

From Apprentice to Journeyman to Partner: Benjamin Franklin's Workers and the Growth of the Early American Printing Trade

The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne.

—Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Parliament of Fowls”

MANY APPRENTICES IN THE EARLY American printing trade must have felt as Chaucer’s fabled craftsman did. Beginning at a young age, they commonly spent up to seven years as contractually bound, unpaid laborers. They usually had to promise not to gamble, fornicate, frequent taverns, marry, and buy or sell or divulge secrets of the business. Apprentices worked long hours, often performed menial tasks, and were subjected to beatings—all without pay. Yet apprentices endured the arduous existence because it held for them the promise of eventual self-employment. Their goal was to learn a craft they could practice when their apprenticeship expired.¹

The apprenticeship system was essential to the growth of the early American press. Apprenticeships to printers were a means of vocational education that replenished and augmented the craft’s practitioners, thus insuring a sufficient supply of skilled labor through which the “art” (special skill) and the “mystery” (special knowledge) of printing

¹ For an example of the apprentice’s obligations, see Samuel Richardson, *The Apprentice’s Vade Mecum* (1734; reprint ed., Los Angeles, 1975), 2-20. On the menial nature of some tasks, see O. Jocelyn Dunlop and Richard D. Denman, *English Apprenticeship and Child Labour: A History* (London, 1912), 19-20; Sharon V. Salinger, “To Serve Well and Faithfully”: *Labor and Indentured Servants in Pennsylvania, 1682-1800* (Cambridge, 1987), 7. On beatings endured by printing apprentices, see W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice: From Franklin to the Machine Age in America* (New York, 1986), 11, 43, 93, 103, 193.

was passed on from one generation to the next.² Securing a printing apprenticeship was especially desirable because of the trade's potential earning power and the relative ease with which one could become a master craftsman. "Printing was nearly as elite a trade as silver-smithing," which was "at the top of the craft hierarchy," W.J. Rorabaugh wrote, adding that printing was lucrative. "A growing population and increased literacy, as well as increased commerce and political controversy, gave the colonial printer a growing market." So, too, did maturing social organizations. In Boston, for example, religious groups issued numerous publications, thereby providing a substantial income for printers.³

Daniel Boorstin maintained that colonies owed the existence of their first presses to government subsidies and printing contracts. "[T]he colonial press could hardly be a nursery of novel, startling, or radical ideas," he wrote, for the "printer had to be a 'government man,' acceptable to the ruling group in his colony."⁴ More recent students of eighteenth-century journalism, such as David A. Anderson and Jeffery A. Smith, disagreed with Boorstin's emphasis. They argued that press freedom became increasingly important to American colonists during the eighteenth century because it served as a check on what many viewed as government's natural inclination toward despotism and oppression.⁵ Other scholars have contended that political and social factions were important to the growth of the press, which became a powerful force in political culture. Through pamphlets and newspaper essays, the laboring classes had more access to political issues than ever before. These salvos were "necessary to prepare the Minds of the Publick," Benjamin Franklin wrote. Gary Nash has noted the deliberate efforts of some printers to fuel laborers' activism

² Richard B. Morris, *Government and Labor in Early America* (New York, 1946), 363-89. Demonstrating Enlightenment thinking, seventeenth-century London printer Joseph Moxon argued that typography, which consists of punch-cutting, founding, and printing, is a mathematical science. Joseph Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises on the Whole Art of Printing*, edited by Herbert Davis and Harry Carter (2nd ed., London, 1962), 10-12.

³ Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice*, 6-7; MaryAnn Yodelis, "Who Paid the Piper? Publishing Economics in Boston, 1763-1775," *Journalism Monographs* 38 (Feb. 1975), 1-2.

⁴ Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1958), 325, 335.

⁵ David A. Anderson, "The Origins of the Press Clause," *U.C.L.A. Law Review* 30 (1983), 455-541; Jeffery A. Smith, *Printers and Press Freedom* (New York, 1988).

and resentment with allegations of a causal link between the rise of a wealthy elite and the economic woes of the lower and middle classes. Both the use of the press as a political weapon and the increased readership among a politically conscious populace provided considerable income for printers.⁶

The sources of press ideology and income have been thoroughly studied. However, there has been relatively little examination of such economic and organizational factors as printing networks and the apprenticeship system. These elements made it possible for the press not only to survive but to grow, while serving, in the words of Andrew Hamilton during the Zenger trial, "publicly to remonstrate the abuses of power in the strongest terms, to put their neighbors upon their guard against the craft or open violence of men in authority."⁷

Apprenticeships could be used for more than a ready supply of cheap labor, as Franklin demonstrated through the formation of his printing network. The foundation of this informal web of printers was laid by Franklin's decision, unprecedented in America, to make partners of apprentices and journeymen whose character, skill, and work ethic—and perhaps political ideology—impressed him. Franklin established these partners, most of whom were his former employees, with their own printing houses and supplies, and in his capacity as deputy postmaster-general for North America, arranged for many of them to serve as local postmasters. These postmasterships provided the printers with additional income while allowing them to be the first in their locations to receive information and newspapers

⁶ Gary B. Nash, "The Transformation of Urban Politics, 1700-1765," *Journal of American History* 60 (Dec. 1973), 606, 616-20; Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1979), 199, 224, 321, 363, 374; Benjamin Franklin to Joseph Galloway, Feb. 17, 1758, in Leonard W. Labaree, et al., eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (27 vols. to date, New Haven, 1959-), 7:374. For the contrary view that the press was politically lethargic until the Revolution, see Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence* (New York, 1958), 61-66, 296-97. More generally, for the view that radical politics should not be associated with years prior to the 1764 Sugar Act, see Merrill Jensen, "The American People and the American Revolution," *Journal of American History* 57 (June 1970), 5-35.

⁷ Reprinted in James Alexander, *A Brief Narrative of the Case and Trial of John Peter Zenger* (2nd ed., Cambridge, 1972), 81. On the press's function as a check on government, see Vincent Blasi, "The Checking Value in First Amendment Theory," *American Bar Foundation Research Journal* 1977 (Summer 1977), 521-649.

from other colonies and abroad. It also encouraged them to communicate more with Franklin, because letters to and from the deputy postmaster-general traveled free. These partnerships formed the crux of Franklin's network.⁸

The Franklin network was a loosely structured organization of Franklin's business partners, trade associates, and family members in printing. It grew to be the most prominent and geographically extensive of the early American printing organizations, and it lasted from the 1730s to the 1780s.⁹ Stretching from New England to Antigua and comprising more than two dozen members, the network altered practices in both the colonial and European printing trades by providing capital to set up workers as partners and network members. As an economic entity and source of mutual support, Franklin's network was integral to the success of many eighteenth-century printers and played a key role in the development of American journalism.¹⁰

The apprenticeship system, whether in printing or other trades, was a well-established custom for passing on a skill to male youths, both in the American colonies and abroad. Apprentices were unfree

⁸ Because postage was a considerable expense for colonists, Franklin regarded the job as "very suitable to me." Not only would it eliminate the cost of correspondence between network members and himself, it would also enable him to "execute a Scheme long since form'd," the establishment of the American Philosophical Society, which, he told a correspondent, "would soon produce something agreeable to you and to all Lovers of Useful Knowledge, for I have now a large Acquaintance among ingenious Men in America." Benjamin Franklin to Peter Collinson, May 21, 1751, in Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 4:135.

⁹ Some of the printers were Anthony Armbruester, Gotthard Armbruester, Benjamin Bache, Johannes Boehm, Francis Childs, William Daniell, William Dunlap, Hugh Gaine, William Goddard, Thomas Green, David Hall, Samuel Holland, John Holt, Ann Franklin, James Franklin, Jr., Benjamin Mecom, Hugh Meredith, John Henry Miller, James Parker, Samuel Parker, Thomas Powell, Thomas Smith, William Smith, Elizabeth Timothy, Lewis Timothy, Peter Timothy, William Weyman, and Thomas Whitmarsh.

¹⁰ Detailed description of Franklin's network and analysis of its structure are outside the scope of this article. For more information on Franklin's network of printing partnerships, see Ralph Frasca, "Benjamin Franklin's Printing Network," *American Journalism* 5 (1988), 145-58. See also John Clyde Oswald, *Benjamin Franklin, Printer* (New York, 1917), 138-50; Charles W. Wetherell, "Brokers of the Word: An Essay in the Social History of the Early American Press, 1639-1783" (Ph.D. diss., University of New Hampshire, 1980); Smith, *Printers and Press Freedom*, 124-41; and Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 1938), 115-23.

laborers who performed duties intended to teach them a craft. They usually lived in the master's home and worked closely with each other, in sharp contrast to modern industrial practice, where the emphasis is on organization and the control is impersonal.

Sometimes these relationships turned sour, due to the master's cruelty, the apprentice's slothfulness, or both. To cite one example: printer James Parker, an integral member of Franklin's network, took on Benjamin Mecom as an apprentice in 1745, when Mecom, the son of Franklin's sister Jane Mecom, was about twelve years old. The relationship was evidently a stormy one; Mecom wrote bitterly to his mother and uncle about Parker's poor treatment of him. Mecom complained of inadequate clothing, "the bad attendance afforded him in the smallpox," and the beatings he received. Parker, on the other hand, objected to Mecom's practice of staying out all night and "refusing to give an account where he spends his time, or in what company." Mecom tried to run away by enlisting on a privateer, but he was caught. Franklin had little sympathy for his nephew, calling Mecom's actions "the high road to destruction" and noting of the beatings: "I think the correction very light, and not likely to be very effectual, if the strokes left no marks."¹¹

Another function of the apprenticeship, both in Europe and America, was more subtle: it served to reaffirm social class hierarchy. Masters in the most attractive trades sometimes demanded fees in order to take on an apprentice. As impoverished parents could seldom afford this payment, their children were rarely apprenticed in trades that offered the prospect of climbing the social ladder. Fees were less common in America than in Europe, yet even Franklin's father faced this obstacle. The expectation of a fee prompted Josiah Franklin to remove his twelve-year-old son from an apprenticeship to a Boston cutler, cousin Samuel Franklin, and instead place him in the printing trade with another son, James Franklin, who agreed not to charge a fee. Benjamin Franklin recalled that Samuel's "Expectations of a Fee with me displeasing my Father, I was taken home again," whereupon

¹¹ Benjamin Franklin to Jane Mecom, [June?], 1748, Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 3:301-4. See also Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice*, which cites many examples of poor behavior by both masters and apprentices.

Josiah Franklin “at length determin’d . . . to make me a Printer.”¹² One of Benjamin Franklin’s partners, Peter Timothy, also expected fees for taking on apprentices. He expressed this desire by referring to boys who could be “well-recommended.” In one newspaper advertisement, Timothy announced: “The printer of this paper will take an apprentice, provided he be well recommended.” In another, he noted: “The printer of this paper wants a sober lad as an apprentice, who must be well-recommended.”¹³

The use of apprentices enabled their masters to hire fewer journeymen. Journeymen were often transient because the prospect of economic gain dictated freedom of movement in early eighteenth-century America. As the term implies, journeymen tended to move from city to city in search of higher wages, which would draw them closer to their goal of saving enough capital to open their own shops. With the growth of the printing trade, most journeymen had little trouble securing work.¹⁴ Many masters relied heavily on apprentices

¹² J.A. Leo Lemay and P.M. Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, A Genetic Text* (Knoxville, 1983), 10-11. For a comparison of European and American apprenticeships, see “Information to Those Who Would Remove to America,” [circa 1783] in Albert Smyth, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (10 vols., New York, 1905-1907), 8:612-13. See also “Some Observations on North America, and the Colonies of Great Britain There,” July 1766, Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 13:356. On the correlation between apprenticeships and social class hierarchy, see John Clapham, *A Concise Economic History of Britain* (Cambridge, 1951), 133.

An example of an apprentice plying a low-status trade because of the expectation of a fee was George Robert Twelves Hewes of Boston, who was apprenticed to a shoemaker because he could not afford to pay a fee. Alfred F. Young, “George Robert Twelves Hewes (1742-1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 38 (1981), 561-623.

¹³ *South-Carolina Gazette*, April 6, 1752, Aug. 19, 1756. There are enough examples of Timothy using the term “well-recommended” to mean payment that his intent regarding apprentices is clear. For instance, in November 1754, Timothy requested that letters from political factions “be paid for proportionably as advertisements.” The payment would thus signify the writings as “properly recommended.” *Ibid.*, Nov. 21, 1754. The following year, during a controversy surrounding fees charged by a Charleston medical clinic, Timothy insisted on remaining impartial, as evidenced by his refusal to print solicitations on the subject unless they were “properly and sufficiently recommended.” *Ibid.*, July 3, 1755.

¹⁴ Journeymen have been referred to as “nothing else than vagabond persons, bound to no master.” I.F. Grant, quoted in Clapham, *A Concise Economic History of Britain*, 133-34. David T. Pottinger has noted that in Europe journeymen were theoretically men who had completed their apprenticeships but had not been received as masters in the guild. This lack of acceptance was usually due to two factors—insufficient capital with which to set up a

in order to avail themselves of a work force that had continuity as well as to counter the spiraling wage demands of journeymen who were determined to set up their own printing houses. Apprentices cost little more than food and a room in the house, were usually bound for seven years, and could be trained to perform many of the journeymen's duties. This arrangement allowed masters to hire fewer journeymen and thus pay them fewer—and lower—wages.¹⁵

The shift from journeymen to apprentices came at a price. The disadvantage of allowing an apprentice to master the printing trade too soon is exemplified by the case of James Parker, who became one of the most gifted and important printers of the century and a close associate of Franklin. On January 1, 1726, Parker, at age eleven or twelve, signed an apprenticeship indenture with New York City printer William Bradford for a term of eight years. Bradford promised to teach Parker printing and bookbinding, provide him with drink, apparel, and lodging, and supply him two sets of clothes at the end of his apprenticeship. On May 17, 1733, Parker fled Bradford's employ because he believed his printing skills were already superior to Bradford's and thus thought Bradford had nothing more to teach him. Parker's skill could command good wages, or allow him to set up on his own. The apprenticeship shackled him to a poor teacher and afforded him no opportunity to grow in his craft. Years later, Parker reflected on his apprenticeship, writing "Forty Years ago when a Boy . . . I was the first that brought the printing Art into any Credit here (New York City)."¹⁶

shop or legal restrictions on the number of masters, in which case journeymen would wait for a vacancy to occur. Pottinger, *The French Book Trade in the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, 1958), 241.

¹⁵ Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice*, 8, 94; Lawrence C. Wroth, *The Colonial Printer* (New York, 1931), 158-59; Henry Rosemont, "Benjamin Franklin and the Philadelphia Typographical Strikers of 1786," *Labor History* 22 (1981), 398-429. Few reliable sources exist which suggest the average duration of an apprenticeship in colonial America during the early eighteenth century. However, one scholar found that 189 of 198 apprenticeships in New York from 1718 to 1727 were for seven years or more, with 120 of those requiring seven years. Paul H. Douglas, *American Apprenticeship and Industrial Education* (New York, 1921), 40. Interestingly, Douglas notes that trades in colonial America could be mastered in less than five years. An apprenticeship which required more time than this "was an exploitation of the boy." *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁶ *The New-York Gazette and Weekly Post-Boy*, May 25, 1752; James Parker, "An Humble

Bradford advertised for Parker's return, describing him as "an Apprentice lad . . . by trade a Printer, aged about 19 years; he is of a fresh Complexion, with short yellowish Hair" and offering twenty shillings for his return. This amount was doubled a month later. Probably at the urging of Franklin, who had befriended the runaway, taken him in, and presumably permitted him to work in the shop as a journeyman, Parker apparently served the duration of his apprenticeship, and he likely paid a penalty of additional service for running away.¹⁷

Franklin's reason for urging Parker to return to Bradford might have been motivated by his own imprudence a decade earlier. At age twelve in 1718, Franklin had been apprenticed to his older brother James, the printer of the *New-England Courant*, until he turned twenty-one (effectively, for a period of more than eight years). The indenture included an unusual stipulation—during his final year of service, Benjamin Franklin would receive journeyman's wages. Franklin matured rapidly as a printer's apprentice: "In a little time I made great Proficiency in the Business, and became a useful Hand to my Brother," he wrote.¹⁸ But after repeated quarrels with his brother,

Address to the PUBLICK," broadside reprinted in Beverly McAnear, "James Parker versus John Holt," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* 59 (April 1941) 95; Alan Dyer, *A Biography of James Parker, Colonial Printer* (Troy, 1982), 3-4. A photocopy of the James Parker apprenticeship indenture, dated Jan. 1, 1726, is in the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia. Parker's estimation of his printing skill is supported by at least two historians. Victor Paltsits wrote of Parker, "In his day he was in eminence and efficiency the equal of any printer in English-America. He was a better printer than Bradford or Franklin." See Paltsits in Dumas Malone, ed., *The Dictionary of American Biography* (10 vols., New York, 1958), 7:227. Isaiah Thomas, a contemporary of Parker, noted that Parker "was a correct and eminent printer . . . He possessed a sound judgment, and a good heart; was industrious in business, and upright in his dealings." Thomas, *The History of Printing in America* (1810; reprint ed., New York, 1970), 520.

¹⁷ *New York Gazette*, May 17, 1733; *American Mercury*, June 21, 1733; Benjamin Franklin to Jane Mecom, [June?] 1748, Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 3:301. Although settlements between masters and runaway apprentices were often reached via a cash payment to the master, it is reasonable to conclude that Parker served a penalty for running away because he said he worked more than eight years as an apprentice and worked for Bradford in 1741. Had Parker run away and never completed his apprenticeship, it is doubtful he would have been hired by Bradford eight years later. See Dyer, *A Biography of James Parker*, 4-5.

¹⁸ Franklin's indentures have disappeared. This account is based on Lemay and Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 11, and on items typically found in apprenticeship agreements (including those Franklin formed with his apprentices).

who "was passionate & had often beaten me," Franklin ran away in 1723 and offered his services to the four other printers in Boston. None would employ him, for James "took care to prevent my getting Employment in any other Printing-House of the Town, by going round & speaking to every Master, who accordingly refus'd to give me Work."¹⁹ That James Franklin was able to prevent his brother from securing work is an early example of the structural solidarity within the printing trade, a solidarity that characterized later networks.

Stymied in his efforts locally and trying to avoid his family, whom he thought would doubtless prevent his departure, Franklin arranged covertly to board a New York-bound ship, under the guise that he "had got a naughty Girl with Child, whose Friends would compel me to marry her." Finding no work in New York, he traveled to Philadelphia and passed himself off as a journeyman, eventually securing employment with both of that city's printers, first Andrew Bradford on a sporadic basis and then Samuel Keimer full-time.²⁰

Had he been in England instead of America, Franklin would not have been as successful in billing himself as a journeyman. Eighteenth-century guild jurisdiction in England was so powerful that he would probably not have been able to find work, and even if he found a post, his credentials would have been more thoroughly investigated. Had he been discovered as a runaway apprentice, he could have been prosecuted. As there were no guilds in colonial America, a capable boy like Franklin could simply move to a different colony and claim journeyman status. The legal penalties for runaway apprentices differed from colony to colony and did not extend across colonial borders. Also, no printers kept records that would certify the completion of educational apprenticeships. A high demand for skilled workers in the more prestigious crafts gave the colonial printing apprentice an excellent chance of finding employment.²¹

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 18-20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 20-27.

²¹ Margaret Gay Davies, *The Enforcement of English Apprenticeship, 1563-1642* (Cambridge, 1956), 82; Dunlop and Denman, *English Apprenticeship and Child Labour*, 85; Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice*, 5, 7. While skilled workers in printing and several other prestigious crafts were in demand, there was not such a demand for workers in lower-level crafts. See Billy G. Smith, "The Material Lives of Laboring Philadelphians, 1750 to 1800," *William and Mary Quarterly* 38 (1981), 163-202; and Nash, *The Urban Crucible*, chaps. 3, 5, 9.

Despite the unkindness with which his brother had treated him, Franklin later expressed regret for his action. In a return visit to Boston in 1733, ten years after he had fled, Franklin visited his estranged brother in Newport and made amends. Franklin wrote: "In returning I call'd at Newport, to see my Brother there with his Printing-House. Our former differences were forgotten, and our Meeting was very cordial and affectionate." Afflicted with failing health and anticipating death, James Franklin asked that Benjamin take on his son, James Franklin, Jr., as an apprentice. The Philadelphian agreed, noting, "Thus it was that I made my Brother ample Amends for the Service I had depriv'd him of by leaving him so early."²² Franklin was probably never completely contrite, as he was by this time in charge of his own Philadelphia printing house and had fared as well or better than if he had continued to endure James's abuse for the duration of his indenture.

The omnipresent temptation to abscond must have seemed attractive to boys (like Parker) who were confident of their printing skills, because of the relative ease of traveling to another colony and seeking employment as journeymen. When apprentices ran away, they hurt the businesses of many colonial printers, who needed all available workers. The printers frequently published notices offering rewards for the return of their footloose apprentices. Andrew Bradford, for example, advertised in a 1728 issue of his *American Weekly Mercury* for the return of apprentice Nicholas Classon. William Parks noted in the *Virginia Gazette* that one of his runaways was adept at making and picking locks. Joseph Royle sought the return of one apprentice, whom he described as "very thick, stoops much, and has a down look; he is a little Pock-pitted, has a Scar on one of his Temples, is much addicted to Liquor, very talkative when drunk and remarkably stupid." Despite this unflattering portrayal, Royle offered the hefty sum of £5 for the young man's return. James Franklin simply placed an ad in his *New-England Courant* when his apprenticed brother ran away, informing readers that "James Franklin, Printer in Queen Street, wants a likely lad for an apprentice."²³

²² Lemay and Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 98-99.

²³ *American Weekly Mercury*, June 13, 1728; *Virginia Gazette*, Dec. 12, 1745; *Maryland Gazette*, May 2, 1765; *New-England Courant*, Sept. 30, 1723.

One of Franklin's partners, Peter Timothy, had a particularly difficult time with apprentice Charles Crouch. As a result, Timothy published numerous public notices warning of Crouch's character and penchant for swindling. In 1750 Timothy printed a notice that Crouch had run away and warned, "whoever harbors or entertains him will be prosecuted with the utmost severity." The following year, the sixteen-year-old Crouch "absented himself" again, prompting Timothy to comment that the apprentice "hath since (as well as at many other times) been seen tipling and gaming in divers public houses in this town." Timothy described him as having "a mighty pleasant countenance," although "his knees incline inward to each other." Crouch seems to have stayed put for two years before wanderlust struck again in February 1753. This time, he tried to collect Timothy's debts for his own use. Timothy warned "that no person whosoever, do pay any monies on my account to Charles Crouch, or have any dealings with him in my name." Timothy reported that Crouch was "at Port-Royal, where he pretended to be free and that he was sent to collect my debts in the country." Crouch was apprehended, but he ran away again in June.²⁴

Ironically, when Timothy suspended publication of his *South-Carolina Gazette* shortly after passage of the American Stamp Act, Charleston radicals turned to his disloyal ex-apprentice. They set up Crouch with his own printing shop and newspaper and, as Timothy informed Franklin, supported this "worthless Fellow" with "their utmost Zeal and Interest." As a result, Timothy found himself "from the most popular reduced to the most unpopular Man in the Province." Adding to the irony is the fact that Crouch was Timothy's brother-in-law. Timothy soon regained the radicals' favor by vigorously supporting the non-importation movement.²⁵

Franklin had many early experiences which impressed on him the importance of responsible behavior and later influenced his choices

²⁴ *South-Carolina Gazette*, March 5, 1750, March 4, 1751, Feb. 12 and 26, 1753, and June 25, 1753.

²⁵ Peter Timothy to Benjamin Franklin, Sept. 3, 1768, Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 15:200-1; Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 571. For further information on Timothy's activities and their effect on his reputation, see Jeffery A. Smith, "Impartiality and Revolutionary Ideology: Editorial Policies of the *South-Carolina Gazette*, 1732-1775," *Journal of Southern History* 49 (1983), 522-24.

of partners, protégés, and business associates. Growing restless in Keimer's shop and wishing to set up his own printing house, Franklin was persuaded by provincial governor William Keith to open a shop in Philadelphia. Franklin agreed and traveled to London at Keith's request in 1724 to establish business relationships with suppliers of books and stationery and secure the needed supplies. These were to be purchased with letters of credit Keith promised to send, along with letters of recommendation, but none were forthcoming. With his expectations shattered and finding himself in need of employment, Franklin secured work in London as a journeyman printer. While there, he became disenchanted with the behavior and rituals of the apprentices and journeymen.²⁶

The serious and businesslike Franklin deplored his fellow pressmen's practice of drinking on the job. "I drank only water; the other Workmen, near 50 in number, were great Guzzlers of Beer," he recalled. Laughed at as "the Water-American," Franklin impressed his colleagues by regularly carrying a large form of type in each hand, while the others, who drank "*strong* beer that [they] might be *strong* to labour," could carry only one form. Franklin explained to them the strength beer afforded was only proportional to the flour of the barley it contained, and that more flour could be found in a piece of bread, which was much less expensive. His attempt at persuasion was ignored, causing Franklin to dismiss the workers' excessive consumption of beer as "a detestable Custom."²⁷

Franklin was soon promoted from the press room to the composing room, where he found himself expected to pay the newcomer's fee of five shillings for beer. Franklin refused, having paid the fee while a pressman. "I had thought it an Imposition, as I had paid below," Franklin wrote. "The Master thought so too, and forbad my paying it." Franklin held out for two or three weeks and "was accordingly considered as an Excommunicate." His refusal to pay earned him the ire of his fellow workers. Franklin's refusal to pay twice for beer

²⁶ Lemay and Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 28-29, 34, 39-43, 45; Nash, *Urban Crucible*, 148-54; Thomas Wendel, "The Keith-Lloyd Alliance: Factional and Coalition Politics in Colonial Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 92 (1968), 289-305.

²⁷ Lemay and Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 45-46.

he did not consume prompted the compositors to perform "so many little Pieces of private Mischief," including "mixing my Sorts, transposing my Pages, breaking my Matter, &c. &c. if I were ever so little out of the Room," he wrote.²⁸

These experiences and observations of wastefulness, drunkenness, and empty ritual left a lasting impression on Franklin, as evidenced by his reward of partnerships to his most industrious and well-behaved workers. This elevation to master-printer status probably served as a tempting incentive for Franklin's workers to behave more responsibly than their European counterparts.

In 1726 Franklin returned to Philadelphia and Keimer's printing house, remaining only a short time before forming a partnership with Keimer's pressman Hugh Meredith. Financed by Meredith's father, Franklin and Meredith opened their own shop, the third in Philadelphia, in 1728. The following year, they commenced publication of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*.²⁹

This partnership did not succeed, much to Franklin's relief. He resented Meredith's insufficient skill and periodic drunkenness; so, when Meredith told Franklin that he no longer wished to be a printer, preferring instead to buy farm land in North Carolina, Franklin bought out Meredith with a loan provided by friends Robert Grace and William Coleman. Although he had plunged into debt, Franklin had become sole proprietor of both the printing press and the newspaper. He later proposed a partnership to former Keimer apprentice David Harry, "which he, fortunately for me, rejected with Scorn."³⁰

Franklin's arduous involvements with Keith, Keimer, Meredith, and Harry influenced his expectations of others and prompted him to exercise great care in his business relationships. Guided by the prudence and circumspection that became hallmarks of his character, Franklin quickly pursued other partnerships, most of which fared successfully. Many of these partnerships were formed with workers whom he deemed worthy by setting them up in various communities

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 50, 52-53, 55-56, 59-60, 63-64, 68.

³⁰ "From Hugh Meredith: Dissolution of Partnership," July 14, 1730, in Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 1:175; Lemay and Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 64-66, 68.

as contractually bound partners. Inspired by early success in the development of his printing partnerships, Franklin wrote: "I was encourag'd to . . . promote several of my Workmen who had behaved well, by establishing them with Printing-Houses in different Colonies."³¹ Franklin used apprentices and journeymen in a novel manner. Often apprentices were indentured to relatives who were printers, so that once the apprentices became journeymen or masters, they would forge business alliances with their kin. Unlike the common practice of cultivating loosely structured printing associations through familial relationships, Franklin's network was the first in America to consist chiefly of non-family members.

Franklin supplied members of his network with press and types, shared the cost of materials, and used them as agents to sell his *Poor Richard's Almanack*. He received one-third of his partners' profits for the duration of the contract, which was usually six years. When the contract expired, the printer had the option of continuing the arrangement or buying Franklin's press and types. These contracts were remarkably thorough and similar, a point in which Franklin took pride.³²

Franklin's preparation of apprentices for their own printing houses represented a substantial departure from the European system, also practiced in colonial America, in which master craftsmen used apprenticeships to limit the growth of trades by substituting apprentices for journeymen and other hired help, thereby avoiding payment of wages and preventing journeymen from raising enough money to open their own shops.³³ Instead, Franklin—alone and in tandem with his partner Parker—used apprentices and journeymen alike to *expand* the printing trade to communities which either lacked printers or had room for competition. This practice was emulated later in the century by Isaiah Thomas and others.³⁴

³¹ Lemay and Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 108.

³² These stipulations may be found in any of Franklin's partnership contracts, some of which are reproduced in Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, passim.

³³ Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice*, 8-9; Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book* (London, 1976), 129, 134-35; Pottinger, *The French Book Trade in the Ancien Régime*, 265-68, 279-80. For a contrasting view, see John U. Nef, *Industry and Government in France and England, 1540-1640* (Ithaca, 1964), 22.

³⁴ Wetherell, "Brokers of the Word," 122-26.

By relying on the virtues he so often professed (hard work, honesty, and sobriety), along with a fiercely competitive nature, keen business acumen, and skillful interpersonal management, Franklin made his small business grow. He hired as a journeyman Thomas Whitmarsh, a compositor he had known in London, and he took on Joseph Rose, the son of former William Bradford employee Aquila Rose, as an apprentice. When the Assembly of South Carolina offered £1000 in 1731 to induce a printer to open shop in that colony, Franklin and Whitmarsh formed a partnership. According to its terms, Whitmarsh was to set up a printing house in Charleston, use equipment provided by Franklin, share the cost of the materials with him, and give him one-third of the profit. The arrangement was to have lasted for six years.³⁵ That Whitmarsh was contractually bound to print only with Franklin's equipment effectively prevented his own expansion. Franklin thus not only extended his influence to the South but also controlled Whitmarsh, forming the first in a series of partnerships which would eventually become a printing network, with Franklin as its nexus.

When Whitmarsh died unexpectedly in 1733, Franklin sent his Philadelphia journeyman, Lewis Timothy, as a replacement. When Timothy died five years later, Franklin first took on wife Elizabeth Timothy and then son Peter Timothy as associates. Although both Whitmarsh and Lewis Timothy died not long after becoming Franklin's partners, Franklin himself regarded the South Carolina venture a success. This inspired him to establish other partnerships and working arrangements from New England to Antigua. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin noted: "The Partnership at Carolina having succeeded, I was encourag'd to engage in others, and to promote several of my Workmen who had behaved well, by establishing them with Printing-Houses in different Colonies, on the same terms with that in Carolina." In 1741 Franklin set up James Parker (William Bradford's runaway apprentice whom Franklin had hired as a journeyman) in

³⁵ "Articles of Agreement with Thomas Whitmarsh," Sept. 13, 1731, in Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 1:205-8; Lemay and Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 68.

New York, and in 1748 Franklin sent journeyman Thomas Smith to Antigua.³⁶

Franklin's partnerships enabled him to benefit financially from this expansion of trade, as it offered him numerous markets in which to sell printing supplies and *Poor Richard's Almanack*. Part of Franklin's success in establishing these lucrative partnerships was based on his ability to select for partnerships printers he could trust and then to bind them with a detailed contract. "Partnerships often finish in Quarrels," Franklin wrote, "but I was Happy in this, that mine were all carry'd on and ended amicably; owing I think a good deal to the Precaution of having very explicitly Settled in our Articles every thing to be done by or expected from each Partner, so that there was Nothing to dispute." These copious contracts were essential to the stability of the partnerships and the network.³⁷

Franklin also established working relationships with several family members. He took nephew James Franklin, Jr., into his Philadelphia shop in 1740 for a seven-year apprenticeship. When the term expired, Franklin offered his nephew the opportunity to form a partnership and open a printing house in New Haven, but the youth returned to his Newport, Rhode Island, home, joining his mother Ann as a printer. Still desirous of opening a shop in New Haven, Franklin turned to his nephew Benjamin Mecom, whom Franklin had arranged to be apprenticed to Parker and who had taken over the Antigua shop when Smith died. Having moved from Antigua to Boston, Mecom declined, forcing his uncle to persuade Parker to run the New Haven firm, in addition to printing operations in New York and Woodbridge, New Jersey, with his own coterie of partners.³⁸

³⁶ Lemay and Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 108. For a more detailed discussion of Franklin's partnerships, see Frasca, "Benjamin Franklin's Printing Network," *passim*.

³⁷ Lemay and Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 108. As an example that Franklin's partnerships were lucrative, during the eighteen years he was a silent partner with Hall, he averaged £467 per year from that enterprise alone—the approximate income of a high-priced colonial lawyer. Esmond Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia* (Cambridge, 1986), 52.

³⁸ Lemay and Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 98; "James Franklin: Indenture of Apprenticeship," Nov. 5, 1740, in Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 2:261-63; Benjamin Franklin to Jane Mecom, [June?] 1748, *ibid.*, 3:301-4; and Wilberforce Eames, "The Antigua Press and Benjamin Mecom, 1748-1765," *American Antiquarian Society Proceedings* 38 (1928), 303-48.

By the summer of 1743, Franklin had financed and profited from three printing houses: his own in Philadelphia, Timothy's in Charleston, and Parker's in New York. He still had further expansion on his mind, as he revealed to longtime friend and London printer William Strahan. In response to a letter from Strahan recommending a young journeyman, Franklin wrote: "I have already three Printing-Houses in three different colonies, and purpose to set up a fourth if I can meet with a proper Person to manage it, having all the materials ready for that purpose." Franklin added that "if the young Man will venture over hither" and discuss a working arrangement, "I make no doubt but he will think my proposals reasonable." The "young man" was David Hall, a journeyman for Strahan who had also worked for Watts. Franklin hired him in 1744 as a journeyman, intending to set him up in the West Indies, but Franklin liked Hall so much that he made him a partner in the Philadelphia shop on January 1, 1748. This enabled Franklin to retire from active service as a printer, although he remained a silent partner. The partnership lasted eighteen years.³⁹

Many apprentices and journeymen worked for Franklin, some of whom rose to partnership and their own printing houses in colonial cities. As these men set out on their own, they secured their own workers and some, partners, all the while remaining bound to Franklin by contract and/or loyalty. Franklin probably was motivated more by money than altruism,⁴⁰ yet his establishment of a network of

³⁹ Benjamin Franklin to William Strahan, July 10, 1743, Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 2:383-84; Franklin to Strahan, July 4, 1744, *ibid.*, 2:409; "Articles of Agreement with David Hall," Jan. 1, 1748, in *ibid.*, 3:263-67; Lemay and Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 119; Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 123.

⁴⁰ According to network printer William Goddard, Franklin and several of his associates were motivated by the quest for "Wealth & Power for themselves & Connexions." At the onset of the American Revolution, Samuel Adams and other Whig leaders, suspecting Franklin of being "a suspicious doubtful character," asked for Goddard's opinion of Franklin's political leanings. Goddard recalled: "I told them if they could convince him that it would redound to his INTEREST to support the American Cause, he would soon declare himself in its Favour, and not otherwise." William Goddard to Isaiah Thomas, April 15, 1811, Isaiah Thomas Papers (American Antiquarian Society). A perusal of primary sources would seem to lend support to Goddard's assertion. While Franklin likely had a philanthropic interest in the growth of the early American press, this was probably not his primary impetus. There are few references in Franklin's autobiography and papers which suggest altruism as

printers contributed to the growth of the trade. Franklin “augmented the intercolonial movement of journeymen and the planting of papers,” Arthur M. Schlesinger wrote. “Training a succession of young hands in his shop, he saw with his characteristic blend of idealism and practicality how he could at the same time promote popular enlightenment and benefit his pocketbook.”⁴¹

During its heyday, the apprenticeship system made a major contribution to American journalism. The arrangement, in which youths offered themselves as cheap labor in exchange for the promise of vocational education, formed the foundation for the structural growth of the early American press. Apprentices, who were commonly adolescent males, came from various social classes, as printing was less class-based than many other trades of the era.

Once they had mastered the trade, many apprentices sought to become journeymen printers and earn a living via their printing skills. Commonly, these journeymen aspired to save enough money to buy a shop and supplies of their own, thereby achieving master-printer status. This system of vocational training and advancement not only filled the ranks in the printing trade but also encouraged its expansion by providing more skilled craftsmen. The encouragement of the trade’s growth represented a considerable departure from European printing, in which apprenticeships were used just as much to limit their crafts because they were overrun with aspiring artisans.

Franklin altered not only the European trade practice but the American printing custom as well, by recruiting some of his apprentices and journeymen for partnerships, in which he provided them with a press and types and established them with printing houses. As these partners formed their own associations, and as Franklin formed others on his own, the Franklin printing network began to take shape. To construct the network, Franklin, and eventually his partners, recruited those workers whose character most impressed Franklin (and probably reminded him of his own frugality, sobriety, and work ethic)

his central motivation for establishing the partnerships. There are, however, sufficient references to profits and expenditures to lead one to believe this was Franklin’s primary interest. Franklin’s contractual arrangements with his partners netted him a percentage—usually one-third—of the total profits the partners made.

⁴¹ Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence*, 56.

to situations of mutual gain by promoting them to partnerships. The apprenticeship system supplied the pool of talent integral to the success of the network.⁴²

With Franklin supplying the capital and materials for his workers to set up shop (thus eliminating the obstacle which prevented many early American journeymen from setting up on their own), his partners formed associations and thus formed economically viable businesses. This signaled a movement away from reliance on political and social elites, who had helped support the press in the early eighteenth century in order to control a means of articulating and generating support for their views. The fact that a segment of the laboring class assumed control of American mass communication presaged an increase in political activity among the lower classes, as newspapers, mostly of the anti-administration ilk, made "pitches" to laborers.⁴³

While they had their own views and aspirations, Franklin and his partners seemed to have held to a similar political ideology. This raises the question of whether Franklin selected printers for partnerships because they possessed an ideology similar to his or whether he inculcated his views into them, either through subtle persuasion or explicit coercion. The evidence is so scanty that one can only speculate, but it would seem that Franklin consciously chose partners whose beliefs resembled his own. This may have been part of what Franklin meant when he referred to recruiting printers who had "behaved well" or were "of good character." It is equally likely that Franklin, recalling the antipathy toward masters and the laxity found in some European and American printing houses, as well as the problem of runaway apprentices, sought to avoid these labor difficulties. Despite the network printers' kindred political ideologies and views of their

⁴² Franklin enumerated this code of conduct early in life. At the age of twenty, he wrote a "Plan of Conduct" while at sea, returning to Philadelphia from his stay in London. The plan called for frugality, honesty, sincerity, industriousness, patience, and avoidance of foolish diversions. Years later, Franklin wrote of his plan: "It is the more remarkable, as being form'd when I was so young, and yet being pretty faithfully adhered to quite thro' to old Age." "Plan of Conduct" in Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 1:99-100; Lemay and Zall, eds., *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, 52.

⁴³ See, for example, Milton M. Klein, ed., *The Independent Reflector* (Cambridge, 1963), 57, 336-42; Dyer, *A Biography of James Parker*, 31-39, 41-43; and *Boston Independent Advertiser*, Jan. 25, 1748.

work, some stern words appear to have been necessary when individual predilections conflicted with network imperatives.⁴⁴

The printing activities of Franklin and his cohorts indicate the significance of associations among printers. These associations, when interconnected, formed loosely structured but influential networks that enlarged the scope of the early American printing trade, aided in the dissemination of information and opinion, and impressed the significance of journalism upon the collective consciousness of early America.

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⁴⁴ See, for example, Beverly McAnear, "James Parker versus William Weyman," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* 59 (Jan. 1941), 1-23; McAnear, "James Parker versus John Holt," 77-95; and Frasca, "Benjamin Franklin's Printing Network," 145-58.