

## **Our Fourth Estate**

*(H.C. Frisbee and other early editors of local newspapers)*

*By Douglas Shepard / Barker Museum Newsletter (Winter 1997)*

Over the years in this newsletter we have drawn heavily on material from the *Censor* as well as from the other newspapers serving our region. But, although we have used these sources, we have never actually focused on them for their own sake. Well, we intend to remedy that grievous lack starting right now.

Let us begin, like Alice, at the beginning: the “masthead”. If you are an old-timer here, you are so used to it that you probably do not even hear anything odd when we say the name of our main source, the *Censor*. But stop for a minute and try and imagine what in the world **Mr. Frisbee** had in mind when he named it in February, **1821**. Was he going to carefully not print what he found objectionable in the news? No. Actually, in naming his paper, he was working within a long and venerable tradition.

As the nation states of Europe and the British Isles began to shape themselves – and each other – from the Renaissance period on, the need for information began to grow. Large banking establishments and other important cross-border merchant groups began circulating what we would call newsletters or house organs which quickly became important to others outside the group as well.

At the same time, increased literacy and improvements in the printing press encouraged the dissemination of court circulars about the official schedule of the monarch and his/her entourage. Chap books recounting “horrid murders” or promoting virtue through uplifting accounts of young people resisting sin, became extremely popular.

All of this, along with instructive essays aimed at a new middle class on how to comport oneself in business, at the theatre, or on the town, finally came together in the early newsheets that became the newspapers we are so familiar with today.

Some newspaper titles suggested the scope of their inquiries such as “World” and “Globe”. Other newspaper pioneers saw themselves as merely extending the court circular to include other levels of society and so they gave their newspapers fairly neutral names: Gazette, Recorder, Journal, early titles suggesting a record – without comment – of what important people did, and, of course, we still expect some of that in our newspapers today. Herald, Courant (runner), Messenger, and Courier emphasized the speedy delivery of the news (as does Post later on).

Suggesting an increasingly critical eye were Spectator, Argus, Examiner and Tatler. An even stronger sense of the developing function of newspapers can be found in Sentinel or Guardian.

For the reason behind **Frisbee**'s title, however, we need to return to Chautauqua County in **1816** and a 26-year old **James-Hull**, on the second floor of a huge wooden building at about today's 51 West Main Street. We may now understand a little better what function the first newspaper in the county was intended to serve when we find it entitled the *Chautauqua Gazette*. This was to be a record of important events involving important people.

That is what it was supposed to be, but the reality was something different. Like most struggling newspapers of the time, and for almost all today, information was the aim, but advertising was the prime necessity. That is one reason why, at first, the *Gazette*'s front page was given over entirely to advertisements. A typical issue (November 11, **1817**) had twenty-two filling the front page. **Mr. Hull**'s rates were one square advertisement “inserted three times for One Dollar”. Since the *Gazette* was a weekly, that meant three weeks worth of advertising. Follow-up insertions were twenty five cents each. Since the notices are all dated, we may estimate the total revenue from the front page at \$8.25. As subscriptions were “Two Dollars and Fifty Cents per annum” delivered, it is clear your **Mr. Hull** was not getting rich too quickly. (Of course we are not being fair since we have left out the advertisements inside the paper and the official notices on the back page, all of which represented revenue.)

The standard pattern for papers of that date was for the older advertisements to fill the front page. Official notices (mortgages, sheriffs' sales, insolvencies, jury calls, etc.) were on the back page, with any extra space filled with uplifting essays, anecdotes or poetry borrowed from other publications. For the usual four-page sheet, that permitted one side (pages 1 and 4) to be set in type well before the weekly publication date.

On the inside pages, one usually had material copied from other newspapers. (All newspapers gave each other free subscriptions so that each could use from all the others what seemed interesting, useful or important.) In the November 17, 1817 issue, **Hull** used for example a long essay from the *Evening Post* on the decline of party spirit and a piece on the late **Madame de Stael's** will; the results of a race held Nov. 6<sup>th</sup> from the *New York Herald*; a report on wheat prices from the Albany market; another on wool clothmaking in Ontario County; a letter from the *Mercury Advertiser* written from Marseilles on June 26<sup>th</sup> describing the rapturous reception afforded the American-built "Cleopatra's Barge" and a note from the *Dutchess Observer* on the makeup of the new 15<sup>th</sup> Congress (112 republicans, 40 federalists).

It is on page 3 that the local news always appeared, in a column under the *Gazette* heading. In this case we are told that:

*Thanksgiving. Agreeably to the Governor's Proclamation, a sermon will be delivered on the occasion, at the east school house in this village, on Thursday next, at 11 o'clock in the forenoon, by Elder Joy Handy, and a sermon in the afternoon, on the west side of the Creek, by the Rev. Mr. Swezey.*

The other item of local news is that the **Rev. Mr. Smith** would preach at the school house on the east side of the Creek in the village "next Sunday". (The "east" school house was the one **Hezekiah Barker** had put up on the Common about where the mailbox islands are today.)

And that was it for the local news. Unfortunately for local historians, the *Gazette's* mission, you may remember was to provide a record of the important events. In a village of at most several hundred souls, the best source of immediate news was neighbors meeting at the post office. Pomfret, with a healthy 2,000 inhabitants, hardly called for much more. So all local newspapers in those days focused on what the inhabitants would not otherwise know, not on what they had probably already heard before the weekly appeared. It is logical, but it is not much help to a researcher.

Following the local material came news from Buffalo and Albany, selected international news from the *Argus Summary* and then marriages at Hanover, Schenectady and Utica. That took the left half of the page. The right half was filled with current legal notices and new advertisements.

The *Gazette* barely survived for some four years, so why did 19-year old **Henry C. Frisbee** start another newspaper? The answer is "politics". To an extent no longer possible to believe, every newspaper was expected to be the mouthpiece or semi-official organ of one political party or another.

The 1820s were a hot time politically. The federalist vs. republican rivalry had dissipated but, however, had been replaced in New York State by the rivalry between the Bucktails and the Clintonians – the supporters of **DeWitt Clinton**. (**S.A. Brown** once explained that the New York City party, the Tammany Society, named for a noted Indian Chief, called Tammany Hall its "wigwam". Its representatives elsewhere in the state gave themselves similar names "and on festival days wore the Indian costume, and among other peculiarities, wore a real buck's tail on the hat." In case you had supposed political silliness was a recent phenomenon, look again.)

**Frisbee** said that back in the late 1820s he realized that despite the vigorous campaigning that had begun, there was a newspaper for the Clintonians, but none for the Bucktails. So he began a correspondence "with some of the leaders in the east, especially **Richard Riker**," and "finally got a promise of some help if I started a 'Republican' paper." The old press and entire print shop was leased to him for three years with the option to buy it outright for \$300. His surety was a republican candidate for Congress from Buffalo, **Maj. John G. Camp**. And that is how 19-year old **Henry C. Frisbee** launched the *New York Censor* (changed to *Fredonia Censor* in 1824) with about 50 loyal subscribers who expected partisan rhetoric – and got it. After all, he had not named it the "*Censor*" on a whim. Anyone with any classical education at the time

understood the reference to Cato the Censor, the moralistic castigator of the sins of others, especially other politicians.

In **1870**, a mellowed **Henry Frisbee** wrote:

*The Censor commenced its career as a Democratic paper of the strai[gh]test sect, of the order of bucktail, of the tribe of St. Tammany, and I maintain that it has always been an advocate of genuine Democratic principles.*

In other words, over time the *Censor* parted company with the party line especially when the issue of slavery began to arise. That may be what a young **Willard McKinstry** was referring to when he took over the *Censor* in 1842 saying "while we glory in the name and principles of the Whig Party...we hope never to forget things in our devotion to a name."

Forty years later, the field had changed enough that, in the first issue of the *Evening Observer*, the editor wrote: "We want it perfectly understood that the *OBSERVER* is entirely a non-partisan, independent Newspaper, which "Hews to the line," irrespective of where the "Chip may fall." So you see the purpose of the newspaper or newsheet has changed dramatically over the years and with the greater prevalence of electronic media who knows what further changes the newspaper will undergo.

In the early 19th century, however, newspapers were expected to promote and further a particular political party and a particular set of views. It is that original sense of themselves as spokesmen for the (political) "truth" that accounts for the startling -- to moderns -- freedom if not license with which early editors referred to each other.

Let us examine some typical examples. In August **1835**, **Frisbee** noted that the *Chautauqua Whig* had announced a change in its name to *Dunkirk Beacon* along with some mysterious allusions to a change in editorial policy, which **Frisbee** characterized as "recreant, cowardly language".

Later in the month he took on the editor of the *Mayville Recorder* who, when he first arrived in the county:

*was one of the rankest Federals that could be found... and even electioneered in an underhanded way to prevent the people choosing their own Justices of the Peace. Many a brush have we had with him in Old Bucktail times.*

In September **1835** he was back at the *Beacon's* editor, **Mr. Thompson**, who:

*indulges in a strain of incoherent gibberish that would ill become an idiot, interlarded with streaks of slang and billingsgate (1) that would add a feather to the cap of the most degraded fisherman.*

Apparently **Thompson** had described **Frisbee** as "lank" which he was. **Frisbee** pretended mock horror at this, pointing out that **Thompson** was sleek and well fed because he had not lived "upon his own honest industry at the Printing business [but] upon his creditors." Indeed part of **Frisbee's** lankness may be due to **Thompson** retreating into bankruptcy instead of paying his just debts, leaving his partner to make it good by doing some printing for **Frisbee**.

In December **1835** he referred to **William H. Cutler**, editor of the *Western Democrat* and **Ebenezer R. Thompson** of the *Beacon* [**Frisbee** calls it "the Dunkirk Recreant"] both as "dimmercrats", with **Thompson** "any thing that **Walter Smith** tells him to be." (**Walter Smith** was the Fredonia merchant who had moved to Dunkirk and "made" it. He was a real powerhouse, becoming Dunkirk's first mayor when it was incorporated in **1837**.)

And so it went. However, two points should be emphasized here. First, the editorial fumings took place on both sides and were often more rhetorical posturing than heartfelt declarations. In **1848**, when that same **William H. Cutler**, who had gone on to the *Frontier Express*, was leaving that paper, the *Censor* editor said "our controversies may have savored of warmth, yet our personal relations have never been disturbed.

Our best wishes follow him in his retiracy."

The second point is that personal attacks were not saved for other editors alone.

When **I.A. Saxton** was appointed Post Master in Fredonia in **1835** (because the "wrong" person had become mayor) **Frisbee** kept up a running barrage of complaints directed at **Saxton** who had moved the office to his store, which was at today's Fire Department parking apron on West Main Street. **Frisbee** maintained that **Saxton** forced 4/5ths of the Village businessmen to go out of their way to get their mail; that the only reason **Saxton** made the move was to get his revenge for never having been able to get elected to anything in the Village. Anyway, he added, **Saxton** was so inept that on his first day in office, when the stage had dropped the mail off, he locked it safely away but left the key in the lock. Besides, the "fire proof building" he claimed to have was:

*a perfect burlesque of the term. There are three doors wholly of wood leading into the office, and the store itself is an old illy constructed thing as respects guarding against fire, and in fact was on fire but a few days since, and came nearer burning down than has been known of any other building in the place.*

The editor somehow neglects to mention that every new postmaster moved the post office to his place of business or home, and that this particular building was unique, being made entirely of stone.

This kind of personal attack was not at all unusual, and can be found in most of the local newspapers for a good while, although there was, in general, a very gradual softening of rhetoric as the years went on. By **1900** most of this kind of thing was gone, partly, perhaps, because the increase in population kept editors fairly remote from most of their readers, perhaps because of changes in the law, but primarily because a change was taking place in what professional journalists considered appropriate.

However, back in the **1870s** the tone was still alive and could be poisonous. One particular telling example involves **William B. Cushing**, the Civil War hero, his father-in-law, the prominent merchant **Col. David Forbes**, and **C.E. Bishop**, editor of the *Jamestown Journal*.

It all began very happily with the description of the February 22, **1870 Cushing-Forbes** wedding, one of the premier social events of the season. Because the editor was unable to attend, he copied the *Dunkirk Journal* account in the *Censor* of March 2, **1870**. It was a long, elaborate description of the bride's dress, the bridesmaids, and the male attendants all in full military dress. For their honeymoon, "**Lt. Commander** and **Mrs. Cushing** went east upon the evening train from Dunkirk."

At that point, **Editor Bishop** swung into action. On March 11, the *Journal* carried an article that began:

*The Fredonia papers contain full accounts of the marriage of **Lieut. Com. W.B. Cushing, U.S.N.**, and **Miss Kate Forbes** of Fredonia, on the 22d ult. The papers could be in better business than such toadying. **Cushing** is the most ineffable, idiotic young snob that ever trod leather. He could have secured on ten minutes notice a free ride out of F. from a delegation of his former friends and schoolmates whom he had snubbed. For a little upstart like him, who by an act of insubordination in the navy, blundered into noteriety, to pompously order older and better men than himself to address him as '**Lt. Com. Cushing, Sir,**' is disgusting and the papers who toady [to] such an egotistical ass, belittle themselves beyond degree. Flunkeyism is born in a servile soul and will show itself.*

"Friends' at home promptly sent copies of the paragraph to **Cushing**, then in Boston, and to some of his fellow naval officers. As soon as he could, **Cushing** returned to vindicate what **Bishop** called "his wounded honor." "He and his inebriated father-in-law came across by carriage to Jamestown, bought a horse-whip of **Shearman & Son**, and came to the interview [with **Bishop**]."

The whole episode was then rehashed in the *Censor* of April 27th (reprinting it from the *Chautauqua Democrat* "Extra" of April 22nd).

*About 4 o'clock, yesterday afternoon the Journal office was visited by **Col. David Forbes**, of Fredonia, and*

*Lieut. Com. Cushing, of [the] U.S.N. The errand was to horse-whip **Bishop** for an unprovoked, libelous and scandalous attack upon **Lt. Cushing**...**Col. Forbes** introduced the parties, whereupon **Cushing** drew a raw-hide from beneath his cloak, and proceeded to lay it on the head and shoulders of the offending editor.*

The editor called for help and had his staff evict **Cushing** and **Forbes**. This article was accompanied by a brief statement by **Cushing**:

*Yesterday I entered the office of the editor of the Journal [**Mr. Bishop**] and struck him several times with a cow hide. This was in return for a scandalous, false and abusive article which he published some time since, in which I was the target for his filthy invective. I never knew or saw the man until yesterday. Neither he, nor any one else, has the least reason to give me such an insult, and I could not let such an injury go by unpunished. He behaved like a cur and a coward when attacked, shouted loudly for help, brought five or six men to his assistance, and was perfectly content to call upon the law for healing balm for his lashed body. **W.B. Cushing**.*

**Bishop's** account is, of course, quite different and typically malicious:

*About half-past three yesterday afternoon two chaps made their appearance in the garret where the Daily Journal is concocted and enquired for **Mr. Bishop**.*

*One was a grey, grizzled, middle-aged man with a hang-dog look, and is known to fame as '**Col. D.S. Forbes**, of the 'Bloody 68th' N.Y.S.N.G....The other was a tall, well-formed lad, with an effeminate face, fortified with a flaxen moustache so stunning that it looked much out of keeping with his apparent youth and incurs the fearful suspicion of being 'boughten' on account of its excessive precocity. He wore a second-hand military cloak caught together with a massive silver-plated chain across his manly breast; his phrenological development, if he had any, was concealed by a peaked, brigandish-looking hat. Elegant lavender kid gloves covered his little hands...His whole make-up was like his reputation -- veneered. He was indeed an inspiring sight, and, strange to say, he seemed conscious of it. This miracle of man-millinery was no other than **Lt. Wm. B. Cushing**, who exploded the rebel oyster-boat, *Albermarle*; he has never forgotten that exploit -- not for a moment -- and hasn't let any one else forget it (or him) if he could help it.*

**Bishop** then goes on to describe **Cushing** being formally introduced to him by **Col. Forbes**. (Apparently introductions were required before any horsewhippings could begin.) **Bishop** greeted them and asked them to sit while he finished up some work, and turned back to his desk:

*At this **Lieut. Cushing** drew from under his cloak a horse-whip, saying 'God damn your souls,' struck **Mr. Bishop** with all the force he could command. The blow struck square across his bump of benevolence, which forms a sort of cupola to his cranium, and expended a part of its force on the back of the chair. It caused an abnormally large development of that organ immediately -- unnecessarily so, as it is too much developed by nature for its owner's prosperity.*

**Bishop's** sardonic account continues as he "rises with professional dignity" takes **Cushing** by the throat and, in effect, throws him down the stairs.

This whole episode was a particularly egregious example of the latitude editors allowed themselves in those days. Indeed, even the *Censor*, **Forbes'** and **Cushing's** home town paper, was oddly ambivalent in its response. When the *Censor* of April 27th quoted the *Democrat's* extra it added "It is but fair to state that the *Journal* editor [**Bishop**] tells a different story." Then goes on to summarize how **Bishop** whaled and pummeled **Cushing**, knocked out two of his front teeth, then handed him over to the office staff, who escorted him out. The *Censor* goes on to say:

*We met that officer soon after his return from Jamestown, and discovered no evidence of such injuries to dentals or cuticle...The truth of the statements regarding the early part of the affair rest upon the veracity of the interested parties. Those acquainted with the comparative physique of **Bishop** and **Lieutenant Cushing**, will draw their own conclusions as to the probability of the former putting the latter out of the room, or inflicting severe punishment unaided.*

*However, it makes little difference whether he did or not. Such affairs only decide which party is the best fighter. If an editor lies about a citizen, and the citizen cowhides him, it does not prove that the article was a lie, or vice versa. It will probably be inferred from the above that we don't believe in assaults. The reader will also be correct in assuming that we especially disapprove of assaults on editors. We should not like to be assaulted. It would be unpleasant -- for us. Would endeavor to make it so for the assaulter. But there are libels for which many feel that a cowhide is the only appropriate redress, as well as crimes for the punishment of which **Mr. Bishop** has so invariably endorsed the use of the pistol.*

This is followed by a delicate suggestion that it is all very understandable but that **Cushing** would probably have been better off to ignore the *Journal*. "Of course to be pursued in such a case by one in his profession, he is the best judge."

Although **Bishop's** kind of scurrilous writing did gradually disappear as the century wore on, there is a later case that bears some remarkable similarities and some significant differences. In July **1883** the *Advertiser and Union* printed an article in which they charged that during the Civil War the **Hon. J.T. Williams**, as a member of the 68th Regt. of the New York State Militia -- called out during 'the invasion in Pennsylvania,' -- hid in his own home and refused to go to the front with his regiment. Unlike the episode 13 years previous, **Williams** sued the newspaper for libel.

If we recognize in that early 'freedom' or 'license' some of the tactics of today's tabloids, we should also recognize how far professional journalism has come since then. That is for us as readers. For us as local historians, we must learn what a different set of standards were in operation when those sources to which we all turn were being produced.