

James Davis

James Davis (1721-1785) was North Carolina's first printer and first newspaper proprietor. He brought his press and type with him when he arrived in New Bern in 1749 from Williamsburg for what would become a 35-year stay.

The colonial Assembly of North Carolina had sent word that it needed an official printer, and Davis was well trained, having apprenticed under the first printer in Virginia, William Parks.

Davis announced his business "at The Printing-Office in Front Street." You can still see a typical print shop of Davis' day on a visit to Colonial Williamsburg.

While busy with official duties as public printer, such as printing a revised edition of the colony's laws, Davis launched the North Carolina

Gazette in 1751. While it seems to have been discontinued by 1761, Davis was soon back at it, with the North-Carolina Magazine or Universal Intelligencer, first published in 1764. The four-page newspaper lasted until 1778, when the difficulties of printing in the midst of the Revolutionary War forced its discontinuance.

The columns of the Gazette were typical of colonial newspapers, with a lot of information from outside New Bern, but little local news. Much local information was contained, however, in paid notices, which came from other parts of the colony

North Carolina's second and third newspapers were in a sense the offspring of Davis's first. In 1764, when the colonial Governor tried to take away Davis's official post in and give it to Philadelphia printer Andrew Steuart, Davis used his considerable political clout (he was also a member of the Assembly from New Bern) to thwart the move.

Steuart gave up the fight and went to Wilmington, where he launched another North Carolina Gazette. But then Steuart drowned while swimming in the Cape Fear River, opening the opportunity for Adam Boyd to buy the Gazette's printing equipment and begin the Cape Fear Mercury in 1769.

During the Revolutionary War, Davis supported the Patriot cause, but he made everybody mad when he took umbrage at the recruiting methods of a young French officer attempting to raise a volunteer regiment in Craven County. Davis himself raised a mob, and threatened to wreck the camp. He was denounced for "arbitrary and scandalous behavior" that had "given New Bern a name that every inhabitant except himself and minions would blush at."

So, in a sense, James Davis was also the first editor, but hardly the last, to incur the wrath of his community.

By Roy Parker Jr.
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