

ALBANY GAZETTE.

M O N D A Y , N O V E M B E R 25, 1771.

PERIODICAL MISCELLANY: with a pleasing variety of recent Occurrences, instructive Fables, and curious Anecdotes, properly arranged; has been generally encouraged; and its Revolution anxiously expected, by the Curious; the Inquisitive; the Men of Business; and indeed, all who prefer Mental Amusement, to less abstruse Gratifications.

Its civilized Contents; News Papers are more extensively perused, than any other Publication which is visible, from the great Number printed in Europe, and in America.

Its Consideration alone, in a late Review, Testimony of their Utility, therefore, we shall only observe, that an impartial Paper, conducted with Judgment, in the Pursuit of Justice; the Propagation of Moral and public Views; promotes a Spirit of Equity; is favourable to Civil and Religious Liberty; a cheap Vehicle of Knowledge and Instruction to the Ignorant; and expanded with numerous commercial Advantages.—The period requires but a short Review from Business, and the usual Expence is so inconsiderable, that few can be deprived of enjoying it, through Apprehension of Expence, either upon their Time or their Pockets.

SAVANT Subscribers to the establishment of this *GAZETTE*, having indicated their Desire of its Appearance this Day: The Printer, always willing to accept the Advice of their Friends, and exceedingly anxious of gratifying a Number of Gentlemen, to whom they have been highly obliged; have published this first Number, requesting, that those who choose to purchase this Paper for Binding; will be pleased to send in their Subscriptions as soon as possible; otherwise, they will be disappointed of any farther Numbers.

A DIALOGUE, between MERCURY, an English DUELLIST, and a Mohawk S.A. YAGE.

MERCURY, Chirco's boat is on the other side of the water. Allow me, before I return, to have from conversation with the weak American Savage, whom you brought hither at the same time as you conducted me to the bushes. I never saw one of this species before, and am curious to know what the animal is. He looks very grim—Pray, Sir, what is your name? I understand you speak English.

SAVAGE.
Yes, I learnt it in my childhood having been bred for some years in the town of New-York. But, before I was a man, I returned to my countrymen, the valiant Mohawks; and being chosen by one of our Chiefs for the title of *Wanag*, I never ceased to have any thing to do with them afterwards. Yet I took up the hatchet for them with the rest of my tribe in the war against France, and was killed while I was upon a *posting party*. But I did very well satisfied: for my friends were victorious, and so well I was that I had fought five men and five women and children. In a former war I had done still greater exploits. My name is *the bloody Star*: it was given me to express my ferocity and valor.

MERCURY.
Bloody Star! I respect you, and am your humble servant. My name is Tom Puffwell, very well known at Arthur's. I am a gentleman by my birth, and by profession a gamester and man of honor. I have killed men in fair fighting, in honorable single combat, but don't understand cutting the throats of women and children.

SAVAGE.
Sir, that is our way of making war. Every nation has its own customs. But by the principles of your religion, and that hold in your breast, I suppose you will kindly as I can assist in those bloody wars. How happened it that your country did not take of your scalp?

MERCURY.
Sir, I was killed in a duel. A friend of mine had his eye made worse. After some or three years, he did not get well himself, he asked me to play him. I thought his demand unreasonably to my honour, and so I was at a challenge. We met in Hyde-Park. The

fallow could not fence: I was the adroitest fencerman in England. I gave him three or four wounds; but still he rose upon me with such impetuosity, that he put me out of my play, and I could not prevent him from whipping me through the lungs. I died the next day, as a man of honor should, without any shuffling signs of repentance; and he will follow me soon, for his surgeon has declared his wounds to be mortal. It is said that his wife is dead of her fight, and that his family of seven children will be undone by his death. So I am well revenged, and that is a comfort. For my part, I had no wife—I always hated marriage; my whole will was good use of herself, and my children are provided for at the Foundling Hospital.

SAVAGE.
Mercury, I won't go in a down with that fellow. The law is made for the cowardly; the law is made for his friend: I say I won't go in about with that fellow. I will fight over the water: I can swim like a duck.

MERCURY.
Swim over the *Siyah* is not to be done; it is against the laws of Pluto's empire. You must go in the boat, and be quiet.

SAVAGE.
Don't tell me of laws. I am a Savage; I value no laws. Talk of laws to the Englishman, there are laws in his country, and yet you see he did not regard them; for they could never allow him to kill his fellow-subject, in time of peace, because he asked him to pay a debt. I know that the English are a *hardhearted nation*; but they can't be brutal as to make such things laws.

MERCURY.
You reason well against him. But how comes it that you are so offended at another, who you have married women in their boys, and children in the

SAVAGE.
I killed none but my enemies: I never killed my own countrymen. I never killed my friend—I do not take my blanket, and let it come over in the boat; but let the murderer do not sit upon it, or touch it. If he does, I will burn it in the fire of my powder. *Esawell!*—I am refused to boat over the water.

MERCURY.
By this touch of my wand: I'll at thy strength from thee.—Swim now if thou canst.

SAVAGE.
This is a very potent enchanter.—Restore me my strength, and I will obey thee.

MERCURY.
I restore it; but be wily, and do as I bid you, otherwise work will befall you.—Restore me my strength, and I will obey thee.

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so for thee here. How dost thou stand? He said: Has Mercury struck thee with his envenomed rod? Or art thou about to let us see how advanced thou art? If he would permit me, I would wish thee to dance in a way that thou hadst not yet learnt. I'll make thee caper and leap like a buck. But what's the result thou do, that brings thee here?

MERCURY.
O Heaven! must I bear this! What can I do with this fellow? I have neither found out yet, nor had time to be twice as strong as mine.

MERCURY.
You must answer his questions. It was your own doing to have a conversation with him. He is not well bred; but he will tell you some words which you must bear in this place. It would have been well for you, if you had heard them *before*. He asked you what you would do, in case of being and coming.

MERCURY.
I feel very agreeably.

SAVAGE.
Let me hear you sing your *drunk song*, or the *war song*. I challenge you to sing.—The fellow is mute.—Mercury, this is a *Sur*.—He tells us nothing but lies. Let me pull out his tongue.

MERCURY.
This is the *ghost* of my dead wife; I dare not repeat it. Did what a disgrace to the family of the Puffwells! This indeed is *dear*.

MERCURY.
Here, Charon, take the *ghost* to your care. How far the barbarism of the Mohawk will excite his horrid rage, I leave to Minos to judge. But the Englishman, what could he be pleased? The custom of duelling! A bad custom at best; but his wife it cannot avail. The spirit that made him draw his sword in this combat against his friend is not that of *humanity*. It is the spirit of the *ferocious Mohawk*. To let me meet go, for the high lord death in his nostrils before.

MERCURY.
It is to be punished, turn him over to me. I understand the art of fencing. Swear, I begin with this *let me see your sword*. Give you into the boat, so I'll give you another. I am impatient to have you *conquer* me.

MERCURY.
Oh my honour, my honour, to what infamy are you *fallen*!

EUROPEAN INTELLIGENCE.

PARIS, October 8.
PRINCE Gallatin, ambassador at the Hague, has returned a letter from the junction, dated August 31, advising that after the position of the affairs of Great Britain to those of Sir Bey, he signed the army with a letter of 6000 men; and that he will a number of ships having joined them, he was still remaining at the head of the sea, in order to conquer all Syria.

LONDON, September 8.
The French nation has been celebrated for politeness. It was by police in the Court de Guignes to depart without taking leave.

The conduct of Count de Guignes, French ambassador to this court, was so agreeable to a great pleasure, that some time ago, when it was expected the Count would be removed, he wrote a letter with his own hand to the French monarch, requesting the Count might be continued at his court.

A correspondent tells, the numerous ravens with which the people of this country are loaded, leaves room but for the *more*, which is, to like all they have heard of.

A *wick* day is expected an account from the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, when he intends returning to this kingdom, and, if circumstances, it is said the Duke of Orleans will be appointed to succeed him.

A national opinion is so greatly directed in France, that people who have any property in the *Republic*, that Kingdom, are hourly selling out, though at a surprising loss; and the Emigrants generally, who still legally so fluctuate, are incessantly filled as before.

A correspondent observes that the late Lord of Portsmouth, was a more inferior person than the popular phan, and would in his consequence, the greatest of all could have taken in the latter.

Open to All Parties: Alexander and James Robertson, Albany Printers, 1771–1777

Denis P. Brennan

In 1810, when Isaiah Thomas published the first edition of *The History of Printing in America*, information about the first newspaper in Albany, New York, was rather scarce. Thomas correctly identified the publishers as Alexander and James Robertson but called their paper *The Albany Post-Boy* while admitting, “At this period, very little intelligence respecting it can be obtained.”¹ The 1874 edition of his book contained considerably more information about the Robertsons but still referred to the *Post-Boy*, although it acknowledged in a footnote that all copies of the Robertsons’ paper that had been found were titled *The Albany Gazette*. These changes can most likely be credited to Joel Munsell, an Albany printer and antiquarian who assisted in updating Isaiah Thomas’s work. The resulting second edition, as well as Munsell’s own *Typographical Miscellany*, have been the sources for most of what is known and written about the Robertsons and *The Albany Gazette*. Alexander and James Robertson’s place in Albany history is generally fixed with a short reference to the fact that they published the city’s first newspaper in 1771 and later supported the Loyalist position.

The Robertsons were born in Stonehaven, Scotland, and were taught the printing trade in Edinburgh by their father. James was five years younger than Alexander but came to America first. He arrived in Boston in 1766 at the age of nineteen and completed his training as a journeyman printer under the tutelage of fellow

Scotsmen John Mein and Thomas Fleeming, Boston printers and publishers of *The Boston Chronicle*.

James's service with Mein and Fleeming coincided with a critical period in American colonial history and a time of significant change in the printing industry. The Stamp Act of 1765 had altered the relationship of the colonies to the mother country and set them on a course that would eventually lead to independence. Newspapers would help to chart this course. The repeal of the Stamp Act was significantly aided by the efforts of printers and journalists. Prior to November 1, 1765, when the Stamp Act was scheduled to take effect, newspapers published many articles and resolutions outlining colonial opposition. No stamped newspapers were ever printed, and many either suspended publication or otherwise circumvented the letter of the law. The act was repealed on March 1, 1766; Sidney Kobre aptly describes what the confrontation meant to journalists: "The publishers of the press had been, generally, middlemen, who printed the news of interest to their readers. . . . Now the colonial newspapers began to develop strength, to exert a positive conscious influence. The publishers realized, perhaps for the first time, that their papers could be utilized to protest effectively."²

In Boston, John and Samuel Adams and many others recognized the potential of newspapers not only to educate but also to propagandize. According to Frank Luther Mott in his book, *American Journalism: A History 1690–1960*, Mein and Fleeming made an honest effort to be impartial and present both Patriot and Tory viewpoints. The Boston Committee of Safety, however, refused to accept neutrality. Eventually, Mein was assaulted, hung in effigy, and had to seek protection with the British military.³ Certainly, young James Robertson knew of the confrontation and it may well have been the first in a series of incidents that would lead him also to side with the British.

James Robertson completed his training with Mein and Fleeming and in late 1768 moved to New York City, where he was joined by his twenty-six-year-old brother. Alexander Robertson suffered from a disease which Isaiah Thomas explains left him "deprived of the use of his limbs, and incapacitated for labor."⁴ Nevertheless, judging from Thomas's comments about the brothers, it would appear that between them they had the talents and potential to be successful in the printing business. He explains that James "was a worthy man and a very good printer" and that Alexander was "intelligent, well educated and possessed some abilities as a writer."⁵

In 1769 they set up a printing company on the corner of Beaver Street and on May 8, 1769, published their first newspaper, *The New York Chronicle*.

The Robertsons did not enter unobserved into the company of printers in New York City. James Parker, a longtime New York publisher, kept an eye on them, and his observations can be found as part of his regular correspondence with his former partner, Benjamin Franklin. For instance, on November 22, 1768, he wrote, "A new printer from Scotland has set up here. . . . If he lives, he must have a better Faculty than ever I had, tho I think I live as soberly as he can." He goes on in the same letter to express frustration over economic conditions: "And I have not much hope of either Ease or Prosperity, till I rest in the Grave."⁶ Parker's letter of February 17, 1769, reports to Franklin the death of William Weyman, Parker's former partner, who had published his own newspaper, *The New-York Gazette*, until December 1767. He continues, "a young Scotch man has got his [Weyman's] tools and set up here, and 'tis said, in the Spring will publish a News-paper."⁷ It would appear that at this point, either Alexander Robertson had not yet arrived from Scotland or Parker was not aware of his presence.

Parker's pessimism about business difficulties continues as a theme in his letters. Although he was printing and selling a large quantity of newspapers, he was unable to make ends meet because costs had increased so dramatically. To make matters worse, he was now faced with additional competition in the form of James and Alexander Robertson. By late March of 1769, Parker was aware of both of them and their plans for the *New York Chronicle*. Somewhat cynically he assessed their chances: "They are Scots Lads: and if they be fortunate Fools, they will have no Need of Wisdom, otherwise they will fall through."⁸

The first issue of the Robertsons' *Chronicle* appeared on May 8, 1769, and their apparent initial success seems to have stoked the fires of resentment. Parker's letter of May 30 to Franklin referred to "a Couple of smuggled Scots Men" who were, in Parker's opinion, "as bad Workmen as ever Bradford was, but from a large Portion of Impudence, and the National Biass [sic] of all Scotch Men in their favor, I am told they have more Subscribers already than I have."⁹ The reference to "Bradford" is presumably William Bradford, under whom Parker had served as an apprentice and whose paper, *The New York Gazette*, was generally considered to be poorly printed and edited. The success of the *Chronicle*, if indeed it was a success, was short-lived. Publication ceased in early 1770; the last issue located is dated January 4, 1770. Parker probably felt some satisfaction as he gloated in a letter dated

February 2, 1770, to Franklin that “they puff’d and flourished away a While, but the paper is now dropd. They were ignorant Blockheads, but have Impudence enough. I hear they are now at work or going to work for Rivington.”¹⁰

In 1769 the Robertsons also printed a document written by William Smith titled *Review of the Military Operations in North America*. The report takes the form of a letter—signed, in New York on September 9, 1765, “Your Lordship’s most obliged and obedient servant”—but contains 170 pages. Among the *Review*’s many references to activities in and around the Albany area we find the following: “Albany, my Lord, is an old compact city, consisting of 3 or 400 well-built houses. . . . The inhabitants are far from being indigent: the adjacent country abounds with provisions. . . .”¹¹ Smith, however, was not very complimentary to Sir William Johnson and military operations in northern New York. The significance of this particular work to the Robertsons may well be that it served as an introduction to the upstate New York area, which they would soon call home.

Exactly what it was that brought James and Alexander Robertson to Albany, New York, in 1771 is simply not yet known for certain. In the second edition of Thomas’s *History of Printing* we are told, “They were patronized by Sir William Johnson, then superintendent of Indian affairs who advanced them money to purchase a press and types.”¹² This statement has been generally accepted; yet I cannot find any reference in the collected volumes of Sir William Johnson’s papers to support it. Furthermore, Isaiah Thomas’s own records add to the confusion. Thomas’s first edition, published in 1810, made no reference to Johnson’s connection with the Robertsons. Thomas kept extensive notes in preparation for a second edition, which was finally published in 1874, more than thirty years after his death. Included in his handwritten notes are two statements which indicate that the Robertsons’ patron was Sir John Johnson, Sir William’s son. “John” is crossed out in the second statement and “William” is inserted above it in what appears to be a change made by Joel Munsell. It is more likely that Sir William rather than Sir John would have encouraged the establishment of a printing house in Albany, if indeed either of them were involved, but the connection is far from certain.¹³

The papers of Sir William Johnson do confirm Sir William’s wide range of interests. His activities required that he stay aware of the news in the colonies as well as around the world. He corresponded regularly with many people, including General Thomas Gage, whose house was “nearly opposite” the Robertsons’ printing business in New York, and James Rivington, whom Parker had suggested that the

Robertsons may have worked for after the *Chronicle* ceased publication. Rivington's letters were usually accompanied by copies of recent newspapers, either English or colonial. His short letter of December 25, 1769, to Johnson enclosed a newspaper that contained the latest "intelligence" from Europe, and it is possible that the paper was Robertsons' *New York Chronicle*.¹⁴ Other people also sent Johnson newspapers. Joseph Chew, Sir William's secretary, sent a Boston newspaper to Sir William on November 7, 1769, so that he might "be able to form some judgement of the spirit of the times."¹⁵ Among the news Chew mentioned was a report on the assault against James Robertson's former master, John Mein.

The only clear indication that Sir William Johnson may have been actively looking to set up a printing business in Albany is found in a letter dated December 28, 1769, from Peter Silvester, Johnson's lawyer. Silvester wrote to introduce William Goddard, the printer and publisher of the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, who came to Albany "with a View to enlarge his Business & to set up a printing office & publish a Weekly paper in this place if he can meet with proper Encouragement." Goddard came specifically to see Johnson and "to communicate this his design & to know your sentiments."¹⁶ We do not know Goddard's plans, nor do we know Johnson's sentiments, but we do know for certain that Goddard's Pennsylvania printing house did not expand into Albany.

Alexander and James Robertson's printing office in Albany "is said to have been in Barrack, now Chapel Street."¹⁷ It was from this office that on November 25, 1771, Volume 1, Number 1, of the *Albany Gazette*, the first newspaper in New York State outside of New York City, was issued. Alexander was not yet thirty years old, James not twenty-five; they were far from their place of birth, printing pioneers on the fringe of colonial society. They explained in the opening article of the first issue, certainly not without some measure of self-interest, the values they found in newspapers:

. . . an impartial Paper, conducted with Judgement; is an Epitome of modern History: Brings Men of Merit into public View: promotes a Spirit of Enquiry: is favourable to Civil and Religious Liberty; a cheap vehicle of Knowledge and Instruction to the Indigent; and attended to numberless commercial Advantages. — The perusal requires but a short Recess from Business; and the annual Expense is so inconsiderable, that few can be deprived of enjoying it, through Apprehension of trespassing, either upon their Time or their Pockets.¹⁸

Newspapers did indeed epitomize the modern world of the eighteenth century in colonial America. Begun in Boston in 1704, journalism in America was an outgrowth of English press experience which, after a period marked by attempts at suppression or control, became identified with the right of the people to be informed and educated, and as a means of preserving liberty. Imbued with the philosophy of enlightenment and the spirit of Whig politics, the colonial newspaper industry was dynamic, but it developed slowly at first. Around the middle of the century, newspapers began a significant transformation that can be attributed to the changing social and political atmosphere in the colonies.

In the *Albany Gazette* the Robertsons recognized the developing social and cultural aspects of colonial life. What appears to be missing is any sense of the political aspect. Each of the fifteen issues that are among the collection at the New York State Library follows a regular pattern that includes essays, letters to the printers, international and colonial news, a healthy amount of advertising, and, without fail, the "Poets Corner." There is limited sense of the political tensions that were about to erupt into revolution. Perhaps the Robertsons had come to Albany hoping to avoid those tensions and maintain the impartiality that had long been the hallmark of the printer. Perhaps they published during the calm before the storm of change struck Albany. In any case, the Robertsons, at least during their early years in Albany, appear to have been most interested in the newspaper as a tool of the enlightenment and not as a weapon of the political wars. This may be the result of an honest effort on their part to remain neutral and to serve in the more traditional role of impartial printer, or they may simply have known that making their true feelings known would destroy their business.

Unfortunately, as with the *Chronicle* in New York, the *Gazette* in Albany did not last one year. The exact date publication ceased is not known, but the last issue located is dated August 3, 1772. Also unknown is the reason why the paper failed. It may have been a lack of subscriptions or poor advertising revenue or even the difficulty of obtaining paper for printing. At least once the Robertsons apologized to their readers for missing a week's publication because they did not receive a shipment of paper from New York. The first paper mill in the northern part of New York State was built in Troy, but not until 1793.¹⁹ Whatever the reason, the fact remains that over the thirty-seven-week period from November 25, 1771, to August 24, 1772, the Robertsons printed only twenty-four issues. During one stretch in March, April, and May of 1772 they managed to print only two issues in eleven. All this does not necessarily mean that they were poor journalists, but sim-

ply underscores the challenges they faced along with others who chose to settle on the frontier.

The Robertsons maintained a presence in Albany until 1777, well after they discontinued publication of the *Albany Gazette*. However, as of October 7, 1773, their involvement with newspapers shifted to Connecticut. In Norwich they established a partnership with John Trumbell and began printing a newspaper with the grandiose name *The Norwich Packet and the Connecticut, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Rhode Island Advertiser*.²⁰ More often known simply as the *Norwich Packet*, the name may point to a further connection with James Rivington, who in April of 1773 had begun a similarly titled New York City paper called *Rivington's New-York Gazette; or the Connecticut, New Jersey, Hudson's River, and Quebec Weekly Advertiser*.²¹ The partnership with Trumbell lasted until May of 1776, when the Robertsons sold their interest and Trumbell carried on alone. By this time, the Robertsons' Loyalist tendencies were more well defined and the split resulted, according to Isaiah Thomas, because Trumbell "differed in his politics with his partners."²² Years later James Robertson would explain that they left the paper because they realized that "they could no longer carry it on without making it subservient to the cause of Rebellion."²³ Trumbell continued to publish the paper until his death in 1803.

There is ample evidence of continued printing activity for the Robertson Printing Company in Albany. In 1772 they published, "By order of his excellency William Tryon, Esq; governor and commander in chief," a manual of exercises and maneuvers for the New York Provincial militia.²⁴ Among their work for 1773 was the *Law and Ordinances of the Mayor, Recorder, Alderman, and Commonalty, of the City of Albany*. This was a sixty-six-page document of regulations covering the local ferries, street paving and cleaning, storage of gunpowder, the marking of bread, "Negros, Mulattoes and other Slaves," and even the height of fences. It was well printed and easily readable, with an ornate descriptive banner across the top of each page.²⁵ In the same year they also printed a five-act heroic play written by George Cockings titled "The Conquest of Canada: or, The Siege of Quebec."²⁶

Perhaps most interesting of all their work for 1773 were the confessions they printed for three men who were sentenced to death for counterfeiting the currency. John Smith, Joseph-Bill Packer, and John Wall were executed at Albany, in February, March, and April of 1773, respectively, but only the statement of Packer is in the Early American Imprints collection published by the American Antiquarian

Society. Packer's letter is fifteen pages long, addressed "To the Printers" and in it he vehemently protests his innocence. He accuses a man he calls "Doctor Smith," who may be the John Smith mentioned above, as well as other men, who remain unnamed, of causing his downfall. It may well be that Packer, Smith, and Wall were involved in one scheme. However, Packer indicates that he is alone in his punishment, for he states, "it seems that I must be an Escape Goat to bear their transgressions into the other world."²⁷ In any case, the confessions represent an interesting view of the variety of work that printers were engaged in.

During the time the Robertsons maintained printing offices in both Norwich and Albany, there are a number of examples of the same work printed in both places. In 1774 both offices printed "Extracts from the Votes and Proceedings of the American Continental Congress" in the form of an address to the people of Britain. The Norwich edition makes it clear that the radicals were not yet in control of the Congress. The document begins in part by "avowing our allegiance to his Majesty"²⁸ and concludes by pointing out that "we have chosen a method of opposition, that does not preclude a hearty reconciliation with our fellow citizens on the other side of the Atlantic."²⁹ The Albany copy also included a letter to the citizens of Albany City and County from the delegates who represented them at the Philadelphia Congress.³⁰ Also, the Robertsons printed with Trumbell in Norwich *Bickerstaff's New England Almanack, For the Year of Our Lord, 1776*³¹ and, with little change, the same book in Albany under the name *Bickerstaff's Albany Almanack*.³² There is evidence that, in addition to having the same document printed at both locations, printed material from one location was available for sale at the other.

The news of the Battle of Lexington, which took place on April 19, 1775, reached Albany on May 1, and the city authorities immediately formed Committees of Safety and Correspondence. Local patriots assembled shortly thereafter to form militia companies and prepare for what now seemed to be certain armed conflict.³³ The next two years would be difficult times for Alexander and James Robertson. If they had been inclined to support the British, they were, up to this time, able to keep their sentiments out of public scrutiny, but impartiality would no longer be tolerated.

Once again the starting point for examining this period in the Robertsons' stay in Albany is the second edition of Isaiah Thomas's *History of Printing in America*. There we find the following:

They . . . continued their printing house in Albany until the commencement of the revolutionary war; when, being detected in publishing and circulating in a private manner, highly obnoxious handbills, etc., in support of the royal cause which they decidedly espoused, they judged it expedient hastily to leave the city, and went to Norwich.³⁴

As with most of the information in Thomas about the Robertsons, the above comments were not found in the first edition and are not wholly accurate. *The Minutes of the Albany Committee of Correspondence 1775–1778* provide some additional information on the Robertsons' activities before 1777. Furthermore, in 1784, James Robertson presented a sworn statement to the British Commission of Enquiry into the Losses and Services of the American Loyalists. His statement, which is admittedly prejudiced, remains the only primary source of information on the Robertsons' final years in Albany.

James's statement before the British Commission starts at the beginning of the war. He explains that at that time they were settled in both the City of Albany and the Town of Norwich. The Norwich newspaper provided what he called "a very handsome profit,"³⁵ but he and his brother, as explained above, felt compelled to end their partnership with Trumbell. They returned to Albany, where "they imagined they could be of more immediate Service to Government,"³⁶ which presumably means the British government. By this account, then, sometime after May 1776, the Robertsons concentrated their printing activity in Albany. In 1776, Robertson continues, they were employed by a Colonel Edmeston, who was being held in jail in Albany, "to print and circulate such papers as might have tendency to promote the interests of Great Britain."³⁷ Robertson does not mention that during this period they also published as a broadside "The Tory Act," which was part of the resolves of the Continental Congress. The act alerted the patriots that "divers honest and well meaning, but uniformed people in these colonies . . ." do not fully understand the American cause and they were admonished to "treat all such persons with kindness and attention."³⁸ No doubt the Robertsons hoped for such understanding and consideration.

Robertson's admission would seem to confirm the charge that Isaiah Thomas said was placed against them, of publishing and distributing "highly obnoxious handbills, etc., in support of the royal cause." Furthermore, there was a resolution presented before the Committee of Correspondence on October 18, 1776, "That Major Edmunston be immediately taken into Custody."³⁹ This could very well be

the officer that James Robertson named as “Colonel Edmeston.” Whether the Robertsons were printing leaflets for the Loyalists or not, it is certain that they were doing printing for the Patriots. There are eight references in the committee’s minutes to bills for printing done by the Robertsons which were all ordered paid. The first bill was in September 1775, followed in 1776 by two in June, one each in July, September, October, and November, with the final payment on June 7, 1777. If they were printing for both the British and the Americans, it is difficult to know whether they were serving in the role of impartial printer or were simply out for economic gain.

The confrontation over the printing and circulation of Loyalist handbills finally reached a climax in early February 1777. On February 3 the Committee of Correspondence appointed a committee “to examine the Printing Office in this City, and also to take & seize all such papers as they shall deem necessary.”⁴⁰ They were looking for evidence of the printers’ involvement with the distribution of pro-British literature. There is no mention in this account of the names of the printers, but the Robertsons ran the only printing office in Albany. Later the same day Jacob Cuyler and Harmanus Wendell reported back to the committee that they could find no evidence and that the printers denied publishing the proclamations in question. The printers, however, would not declare their innocence under oath. It was then further resolved that if “the said Printers do not declare upon Oath whether the said proclamation &c. has been reprinted by them or in their office, and at whose request,”⁴¹ their press, types, and other printing equipment could be taken and kept in custody. However, there is no indication that the Robertsons’ equipment was confiscated at that time.

The available records make it difficult to establish the exact sequence of events, especially since James Robertson’s statement to the Board of Enquiry mentions few dates. However, he does state that he felt compelled to leave Albany, and it is reasonable to assume that the Committee of Correspondence’s investigation may have given him adequate incentive. He claims to have gone into hiding at a settlement thirteen miles from the city and to have taken printing materials with him. He presumably intended to continue printing for the British. This was evidently not a very unusual practice for printers. Hugh Hastings wrote that during the revolution, “The average printer maintained a portable shop, ready to be moved at a moment’s warning . . . to reach a destination safe from the enemy.”⁴² Aware that he was being sought, Robertson returned one night to Albany to visit Colonel Edmeston and to arrange his escape to New York City, where he would be protected by the British

military. Edmeston provided Robertson with a forged pass to help insure his safe passage, "a card recommending him to Capt. McKenzie, Sir Wm Howe's secretary,"⁴³ and some secret messages to deliver. James evidently made good his escape, trusting perhaps in the kindness suggested by the Tory Act to protect his handicapped brother, Alexander.

According to James's account, Alexander did not receive very good treatment. Angered by James Robertson's escape, the committee "seized upon the Body of Alexander Robertson who for a Series of Years has been entirely deprived of the use of his Legs"⁴⁴ and placed him in prison. Also imprisoned were William Lewis, an apprentice, and Patrick Kelly, a servant. Exactly when this occurred is unclear, but Alexander Robertson was certainly in jail by June 11, 1777, because on that date he wrote a letter to the Albany Committee complaining about their violent treatment at the hands of the jailer, Stephen Bell. In a scuffle with Bell, Patrick Kelly was severely cut, almost lost his thumb and was left without medical treatment for hours.⁴⁵

If we accept the timing of these events, then the payment to "A & J Robertson" for "printing Two Hundred Hand Bills"⁴⁶ which was made on June 7, 1777, as referred to above, seems somewhat out of place. James was clearly no longer in Albany, so Alexander Robertson and William Lewis may simply have been ordered to do the work. Because of his handicap, Alexander could not have operated a printing press alone. The records show that five days after this bill was paid, on June 12, 1777, William Lewis, the apprentice who was arrested with Robertson, was "ordered sent down to the Fleet prison at Kingston."⁴⁷ This transfer may thus mark the end of printing activity in Albany until after the war was over.

Alexander's ordeal was not yet ended. James Robertson explains that after about six months "confined in a most hideous Apartment in Albany Gaol [sic],"⁴⁸ he was sent to prison in Kingston. He was nearly trapped in that jail when Kingston was burned on October 13, 1777. With no one to help him, he managed to escape by crawling on his hands and knees to a cabbage patch outside his jail. He was found there three days later, burned and bruised, but was simply returned to another prison. Information contradicting this scenario is found in a November 18, 1777, letter from General Israel Putnam to New York State Governor George Clinton. Putnam wrote to recommend the exchange of Alexander Robertson for John Dennis of New Jersey. The exchange was the result of "repeated applications from James Robinson [sic] of N: York," and Putnam favored it because "Robinson [sic] is

a Cripple (& I believe a worthless fellow)."⁴⁹ Putnam also states that Alexander was moved from the Kingston jail before it was burned. Clinton responded to Putnam on November 24, 1777, but objected to the exchange unless it was for "Mr Miller of West Chester County or any other Subject of this State."⁵⁰ Despite this objection, Major General Gates granted permission for the original exchange⁵¹ and Alexander was allowed to join his brother in New York City. James then dramatically concluded his statement before the commission: "It is notorious that no Printers on the continent of America did more, or ran greater risks to serve their King and country than your Memorialists, and at a time when they were far from protection of a British Army."⁵²

The final pages of the Robertsons' statement before the board includes a breakdown of the losses for which he was seeking reimbursement and sworn statements by others to help substantiate his claim. The items listed totaled £650 and included £311 for a printing office, £77 for salaries paid to Lewis and Kelly while they were in prison, and £135 for prison expenses. They eventually received £350.⁵³ Of further interest is the fact that one of those attesting to the Robertsons' claim was Joseph Chew, "late Secretary to Indian Affairs under Sir Wm Johnson."⁵⁴ Chew could not specifically confirm Robertson's claim but did state that he knew the Robertsons and had seen their newspaper.

For the next six years, as long as the British stayed in New York City, the Robertsons were busy publishing newspapers. In New York they published the *Royal American Gazette* from January 16, 1777, until July 31, 1783. For a short period in 1778, James Robertson published the *Royal Pennsylvania Gazette* in Philadelphia. In 1780, James traveled to Charleston, South Carolina, and for about two years he published the *Royal South-Carolina Gazette*. When the British evacuated New York, the Robertsons moved, along with many other Loyalists, to Shelburne, Nova Scotia. There, in 1784, they restarted the *Royal American Gazette*. Later that year, Alexander died at the age of forty-two. James moved the paper to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, where he expected to be appointed the King's Printer. He was greatly disappointed when he received the appointment but was granted no salary for the position. He returned to Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1789 and worked as a printer and bookseller until his death in 1816.⁵⁵

The Robertsons' *Albany Gazette* remains isolated in area history, still a mystery. Today little more is known about the newspaper or the printers than Isaiah Thomas knew in 1810. No printing was done before they came to Albany, and after they

left, the printing presses were silent until 1782. There is even an unconfirmed story, again found in Thomas's second edition, that the Robertsons gave their press to a friend for safekeeping and the friend buried it. The press was dug up in 1782 and sold to Solomon Balantine, who then published Albany's second newspaper.⁵⁶ As with much of what is found about Albany in *The History of Printing*, the accuracy of the story is uncertain, but that does not mean it is untrue. Douglas McMurtrie at least confirms the printing hiatus in his book on Albany imprints, where he explains, ". . . no imprints are recorded for the years 1777 to 1781, inclusive. No satisfactory evidence of printing in Albany during those five Revolutionary years has yet been found."⁵⁷

Obviously, the information available at the present time leaves many unanswered questions about Alexander and James Robertson and their experiences in Albany. We cannot be certain who or what brought them to the city, but I believe that what they sought was simply the chance to practice their trade. Albany was an untouched market, an opportunity for literary and commercial success. They were young, enthusiastic, and truly convinced of the importance of "an impartial paper, conducted with judgement," as they wrote in the opening article of the first edition of the *Gazette*. There is no doubt that they were also interested in the financial benefits of a profitable printing house. Judging from James Parker's comments, they were not likely to find that in New York City. Their most critical error was in not recognizing the transformation that the press underwent during the Stamp Act crisis. The crisis enhanced the importance of the press but only at the price of its impartiality. Perhaps the Robertsons thought they could ride out the pendulum of change in a place like Albany, which was removed from the center of controversy. Notwithstanding James Robertson's dramatic remarks before the British Board of Enquiry, I believe they were carried, mostly by circumstance, to the Loyalist position and then to self-imposed exile in Canada. In any case, Alexander and James Robertson deserve more than a footnote in Albany's history. Whatever motives drove them, they brought to Albany "an Epitome of modern History" and, for better or worse, controversy and the press are inseparable. The city has not been the same since.

Notes

1. Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1810), 318.
2. Sidney Kobre, *The Development of the Colonial Newspaper* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1960), 112.
3. Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History 1690–1960* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 79–80.
4. Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1874), 1:193.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 15:270.
7. *Ibid.*, 19: 43.
8. *Ibid.*, 17:75.
9. *Ibid.*, 16:139–40.
10. *Ibid.*, 17:56–57.
11. William Smith, *Review of the Military Operations in North America* (New York: Alexander and James Robertson, 1770), Evans Bibliography no. 11701, 105.
12. Thomas, *History of Printing*, 2nd ed., 1:313.
13. Isaiah Thomas, handwritten notes in first-edition copy of *History of Printing*, 118–19, Manuscript Collection of the American Antiquarian Society Library, Worcester, Mass.
14. *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, ed. Alexander C. Flick (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1931), 7:381.
15. *Ibid.*, 7:240.
16. *Ibid.*, 7:322.
17. George R. Howell and Jonathan Tenney, eds., *Bicentennial History of the County of Albany, N.Y. From 1609 to 1886* (New York: W.W. Munsell, 1886), 699.
18. *The Albany Gazette* (Albany), vol. 1, no. 1, November 25, 1771, 1.
19. Joel Munsell, *Typographical Miscellany* (Albany: Joel Munsell Printing Co., 1850), 227.
20. F. Morgan, *Connecticut As A Colony and As A State, or One of the Original Thirteen* (Hartford: Publishing Society of Connecticut, 1904), 2:299.
21. Dumas Malone, ed., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), 8:638.
22. Thomas, *History of Printing*, 2nd ed., 1:192.
23. *Transcript of the Manuscript Books and Papers of the Commission of Enquiry into the Losses and the Services of the American Loyalists* (Transcribed for the New York Public Library, 1900), 41:453.
24. Douglas C. McMurtrie, *A Check List of Eighteenth Century Albany Imprints* (Albany: University of the State of New York, Bibliography Bulletin 80, 1939), 15.
25. *Law and Ordinances* (Albany: Alexander and James Robertson, 1773), Evans Bibliography no. 12369.
26. McMurtrie, *Albany Imprints*, 15.

27. Joseph-Bill Packer, *A Journal of the Life and Travels of Joseph-Bill Packer* (Albany: Alexander and James Robertson, 1773), Evans Bibliography no. 12914.
28. "Extracts from the Votes and Proceedings of the American Continental Congress" (Albany: Alexander and James Robertson, 1774), Evans Bibliography no. 13723, 11.
29. *Ibid.*, 40.
30. McMurtrie, *Albany Imprints*, 16.
31. *Bickerstaff's New England Almanack* (Norwich: Robertsons and Trumbell, 1775), Evans Bibliography no. 14618.
32. *Ibid.*, Evans Bibliography no. 42771.
33. Cyler Reynolds, ed., *Albany Chronicles: A History of the City Arranged Chronologically* (Albany: J.B. Lyon Company, 1906), 273.
34. Thomas, *History of Printing*, 2nd ed., 1:313.
35. *Transcript of the American Loyalists*, 41:453.
36. *Ibid.*
37. *Ibid.*, 454.
38. "Resolves of the Hon. Continental Congress" (Albany: Alexander and James Robertson, 1776), Evans Bibliography no. 15147.
39. *Minutes of the Albany Committee of Correspondence: 1775–1778*, by the Division of Archives and History, James Sullivan, Ph.D., Director and State Historian (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1923), 1:580.
40. *Ibid.*, 672.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Public Papers of George Clinton*, Published by the State of New York, with an Introduction by Hugh Hastings, State Historian (New York: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co., 1899), vol. 1, 64.
43. *Transcript of the American Loyalists*, 41:455–56.
44. *Ibid.*, 456.
45. *Journals of the Provincial Congress, Provincial Convention, Committee of Safety and Council of Safety of the State of New York: 1775–1776–1777* (Albany: Thurlow Weed, 1842), 2:469.
46. *Albany Minutes*, 1:787.
47. *Ibid.*, 792.
48. *Transcript of the American Loyalists*, 41:457.
49. *Clinton Papers*, 2:528.
50. *Ibid.*, 547.
51. *Ibid.*, 525.
52. *Transcript of the American Loyalists*, 41:461.
53. Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence, The Newspaper War on Britain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 259.
54. *Transcript of the American Loyalists*, 41:468.
55. Marion Robertson, "The Loyalist Printers: James and Alexander Robertson," *The Nova Scotia Historical Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1983): 92–93.
56. Thomas, *History of Printing*, 2nd ed., 1:313.
57. McMurtrie, *Albany Imprints*, 11.