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The American Newspaper Press.



by H. B. Ridgway.

Delivered at the commencement of Dick^r. Col July 12. 1849.

The American Newspaper Press.

(delivered by R. B. Ridgway at the Commencement of 1849.)

The precise time the first Newspaper was established in the U States does not readily occur to me. The second however was first issued by James Franklin a printer of Boston, in 1721. To its columns articles, serious gay instructive and polemic were contributed by the literati of Boston. A small apprentice boy occasionally contributed; and to avoid discovery wrote his pieces in a disguised hand and slipped them during the night under the door of the office. It was one morning when the Critics in their comments referred these disguised articles to men of the first talent in Community, that Benjamin Franklin first felt the kindling of that mighty genius and holy ambition which afterward "snatched lightning from heaven and the sceptre from tyrants." In a few years the same printer's boy is editing with great spirit and energy a journal at Phila. In 1720 the Colonies have 9 newspapers and in 1830 the independent States 1000 - so that the 13 millions of the U. States have more newspapers than the 197 millions of Europe. Allowing such an increase as the very rapid progress of our country for the last 19 years will justify, what must be the number now published? Apart from our great cities every country town has its two or three organs. A distinguished French citizen now in America has advertised for the copy of every paper in the U. States printed immediately preceding the 4th of July; should they all be bound up in one volume it would nearly require the might of the angel of Apocalipta to open the book and loose the seals thereof. From true Statistics, it is evident our countrymen in journals as in every thing else have manifested the same spirit of enterprise. The drop has

increased to streams ramifying the whole nation till you can approach no village however obscure, and attempt a display of your "news knowledge", but you are met by the leveling words "Yes I read about it in the papers". With these plain but startling facts before us the inquiry naturally arises - What is the nature of this element which has insinuated itself into the very being of the people? American newspapers and are American ideas - what then is their character? Not what reputation have they in the eyes of prejudiced foreigners - Not what the abusive and scurrilous epithets of harping tourists make them - but what are they as we know them? We all take the public prints, do they come to us as friends or enemies? Bringing life or death - darkness or light? Let this question of fact be answered. They come laden with intelligence, local and foreign, alive with scientific and political discussions in their nature awakening, quickening & energizing - warning the people of impending danger and showing the way of escape - pointing out the most effectual means of supplying wants and gratifying taste. They come sparkling with gems of wit and genius and fearlessly advocating what they believe true, they come the guardians of human rights, the main spring to all improvements. One chief element in the character of our press is its freedom, and by this is not meant licentious freedom, but that sacred prerogative purchased by blood a prerogative dear as life itself. Their freedom gives a majestic air of fearlessness to ^{our public organs} ~~their columns~~ without which

they would be worse than useless appendages to our growing institutions. That this prerogative is often perverted and that many of our papers instead of teaching the people the science of government inculcate partyism which with its blighting curse withers the noblest impulses of generous nature is a lamentable truth; but because of this abuse shall the press be sealed up and its daily evolution prohibited?

We have already anticipated the influence of the press while discussing its character, and this could not have been well avoided, because character and influence though distinct in themselves like objects and relations are never separated. The lucubrations of the press are the people's thinking aloud; therefore in proportion as the thoughts of the people are just and sound will the press be effective and useful. This soundness and justness of thought can be greatly promoted by a free medium of communication. Let the channel of thought be unobstructed and because the people are honest we need have no fears as to the result. It is for truth the great masses are struggling. But what have our daily and weekly sheets been effecting and what are they still effecting. 30 years ago, a missionary about embarking for India, remarked that the day would probably come when newspapers would be employed for the diffusion of religious intelligence. That seemed almost a prophetic prediction; but it has come to pass in this our generation that every department of enterprise plans the establishment of an organ through which its objects and interests are made known among the earliest of its arrangements. We have even seen the Quaker City gotten up for the exclusive object of the diffusion of Apperdaian literature. Theodore Parker

recently said that there is more printed matter in news-
paper form alone in Boston in 2 weeks than all the manu-
scripts in the world at the time of the invention of printing.
Now allow each great city its due proportion and we ask
what becomes of this great mass of light? It penetrates
the body politic, so that society becomes a High School
of mutual educators pervaded by the sunshine of
general illumination and forever stimulated by fresh
influxes of truth wherein young and old rich and poor,
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telligence of our people bears a remarkable contrast
to the gross ignorance of those nations where an unjust
censorship presides over the press. Free and enlightened
discussion is elevating in its tendency. Let the sword
of fiery intellectual combat be brandished, and while
it scathes and scatters the vestiges of error, truth shall
be rendered more effective. When the Great Battery of
political intrigue charged at Washington shall send
its venomous currents through through the masses, - its
phenomena will be blazed in every public organ. No
measure goes into operation in this Country without being
previously well pressed. Who then we are forced to ask would
impose upon the American press a censorship? Who will
quench in the waters of eternal night this great source
of light? Who will hush forever this great voice of
the people? At the very moment the attempt is made
millions of freemen will receive the thrilling words of
Whittier, "Now, when padlocks for our lips are forging
silence is a crime."

Commencement Oration of Henry B. Ridgaway, Class of 1849
Transcribed by Michael M. Geduldig, November 2006
Edited by Don Sailer, September 2009

The American Newspaper Press

(delivered by H. B. Ridgaway at the Commencement of 1849)

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