

Building an American Book Trade: Philadelphia Publishing in the New Republic

Rosalind Remer¹
Moravian College

In an 1836 publishing trade journal, the young publisher, George Palmer Putnam, wrote that "[O]ur publishing trade appears to be flourishing, if we may judge from the number or the sale of new publications." He praised technology and mechanization and their effects on entrepreneurial publishers:

[I]n this age of ballooning and railroading--printing by steam--where the machinery of book-making is such, that it is only necessary to put your rags in the mill and they come out Bibles--all ready printed--there is no telling what human invention will accomplish next. We like this go-ahead sort of spirit... [2]

Putnam believed that the "go-ahead sort of spirit" was encouraged not only by technology but by a healthy mixture of competition and cooperation in the trade, as evidenced by the "mutual confidence between booksellers throughout the country" [2].

Putnam was one of a breed of "modern" American publishers who had begun their careers as entrepreneurs, not craftsmen. While many were trained in the realms of retailing, wholesaling, literature, and speculation, very few had any connections with printing, and fewer still had actually served as printers. While Putnam's comment about printing by steam was meant to be ironic, it also represented the genteel pose of someone so far removed from the mechanics of production that the process of printing, in his depiction, seems like magic. In his "Register of New Publications American and Foreign," Putnam saw new American publications significantly outnumbering, for the first time, foreign works reprinted by American publishers. These figures suggested to this booster of the book trade that "we are rapidly forming our own literature--especially in the more useful and solid branches" [2]. With the growth of American literature, publishing houses were becoming identified with particular American authors and specific areas of literature. Publishers began to issue catalogues that showed

¹This essay is an abstract of my dissertation, "The Creation of an American Book Trade: Philadelphia Publishing in the New Republic, 1790-1830" written in the Department of History at the University of California, Los Angeles under the supervision of Joyce Appleby. Any uncited material here is drawn from the dissertation.

their increasing specialization--lists of novels, or metaphysical works, or medical texts. And by the 1830s and 40s, many publishers were operating mainly as wholesalers and distributors of the titles they published.

These characteristics of the "modern" publisher, however, had been at least partially developed during the early years of the new republic, when the generation of printer-booksellers *before* Putnam's started to address the incipient needs of a national market. In the years following the American Revolution, along with most Americans, printers and booksellers began the complex move away from their colonial status. The focus of my study is the process by which a group of late eighteenth-century Philadelphia printers and booksellers--seen at the outset as "meer mechanics"--evolved into nineteenth-century entrepreneurs of the book trade [5]. This transitional group, or cohort, consciously attempted to create a national book trade and a market for books. To nourish the young trade, tradesmen like Mathew Carey, Patrick Byrne, Thomas Davis, Thomas Dobson, William McCarty and William Woodward, to name only a few, had to strike a careful balance between competition and cooperation, joining together to share risk and to distribute books to a spread-out nation.

Colonial printers operated very much within the confines of British mercantilism. English booksellers--publishers--exported books to the colonies and made it possible for colonial printers to publish only in a stop-gap way [5]. Here, it is essential to note that printing and publishing are two distinct, if related economic activities, requiring different levels of capital and time investment. The printer simply performed the tasks of setting type and pulling the press. His own costs consisted of labor, press, ink, type, and paper, all of which he factored in when calculating for a customer the cost of a job. Publishers, on the other hand, combined judgment, capital, and marketing strategies with the craft of printing in an attempt to create and sell printed matter. In the colonial period, most printers occasionally acted as publishers [5; 7; 9].

The late colonial printer functioned much like other English provincial printers who in the words of one historian of printing, "were left with little more than the scraps from the London table" [6, p. 120]. Colonial printers entertained notions of publishing as long as they could guarantee for themselves relatively low risk in the undertaking. This could be effected by publishing books either by subscription, or under the aegis of governmental or religious institutions. Printers could also publish inexpensive books, pamphlets, and newspapers which, for a variety of reasons, British booksellers would or could not produce. Many printers sold books, stationery, and other goods to help keep them afloat. An assortment of English books and locally-printed works could usually be found in late eighteenth-century American printing shops [8, pp. 75-77].

During and after the Revolution printers found new opportunities to publish, many of which were afforded by the growing importance of the political press. While political publishing was risky, any publication that met with rapid, or steady sale, could not only make a profit, but could earn for its publisher prominence and often, political patronage. While colonial printers had often been loathe to mix politics and publishing, fearing loss of patronage or even prosecution, printer-booksellers of the early national period began to set these fears aside, gambling instead, on the potential profits that politics could bring. Printers who published were looking for ways to make their presses more

profitable and political patronage in the volatile years of the 1780s and 1790s was critical to the would-be publishers of the new republic.

By the 1790s, many printers operated within the public realm, using printing contracts and political patronage to secure for themselves a prominent place in the new republic. Newspaper publishers often launched themselves into the thick of political controversies. Even as they occasionally avowed, in the longstanding tradition, that their papers were open to all parties, they were aware that their partisanship attracted readers thirsty for political commentary. This is not to suggest that political activism was without its risks. Printers knew in the 1790s what they had known throughout the colonial period: political partisanship could draw both positive and negative attention, affecting patronage, credit, and the state of their finances. Ultimately, this realization, combined with the slightly less frenzied political atmosphere of the early 1800s, helped to direct some printer-booksellers' attention to the business of publishing books, rather than controversial pamphlets and newspapers.

The printers and booksellers who began their careers in the years following the Revolution operated in an environment of speculation, economic growth, and an increasing interest in the development of domestic manufactures. They took greater risks in publishing than members of the American printing trade had ever done before. By the middle of the 1790s, the trade began to divide into printers who published and those who did not. The new publishers began to see themselves as the entrepreneurs of the book trade. They formed associations, held literary fairs, and sought government protection in the form of tariffs. They kept close tabs on imported books and devised ways to compete. In the 1790s three distinct associations were formed to promote cooperation within the trade. The first, the Philadelphia Company of Printers and Booksellers, met for the first time on July 4, 1791, when they hammered out a constitution to "declare a union among the Printers and Booksellers of this city," in order to produce "solid advantages, in extending their business" [4]. The Company was a risk-sharing association for printers who published, or who wished to become more involved in publishing. Of the 19 members, 14 considered themselves printers, while 8 listed their occupations as printer-booksellers or bookseller-stationers. Within a short time, the latter group ascended to the leadership of the Company, and by the end of the decade, broke off into a new association whose name, quite pointedly, was the Philadelphia Company of Booksellers [3]. Printers had been dropped. At the end of the decade, in the next logical step toward creating a national trade, the publisher-booksellers of Philadelphia joined with their counterparts in New York and Boston to share risk, exchange titles, and form a lobby against imported books. The new entrepreneurs were rising to the top of the trade and becoming, in the words of one contemporary, "men of capital" [1].

Philadelphia's publishers of the 1790s and early 1800s further distinguished themselves from printers when many of them gave up printing, preferring to distribute printing jobs to printers who were not as actively involved in publishing. They did, however, continue to sell books from their shops, but by 1815, these had become busy retail establishments on the main commercial streets of Philadelphia. They located their new book emporia along centrally-located streets where foot traffic would bring them a steady flow of

browsers. Printers, on the other hand, became less visible as the century got underway, their shops located in narrow alleys and courts, well out of the high rent district and away from public view.

Through business practices such as wholesaling and combination publishing (a form of collusion), the new publishers more clearly defined their own role. This specialization within the trade tended to subordinate--at least in the eyes of the publishers--papermaking, printing, and binding. In order to secure their position they invested in and attempted to control these other aspects of the book trade, making them ancillary in the process. In the colonial era, the most entrepreneurial printer-booksellers sought to exercise control through vertical integration, but publishers of the early republic more commonly controlled the trade through investment, as well as credit and contract manipulation.

The new century brought with it economic and political instability and the risk-takers of the book trade adopted various ways to limit their risk while continuing to publish. Publishers developed complicated forms of financing their publications and relied completely on the cooperation of other trade members to pay debts punctually, to endorse notes, and generally to prop each other up. This system of private debt and credit was periodically thrown into turmoil by economic downturns and accompanying strings of business failures. Insolvency records show that when one member of the trade failed, others were often swept into the economic vortex. It should be noted that failures did not necessarily spell the end of an individual's or a firm's existence. Petitioning to be considered insolvent meant that enough of one's creditors agreed not to press their claims, thus allowing the debtor to take the time to resolve his difficulties. It represented a set-back, to be sure, but how long a concern managed to weather the ups and downs of business in the early republic said more about its level of success or failure than a few brushes with insolvency. A state of indebtedness was seen as perfectly natural; it was how much credit a publisher could command that made the difference between a successful and unsuccessful publishing business.

This discussion takes into account the development of an early nineteenth-century business culture which operated mainly within a private-sector economy that offered little protection to financially-stressed tradesmen. The rash of insolvencies and bankruptcies in the book trade during the early years of the new century was the result of much of this ad hoc financing. The financial instability of the trade reflected not so much poor management but the nature of a chaotic system of credit, and while publishers were no longer confined to local and regional markets, they had not yet succeeded in organizing a national market.

The publishers of the new republic in Philadelphia early recognized the importance of selling their books throughout the growing nation. Regions in Virginia, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, southern Indiana, western Pennsylvania and Ohio seemed to beckon to the Philadelphia trade with the promise of whole areas and communities which had only limited access to books. The publishers used a number of tactics to reach remote markets. They sent out flocks of traveling salesmen, some of whom were itinerant preachers; they set up branch stores in country market towns; they engaged in wholesale and consignment activities; and they sometimes traveled themselves. Yet the

transitional publishers of this study could not fully adapt to the particular needs of the frontier markets. Nor were they able to distribute books very efficiently. The nation's growth had outstripped the early republic's transportation and communication capacities. Furthermore, the newer settlements worked to develop their own manufactures and institutions, hoping to shake off the grip of eastern capital. First, the Philadelphia publishers found that the country markets were too unformed to *need* many books. As frontiers became more developed, however, their inhabitants sought increasing autonomy from the east and found ways to buy on city terms, or to publish their own.

The story of early national publishing and the creation of an American book trade is not one of unimpeded progress, as George Palmer Putnam's whiggish comments of 1836 suggest. The publishers examined in this study were transitional figures in several respects. They were all born in the middle decades of the eighteenth century and reached adulthood during the years of Revolution and the 1780s and 1790s. While the fledgling nation was being formed and defined, these men were seeking to establish themselves in their trade. Sharing a general desire to forge American identity and an independent role for the United States in the world, these entrepreneurs set out to build a publishing industry and to create and serve new markets for books. Their roots in the eighteenth century, however, were never far from the surface, as they drew, time and again, on traditional business and trade practices, and on their basically local or regional orientations. They were pioneers, like many entrepreneurs of the early republic, but their vision of a truly national market for books remained somewhat limited by increasingly outmoded ideas about credit, geographical distances, and markets.

The generation of "modern" publishers that followed immediately on the heels of this study's cohort viewed a national trade and market with new eyes--the eyes of nineteenth-century capitalists. Nevertheless, it is the intention of my study to bring the earliest attempts at American publishing to life, and in so doing, to shed light on the formative years of an industry and a nation.

References

1. [Philadelphia] *Aurora* (July 1804).
2. *The Booksellers' Advertiser and Monthly Register of New Publications American and Foreign*, II (New York, 1836), 1.
3. *Constitution of the Philadelphia Company of Booksellers, Adopted February 18, 1802* (Philadelphia, 1802).
4. *The Constitution, Proceedings, &c. of the Philadelphia Company of Printers and Booksellers* (Philadelphia, 1793).
5. Stephen Botein, "'Meer Mechanics' and an Open Press: The Business and Political Strategies of Colonial American Printers," *Perspectives in American History*, 9 (1975), 127-225.
6. John Feather, *The Provincial Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1985).
7. Michael Winship, "Publishing in America: Needs and Opportunities for Research," in David D. Hall and John B. Hench eds., *Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book: America, 1639-1876* (Worcester, MA, 1987), 61-102.

8. Edwin Wolf, II, *The Book Culture of a Colonial American City* (New York, 1988).
9. Lawrence C. Wroth, *The Colonial Printer*, 2nd ed., (Portland, ME, 1938).