

A Survey of Middletown
Newspapers
In the 1820's

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Thomas Green descended from New England's, perhaps America's, foremost colonial era Family of printers. His family must have been proud of Thomas. In 1764, Greene founded the Connecticut Gazette, and in 1767 he started the Connecticut Courant, now the oldest continually printed newspaper in the United States.¹ One of Green's lesser known accomplishments, however, in his long career of starting newspapers across the state, was his founding of the Middlesex Gazette in 1785.² At that time and for the next 38 years, federalist politics dominated the state,³ and Middlesex County's first and only newspaper was no exception. The state and the Middletown community had not left their colonial past. Connecticut's constitution, ^{at the time} made Congregationalism the state religion. Fire and brimstone sermons blasted from the front pages of the Gazette. Like most newspapers of the day, the Gazette didn't publish editorial positions, because it was expected that the community agreed with the singular religious view.⁴

But Middletown was changing. Population growth, more mobility, and greater class-stratification altered relationships and confused the family-church pattern of life. People often adjusted to these changes by using familiar institutions in different ways than before.

Newspapers were no exception to these changes. The Middlesex Gazette began publishing more newsy articles, instead of simply entertaining narratives. The religious

columns became less strident; often they were narratives with anecdotes, or even purely informational pieces about strange religions, such as Judaism. Local events and incidents were reported or announced more frequently; perhaps because Middletown was getting larger, more could be or needed to be reported; perhaps Printer Tertius Dunning's son and new printing equipment made it possible to write more original work, and less necessary to use other material.

Newspapers always change. They evolved from simple notices to the 60 page broadsheets of today. Some of the changes were caused by technological advances, but to a large degree, they were caused by and reflect changes in social relations. The two causes, technology and community, also cause each other. Newspapers are often used by historical researchers to find facts and dates, but in they are artifacts in themselves. Thus they illustrate well the social causes that lead to their changes. And from the newspapers, information about individuals involved with them, information about the culture this took place in, we can see how they affected the people and the community of, say, Middletown, Connecticut.

PARTYTIME

It is necessary for the well-being and safety of a state, that correct intelligence, upon which the people are interested, should be circulated in a form within the ability of almost every class of community to obtain.

Thus began the American Sentinel's populist appeal to Middletown, in his January 1, 1923 "Prospectus." A clear question about this new paper's challenge to the established

paper concerns ~~whether~~ the apparently revolt^{ionary} offer to "every class of community." The claim of the article's second paragraph leads one to wonder ~~whether~~ it was profit or power, not principle, that brought William D. Starr and William H. Niles to produce the Sentinel:

By (newspapers), we not only learn what passes around us, but are also instructed, as well as amused, with the moral and miscellaneous subjects, which now, in these peaceful times, occupy a space in the columns of a Newspaper. No family ought to be without one... 6

Whatever their reasons Starr and Niles weren't entirely unique. They founded one of many "party papers" which sprung up in the early 1800's.² Immediately, the Sentinel announced its position:

Our paper will maintain Republican principles; and, as its title indicates, we trust, that we shall ever be fond, watchful and vigilant in the cause. No pieces, it is confidently asserted, will be admitted into its columns which will have a tendency to bring discredit on the Republican party.⁸

Republicans were, by 1823, easily the largest party in the state. They had fought for and won a new constitution for the state, and in the process, taken away the ~~govern~~^{gov}ship and legislature from the federalists. Republicans considered themselves more modern; their new constitution put other religions on an equal footing with the Congregational Church. After 1818, the Republicans made few new reforms, however. The party was so popular by 1823 that many federalists belonged to it.⁹

Since almost the entire political spectrum was located within the Republican Party, debates within the party became the only important political debates. Factional

disputes began to take place. The newspapers, as well as ordinary citizens, loudly proclaimed their positions. The party press often took issue with a politician or another newspaper. The party organ wasn't alien to all Americans. In the late eighteenth century Federalist editors aided by Alexander Hamilton supported centralized government and glorified British culture, while Jeffersonian editors supported states' rights and glorified the French Revolution. But younger newspapers, like the liberal Hartford Times, founded in 1817 by Connecticut politician, John Milton Niles, more explicitly supported specific parties than before.¹⁰ The Sentinel, for example, declared its purposeful adherence to the Republican party on its first day and forcefully attacked more conservative elements from its very first issue.

The new newspapers also sought to appeal to wider audiences. Mechanical and transportation improvements allowed publishers to print more copies and distribute them. More importantly, working class groups, such as Middletown's manufactory workers, were becoming more literate, and - especially important to partisan papers - exercising their right to vote.

When everyone else in the state became Republican, the older, formerly Federalist papers joined the conservative wing of the Republican party. The Connecticut Courant commended Governor Oliver Wolcott when he didn't push too hard for reforms.¹² The Gazette endorsed "temperate candidates" in 1817, the year before Connecticut's constitution was made more religiously temperate.¹¹ The Hartford Times

meanwhile, was "soon recognized as the state's best Republican newspaper,"¹³ but it increasingly found itself more liberal than the mainstream of the party. With an accusation that was to dominate their printed argument over the years, the Sentinel called the Gazette "federal" several times.

NAMECALLING

In 1818, the Gazette ran an article which said:

Nothing can be more disgusting to a man who has any respect for decency, or possesses the least ? licacy of sentiment, than the personal abuse which has of late become so fashionable in conducting newspaper warfare in Connecticut.¹⁴

The article, which was taken from the Connecticut Herald, probably referred to the harsh tone of John Miles' editorials for the Hartford Times. Like it or not the Gazette was soon drawn into this "newspaper warfare."

Tertius Dunning taught William D. Starr the "art and mystery of printing."¹⁵ In 1822, Dunning died and left the Gazette to his son.¹⁶ Sons following in the footsteps of their fathers was a tradition that lasted a long time in the printing profession. Printers weren't common, and printing was in high demand.

The first mention of the Gazette in the Sentinel¹ was in an editorial criticizing the Gazette's criticism of the Sentinel's partisanship. The Gazette had argued that parties were harmful to democracy. The Sentinel responded, "it is hot very surprising to see ^{(that,} an ardent federalist should dislike to see a Republican paper established which would firmly, though temperately, support those Republican principles which, in spite of federal opposition have conducted our country to glory through difficulties and dangers." By claiming that

parties shouldn't control elections, federalists were simply trying to "divide and conquer" the Sentinel wrote.¹⁷

The sharpest words between the Sentinel and the Gazette were exchanged after the younger Dunning sold the Gazette to Horace Clark, a printer living in Middletown, and his brother, Epaphrus. "It is very far from our intention to indulge either in political or personal asperities," the Sentinel wrote while Dunning "for whom we entertain a sincere respect" was editor and owner.¹⁸ Starr most likely knew Dunning if he learned the trade from Dunning's father, so it was hard for him to criticise Dunning, especially since Dunning was of the first family of Middletown printers. Despite this, Republican popularity made it hard to resist criticising a federalist competitor.

When the Clarks took over the Gazette, harsher words were exchanged between the two papers. Sometimes the arguments were based on real political disagreements; often they seemed exaggerated by emotion and the desire to embarrass the other paper. The two papers first disagreed about the presidential race of 1824 and the growing power of party caucuses. The Sentinel had supported John Quincy Adams through most of 1823, but their support of him soured when he criticised Congressional Caucusing. The Sentinel turned its support to solid Republican William Crawford. On March 10, 1824, the Gazette tested support for Adams in a then typical newspaper fashion, by printing another paper's endorsement for Adams and claiming they did so "because we like the style in which it is written." In the same issue the editors of the Gazette criticised a Republican caucus in New York mainly attended by Crawford supporters. In the next issue the Gazette more openly expressed its feelings about the pre-

sidential race. "We think we can say safely that between Mr. Adams and Mr. Crawford, the former is decidedly gaining ground. The intolerance of Crawford's friends has certainly had the effect of impressing many with a more unfavorable opinion of his merits than was entertained before they expressed his cause. So true is the old adage, that a man's friend's are often his worst enemies," the Clarks wrote.

The editors of the Sentinel more emphatically and aggressively expressed their views. They stated March 17 that "Mr. Adams is not the Democratic Candidate; but he is emphatically the Federal Candidate, at least in this part of the country, for President." They criticised the Gazette for not printing the names of the nominees of the recent Republican convention, and sought to make a link between the non-Democratic (~~conservative~~) Republicans and the unpopular federalists.

The Gazette responded by declaring that it was alligned with "the old, substantial, ^gguine, uncorrupted independent Republican presses," and warned the Sentinel that through such attacks it was leaving itself open to a loss of subscriptions and granting a "fair opportunity for attack."¹⁹ The Gazette responded to further criticism by the editors of the Sentinel ("lean and hungry gentlemen," they called them) by stating their party affiliation outright for what appears to be the first time: "REPUBLICAN IT SHALL EVER BE," they said of their newspaper, adding "our characters were established in this respect, while those of the Sentinel were only known as sapling apprentices." It is true that the Gazette had espoused some Republican positions before Starr and Miles founded the Sentinel, but the Clarks had not established themselves as Republicans since they bought the Gazette.

The Gazette attempted to ward off the accusations of federalist sympathy in an essay decrying "Political Denunciation":

This (political denunciation) consists, according to the use which is at present made of it in this quarter, in endeavours, on the part of a few, who suppose they have acquired sufficient personal influence to overawe those whom they consider their inferiors, in rank, by sly insinuations or open declarations respecting members of their party... (They insinuate) that (independent members have abandoned the party, and joined its enemies. 21

The same day (April 14), however, the Sentinel continued its war of words. A letter signed "A Republican" called the Gazette "one of the most violent federal papers in the state," and "the mere mouth piece of federalism." The writer was "only surprised that it had should have been permitted to go on so long in the work of its mischief and corruption, without an effort to check it in tis career." Another letter, signed by "A Traveller," protested the Gazette's use of private letters not intended for public audiences, without specifying its accusations. The Sentinel's own editorial that day said the federalists "through the instrumentality of the Gazette" were still trying "to deceive honest and unsuspecting democrats" by seeking to divide them. "They kenw that the federalists were actively engaged in electioneering; but not a hint of it was given. On the contrary, gross and scandalous attacks were made on the leading republicans of the state. The character of the Gazette is now to plainly federal to be mistaken," Starr and Niles announced.

The fight took a more personal turn in the next issue however, when the Sentinel editors confronted the Gazette's claim that it

"feeble attempt...to ward off the charge of federalism." They made it clear that they were not attacking the (probably respected) Dunnings, who had owned and run the Gazette for the previous 27 years. "With respect to the former character of the Gazette, we have not said ought," they wrote; but the present editors "forfeited the character of republicans since they had charge of the Gazette, both by their actions and their words: they have deserted the Republican party, and gone to the enemy."²²

Starr and Niles would not let the community forget that the Clarks hadn't yet established themselves as Republican editors.

WHO WERE THOSE GUYS, ANYWAY?

Such fierce debate between Middletown newspapers had never taken place before; Middletown was a changing community. Another newspaper, the Connecticut Spectator, operated from 1814 to 1817. The author could not find remaining copies of the Spectator, but from remaining copies of the Gazette during that period, it appears no public controversy developed between the two papers. Perhaps Tertius Dunning's Gazette was too well-respected to compete with. Dunning had owned and run the paper since 1797, and Starr and Niles' comments (mentioned above) indicate that they didn't want to take issue with this oldtime printer - and their former master. Dunning probably didn't incite the controversy of the latter day papers; his Gazette mainly consisted of ministers' sermons, "miscellany" from other newspapers, and advertisements.

That Dunning, essentially an artisan, was the last successful sole owner and editor of a Middletown newspaper, ^{and that Starr took full ownership of the Spectator} shows in itself the changes that were taking place in the structure of the community. For reasons unknown, Dunning's son gave up ownership of the paper after one year at the helm and left town. The new

breed of editors - Starr, Niles, and the Clarks - all went into the business with a partner. This may have freed them to write more; more original copy appeared in the two newspapers throughout the 1820's. (Technological improvements may also have contributed to the increase in original copy, as both newspapers boasted of their modern equipment.)²³ The original copy, either editorial-like essays or opinionated informational pieces, expressed the political opinions of the editors more frequently than ever before. A newspaper with more controversial comment must have made more interesting reading for the public, and the editors must have realized to compete they would have to make their papers interesting.

But the change in newspaper content appears to have been initiated by another force: the motivation and ambition of those running the newspapers. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Middlesex Gazette was primarily an advertising sheet produced by a printer. Papers in the larger cities, such as the Republican National Gazette and the Federalist Gazette of the United States, already contained a fair amount of editorial copy, and their well-known histories preceded similar developments at the smaller papers. Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton aided John Fenno in founding the latter paper in an attempt to create an organ for his political views. In 1793, Thomas Jefferson aided Philip Freneau in establishing the National Gazette because, he said, "a juster view" of events did not find their way into Fenno's paper. The two political organs became the era's leading papers for their respective political views, because they were so close to the voices of power. Freneau and Fenno

both worked in their sponsors' departments as "clerkship for languages" and "printer" respectively. They were not just printers putting out a newspaper to make a living off of the ads; they were operatives who benefitted from their association with the leaders of political parties. Newspaper editors were to find themselves in similar positions about 30 years later in Middletown.²⁴

Robert Fairchild of Stratford was elected state senator in 1825. He was a Republican, but apparently of the more conservative branch of the party. In 1826 and 1827, he wrote several letters to Horace Clark, editor of the Gazette, requesting that various letters and articles, criticising liberal politicians, be published in Clark's journal. The first letter remaining in the collection of Clark's correspondence boasts, "notwithstanding all the efforts and unprincipled acts of our opponents here we have beat them handsomely," referring to conservative victories in the 1826 state elections. Future letters, however, requested - even demanded - conservative editorial policy on specific issues. On December 21, Fairchild wrote:

I have been expecting to see you out on State politics - Why is the Gazette remaining still? It is important that you should have a city meeting, or some public meeting to nominate a Senator and Congressman, and express the sentiments of those who are friendly to districting and enemies to caucus imposition and tyranny...

In the same letter he requested that three articles from other newspapers be published. Clark responded with an editorial on the evils of caucusing in the December 27 issue. He also printed one of the three articles.

After Clark did not print one of Fairchild's suggestions,

Fairchild wrote, "I was surprised not to see the letter from Plant, Hill and company to the Sheriff in your paper of this week. Do insert it in your next with severe comments." In a letter labeled "confidential strictly" and dated March 10, 1827, Fairchild offered to pay for the insertion of what must have been a controversial letter:

I will thank you to insert the enclosed in your next paper. A friend of mine handed it to me to send to you, and I hope you will not fail to publish it - Niles (probably, John Milton, the Hartford politician) deserves it richly. Please send me a proof on Monday next so that it may be copied in the next (Bridgeport) Patriot - Don't spare any trouble and expense, to do this and I will not fail to pay you for it.

The letter itself is not in the collection of Clark's correspondence, and the issues of the Gazette that the letter would have appeared in are not in the Wesleyan collection, but it may very well have been printed. Fairchild tended to follow up requests that were not granted with comments such as "I was surprised not to see.." and continued to write until his request was granted almost always. He usually didn't follow up requests that were granted, and the request of March 10 was not followed up.

It's hard to tell what kind of relationship Clark and Fairchild actually had. Fairchild would sign each letter he sent "Your friend, R. Fairchild," but the formal tone of the letters, with Fairchild attempting to justify every request, and the lack of any personal content, indicates they were more political acquaintances than close friends. The manner in which Fairchild brought up the subject of payment for the printing

of an article - casually mentioning "I will not fail to pay you for it" - may indicate that such was not an unusual arrangement between he and Clark. Then again, it could indicate some embarrassment in offering what might be considered a bribe. 25

Fairchild was not the only Connecticut politico who dealt with Clark as more an active conservative than a newspaperman. February 26, Fairchild wrote Clark requesting his adherence to suggestions he must have made earlier concerning a course for action during the "General convention" (probably of the National Republicans) coming up in Middletown March 1. A Mr. Barber (probably editor of the New Haven Register, a senior conservative journal) wrote Clark requesting a course for action at the upcoming convention also. His letter made it clear that Clark was organizing the convention; he also made it clear that he disliked Fairchild's influence, and though he was unable to attend the convention, Fairchild's influence within the party was somehow reduced. Both Barber and Fairchild wrote Clark explaining how bad each other was for the party and apparently unaware that Clark was hearing the story from both sides.

Clark wasn't the only Middletown editor connected to political parties. Though Starr and Niles didn't leave anything as illustrative as Clark's letters, their familial relations indicate that they were more firmly planted in the Republican powerstructure. William D. Starr belonged to an extensive Middletown family some members of whom were active Republicans.

Nathan Starr, Jr., a distant cousin, was a well-to-do Middletown merchant involved in a bitter controversy with the United States Bank during the 1820's. Starr had taken a legally questionable loan from the bank during the time that a local Republican was the local director. When a federalist took control of the bank, he was forced to pay back the loan with interest and penalties. ²⁶

William H. Niles came from a Chatham family whose genealogy is still shrouded in mystery. A Niles family, however, had established itself in various towns of Connecticut and Rhode Island by the late 1600's.²⁷ The family was quite prolific and spread throughout Connecticut during the 1700's, but it is not known how the Niles family of Chatham ended up there.²⁸ John Milton Niles, however, who has already been discussed as one of the most prominent liberal Republicans of the 1820's, was a member of the extensive Niles family. Born in Windsor, he removed to Hartford where he started the Times. Niles served as state senator from Hartford during the period, but derived much of his power through the Times, which he continued to write for after retiring from the editorship.²⁹ William H. Niles was probably also an active Democratic-Republican. A remaining record of this is an announcement in the Sentinel after he had retired from the editorship and sold his portion of the paper to William Starr that he served on the Committee of Arrangements for a celebration of the anniversary of Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans during the War of 1812.³⁰ It is possible that John Milton and William H. Niles weren't related; we can't tell because the records are incomplete. Even if they were related

there is a chance that the relation was so distant that it meant nothing to the relationships between the leading liberal Republican editor and politician of the state, and one of the other leading editors. But a relation is highly probable, and if the two men were related, it is highly likely that this relationship tightened the bonds between the two newspapers, and the Sentinel and state Democratic hierarchy.

Another recorded circumstance involving both the Niles and the Starrs strengthens the case that family and family friendships were extremely important for the operators of the Sentinel. "In 1841, Elihu Starr was appointed postmaster in Middletown by the Postmaster General John M. Niles. Niles was an old friend and close political associate of Nathan Starr, Jr."³¹ If John Niles and Nathan Starr were "old friends and close political associates" who did favors for each other, what kind of joint interest might they have had in aiding the establishment of Middletown's first truly Republican newspaper, whose editors happened to be their relatives? The extent of the aid, if any, that William Starr and William Niles received from their families indicates the importance of family relations in Middletown in the 1820's.

Another factor in the success of the newspaper entrepreneurs in Middletown during the 1820's was their ability to attract advertisers. The support of the merchants was crucial for anyone who wanted to run a newspaper then, as it remains today; indeed the merchants one of the strongest political forces in Middletown and having newspapers that supported their ideologies was in their interest. A survey of two issues of each Middletown paper indicates that some ^{more} advertisers bought space in the news-

paper they felt most ideologically comfortable with or had some interest in maintaining:

	Business	Gazette		Sentinel	
		8/18/24	12/28/31	6/9/24	12/22/30
1. Charles Brewer	Watches & clocks	0	0	2	2
2. Charles Dyer	Dry goods	2	1	2	2
3. Thomas Greenfield	Hats	0	1	1	0
4. Luke C. Lyman	Dry Goods	0	0	3	2
5. Wm. S. Nichols		2	-	1	-
6. E.G. Southmayd	Dry goods	1	3	3	3

Interests-

1. Active in Democratic-Republican party
2. , ,
3. Bought the Gazette in 1829
4. Owned store in which Sentinel was located
5. Personal friend of Horace Clark; sought Clark's assistance after arrested for unknown reason in 1825
6. A relative, John B., was very active supporter of Jackson.

The Middlesex Gazette ceased operations in 1834. The Sentinel had bought a new paper in town, the Witness, two years earlier. Why did the Sentinel last and the Gazette fold? One factor may have been the continuity of owners and editors. The Gazette changed hands four times between 1828 and 1834. Such instability was probably inefficient for operations and confusing to readers. But more importantly this occurred at a time when the Gazette's compatibility with Middletown political beliefs were in question. The Sentinel sought to develop these doubts in the minds of Middletown residents by waging aggressive partisan warfare on the Gazette, painting the older paper as bastion of a recently unpopularized political party. Times were changing in Middletown.

Religion was losing its primacy as a social institution. This was reflected in the papers themselves: by the 1830's religious columns didn't appear in most issues of either paper. At the same time, people were not yet adjusted to the idea of a heterogeneous society, rather than a closely knit community. This, too, may have been a factor in the survival of one newspaper over the other and the fierce intolerance that the two papers had for each other. As Thomas Bender writes, "The informal and personal relationships that maintained the essential unity of the town also produced a strong impulse toward political consensus. Within the town, this produced unity, if not always harmony."³² The political battle between the two Middletown papers was an indicator that this unity was breaking down. In 1838, another newspaper, the Constitution was founded. Soon there would be three stable, successful newspapers in Middletown, but until that time Middletown residents accepted one and rejected the other.

FOOTNOTES

1. Thomas
2. Beers, 405.
3. Morse, 63.
4. Gazette, 1790-1809.
5. Sentinel, January 1, 1823.
6. Ibid.
7. Lee, 148-50.
8. Sentinel, January 1, 1823.
9. Morse, 62.
10. Ibid, 11.
11. Ibid, 82
- 12.
13. Morse, 62
14. Gazette, December 3, 1818.
15. Santinel, November 24, 1830.
16. Beers, 405
17. Sentinel, January 15, 1823.
18. Ibid.
19. Gazette, march 31, 1824.
20. Gazette, April 14, 1823.
21. Ibid.
23. Sentinel, April 14, 1823.
24. Lee 122-8 and Ford and Emery 84.
25. Clark correspondence.
26. Barry.
27. Dillon, 48.
28. Beers, Genealogy of Middlesex County.
29. Morse
30. Sentinel, January 2, 1833.
31. Barry, 40.
32. Bender, 75.

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