapers began to change and expand, putting less emphasis on foreign affairs and focusing on timely state and national news, which was obtained mainly through the mail. Expansion of the federal postal system, in fact, greatly aided newspaper circulation. In 1832 about 75,000 copies of North Carolina papers were published every week, and several editors also served as [postmasters](#)^[6].


One of the first politically significant newspapers in the state was the *Raleigh Register and North Carolina Weekly Advertiser*, founded in 1799 by [Joseph Gales](#)^[7], who had moved to North Carolina from Pennsylvania. The *Raleigh Register* became known as a leading political voice, first for the [Republican Party](#)^[8] and later for the [Whig Party](#)^[9], as well as for its publishing innovations. It became the state's first semiweekly in 1823 and its first daily in 1850; it ceased publication in 1868.

The newspapers that were started to espouse Whig politics during the early to mid-1800s included the *Fayetteville Observer*^[10] (1816), established by several [Fayetteville](#)^[11] citizens and later acquired by Edward Jones Hale, who used it as an organ of the Whig Party; the *North Carolina Whig* (Charlotte, 1852-63); and the *North State Whig* (Washington, N.C., 1843-54). Influential [Democratic](#)^[12] newspapers from this era were the *North Carolinian* (Fayetteville, 1841-63); the *Raleigh Standard* (1834-70), founded by Philo White and later acquired by [William Woods Holden](#)^[13], who used it as a powerful organ of the Democratic Party and later the [Conservative Party](#)^[14]; the *Western Sentinel* (Winston, 1852-1926); and the *Daily Journal* (Wilmington, 1844-95).

Some papers began to publish more articles of general interest to families, such as agriculture, homemaking, literature, and local happenings. A leader among these "family" papers was the *Western Democrat* ([Charlotte](#)^[15], 1852-97), founded by Rufus M. Herron and Robert P. Waring. Other papers were created to support specific causes, such as the *Spirit of the Age* (Raleigh, 1849-71), a temperance organ established by Alexander M. Gorman for the North Carolina Sons of Temperance chapter, and the *Western Carolinian*^[16] (Salisbury, 1820-44), which advocated equal representation for western counties in the [General Assembly](#)^[17].

As the number of newspapers increased and higher circulation rates were achieved, North Carolinians began to rely on the press for information and editorial opinion on a wide variety of statewide and community issues. In 1827 the first railroad in the state was proposed, for example, in a series of columns titled "[Numbers of Carlton](#)^[18]," which appeared in local newspapers before being published as a book in 1828. Through continuing newspaper promotion and agitation, the idea came to fruition in 1849 with the formation of the [North Carolina Railroad](#)^[19], built with \$2 million in state money and \$1 million in private funds. Construction was completed in 1856. When [telegraph](#)^[20] poles appeared beside the tracks, communication within the state was greatly enhanced. The development of a state system of [public education](#)^[21] (for white males only), changes in the court system, and mill labor reform were among other ideas promulgated in newspaper editorials during this period.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, [slavery](#)^[22] was not a frequent topic in most North Carolina papers. The majority of editors viewed it as a regional matter and avoided taking a position. But as [secession](#)^[23] became more probable, the issue bitterly divided North Carolinians, including newspaper editors. Their opinions essentially split along party lines, with most Democratic editors favoring secession and most Whig editors opposing it.

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