

North Carolina's first newspaper

Nicholas Graham, "August 1751: North Carolina's First Newspaper," *This Month in North Carolina History*, August 2004.

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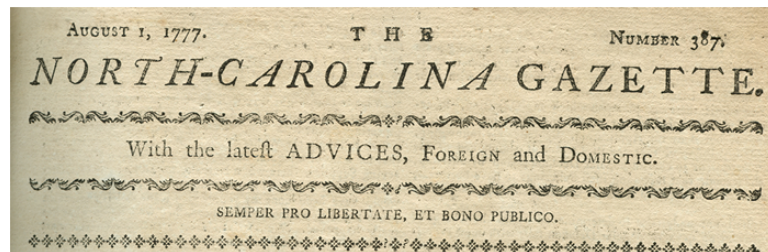


Figure 1.

It took a long time for the news to reach North Carolina.

The first American printing press began operation in Massachusetts in 1638, with the first newspaper in the colonies published in Boston in 1690. North Carolina, which lacked the busy ports and bustling commercial centers of many of the other colonies, was a little slower to develop. Early eighteenth-century North Carolinians had to wait weeks and in most cases months for their news to arrive in papers from Northern cities or from England. Even when newspapers were established in South Carolina in 1732 and Virginia in 1736, North Carolinians did not rush to establish a press. It was not until 1749, when the legislature decided that the colony needed a press of its own to print currency and laws, that James Davis, an experienced printer from Virginia, was hired and brought to set up shop in New Bern. Later that year Davis issued his first title, "The journal of the House of Burgesses of the Province of North-Carolina," the first work to be printed in North Carolina.

Davis served as official printer of the colony for thirty-three years, though his work was not limited to official publications. In August 1751 he published the first issue of *The North Carolina Gazette*, North Carolina's first newspaper. Although it looks very different from the papers we're used to today, the *Gazette* was a typical eighteenth-century newspaper. It contained a wide range of articles, many reprinted from other papers. Essays, laws, and unsigned or pseudonymous editorials took up the first couple of pages. Local news, if it was included at all, was often relegated to inside pages, and advertisements and

announcements appeared throughout. Although the Gazette offered, according to its masthead, “the freshest Advices, Foreign and Domestic¹,” the freshness of the news was debatable. A typical issue might include stories reprinted from other papers as many as four or five months old.

After the Gazette was established, newspapers began to appear slowly across the state, with other papers founded in the larger eastern cities of Wilmington, Fayetteville, and Halifax. By the end of the eighteenth-century, Hillsborough, Raleigh, and even Salisbury, in what was then considered the far western end of the state, had newspapers.

North Carolina has come a long way from having just one newspaper for the state. The North Carolina Collection holds at least one copy, often on microfilm, of more than two thousand different papers that have been published in the state from the 1750s through today. Although many of today’s papers show up in other formats — online versions are increasingly common and microfilm has been used in libraries for decades — publishers continue to produce paper copies, and are showing no signs of ending the tradition of newspaper printing in North Carolina.

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Notes

1. *Advices* meant not pieces of advice in the modern sense but something more like *advisories* — the newspaper advised people, informed them or even warned them, about what was going on in the world. *Domestic* means having to do with home, in this case the home colony of North Carolina, the colonies generally, or perhaps the British Empire, depending on how big the publisher felt “home” was.

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From the North Carolina Gazette, August 1, 1777. This image is believed to be in the public domain. Users are advised to make their own copyright assessment.