

Newspapers Part 1: North Carolina's First Newspapers ^[1]

Newspapers

by Edwin H. Mammen, 2006; Revised December 2021

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See also: [Carolina Peacemaker](#) ^[2]; [Charlotte Observer](#) ^[3]; [Fayetteville Observer](#) ^[4]; [Greensboro News and Record](#) ^[5]; [North Carolina Press Association](#) ^[6]; [North-Carolina Gazette; Raleigh News and Observer](#) ^[7]; [Wilmington Star](#) ^[8]; [Winston-Salem Journal](#) ^[9].

Part 1: North Carolina's First Newspapers, [Part 2: Political Affiliations of Nineteenth-Century Newspapers](#) ^[10], [Part 3: An Expanding Press Champions Economic and Social Progress](#) ^[11], [Part 4: Changing Technologies, New Voices, and the Trend toward Corporate Ownership](#) ^[12]

Newspapers, although appearing later in North Carolina than in the other original British colonies, over time became a vibrant social and political force that helped shape the state's enduring reputation as a progressive southern state. Thanks in part to strong competition among newspapers in the many small towns and medium-sized cities that were characteristic of the state until the late twentieth century, the North Carolina press produced several generations of talented journalists, some of whom moved on to national prominence as reporters, editors, cartoonists, or commentators. Following a widespread trend, over time ownership and management of the state's newspapers moved from initial control by smaller, local printers to wealthy family publishers and ultimately to powerful corporate conglomerates. These stages reflect the increasing costs of recruiting talent, gathering news, and printing and distributing papers in a media market with tastes and interests that have become increasingly national and international. As costs have risen and conglomerates have gained greater control, the number of newspapers has declined, leaving them (like radio and television) in the hands of fewer owners. Although it has been argued that these developments have adversely affected quality and uniqueness, the press in North Carolina continues to maintain a central position in the dissemination of news, information, and editorial opinion.


North Carolina's First Newspapers

By the time the first newspaper was published in North Carolina in the mid-eighteenth century, 11 other colonies already had publications. Because it was a frontier colony, its population was widely scattered on farms and plantations; there were no large towns or well-defined community centers. Illiteracy on the frontier also delayed the demand for printed matter. But by midcentury, New Bern, the unofficial capital, had become a town of some size and the colonial Assembly urgently needed a [printer](#) ^[13] to distribute newly revised laws. In 1749 the lawmakers found one in Virginian [James Davis](#) ^[14], who accepted their five-year contract and moved his printing press to New Bern to reproduce the colony's legal paper and currency. Two years later, on 9 Aug. 1751, he published the first issue of the [North-Carolina Gazette](#) ^[7]. Four other versions of this newspaper would appear before 1798.

At the start of the [Revolutionary War](#) ^[15], five different newspapers were in circulation, including [Adam Boyd](#) ^[16]'s [Cape-Fear Mercury](#) (1769-75 ^[17]), but they all eventually failed, leaving the state without a single paper between 1778 and 1783. Soon, however, a minor renaissance began with the introduction of new printed matter, including Hillsborough's [North Carolina Gazette](#) in 1785, the [Edenton Intelligencer](#) in 1788, the [Fayetteville Gazette](#) in 1789, the [Halifax North Carolina Journal](#) in 1792, and Salisbury's [North Carolina Mercury and Salisbury Advertiser](#) in 1797.

Most of these early newspapers consisted of foreign dispatches from several weeks to several months old, poetry, farming tips, and items copied from other publications. Local news was largely confined to obituaries and [wedding](#) ^[18] announcements; [horse races](#) ^[19] and [cockfights](#) ^[20]—both popular sports of the time—were also widely covered. In small-town colonial North Carolina, everyone already knew the local news before a newspaper was printed. Appearing only weekly, early papers were sidelines to other businesses such as printing, book selling, and retail sales of various imported merchandise.

[Advertisements](#) ^[21] during this era were mostly legal notices and announcements of the arrival of new merchandise. Seldom did a display ad appear; many merchants, as well as lawyers and physicians, had their business cards printed in the newspaper. Subscription rates and postage costs were extremely high, and most readers picked up their copies of the news at the printing shop. High costs and scattered populations in small communities led to low circulation rates. Indeed, circulation of the various versions of New Bern's [North-Carolina Gazette](#) seldom reached 150 copies.

Keep reading >>[Part 2: Political Affiliations of Nineteenth-Century Newspapers](#) ^[10]  ^[10]

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