

Nick Sammartino

In 1765, as a result of one of the provisions of the Stamp Act, newspapers in Colonial America were now required to pay a tax on each piece of printed-paper they sold, using only imported and stamped paper from Britain. At this time, newspapers had already become a useful tool in generating public support against British control throughout the colonies. Individual motives often varied, and it can be seen quite clearly in “To Benjamin Franklin from David Hall, 14 October 1765,” as well as the following Pennsylvania Gazette article “No Stamped Paper to be Had.” The Pennsylvania Gazette was a newspaper started by Benjamin Franklin. At this time, David Hall was editor and publisher.

In the letter, David Hall is asking Benjamin Franklin for his input on how to proceed with publishing the newspaper once the Stamp Act takes effect on November 1, 1765. Colonists were boycotting any taxed goods, and as mentioned by Hall, “we have already lost at least 500 of them,” as customers who were refusing to purchase any good taxed under the Stamp Act. Hall is asking Franklin how far they can, and should, go in regards to publishing the paper without the stamps. The obvious concern here is money, and keeping their livelihoods, as well as the newspaper, afloat. Hall writes “For if we should go on without the Stamps, and the Penalties which are very high, can be put in Force against us, we may do more in a Quarter of an Hour, than would ruin us for the rest of our Lives,” (Hall, October 4, 1765). There seems to be a fair deal of confusion as to whether or not the law will even be enforced, but that “We printers of News Papers here ... have been proposing to take the Advice of the ablest Council, how far we may, or may

not, be safe in carrying on our Papers without the Stamps, which is the only Method, we think, we can take,” displaying that regardless of how the law is enforced, they are aware they will lose customers, and money, if they were to print with the stamps (Hall, October 4, 1765). In the article published shortly after, we can see another concern; “We have certain information from Boston, that the printers there intend to continue their papers, and risk the penalties---- and that if any of them were to stop on account of the stamp act, their offices would be in danger from the enraged people,” (No Stamped Paper to be had, November 7, 1765).

The solution to this problem, revealed in the newspaper article published on November 7, 1765, was to publish the paper without the masthead, date, newspaper title, and other qualities of a newspaper, to avoid the legal repercussions and penalties. The article is a fervent attack against Britain and the Stamp Act, outlining all the spirited protests throughout the colonies, and offering a list of resolutions to the British government. The article is impassioned and clearly aimed at mustering more support from the colonists. Comparing the letter to the article is interesting, as it shows the monetary motivation behind the decision to publish the paper without stamps; though the decision was publically painted in the newspaper as a patriotic protest. This act alone would have been just as influential as the actual printed words in the article. The article outlines the declarations of King George III in the Stamp Act, details the resulting protests throughout the colonies, including a riot in Boston, and concludes with its own set of declarations on behalf of the colonists, essentially stating that they will not buy any goods from England until the Stamp Act be repealed.

Looking at these documents gives great insight into the intricacies of what motivated different individuals for the Revolutionary cause, particularly in regards to acts of resistance. In this case, the letter between Hall and Franklin shows that profits, and keeping customers happy, is their primary concern. If one were to only read the newspaper article, it would tell a very different story, painting the publishers, and the newspaper as a whole, as resisters fully dedicated to the patriotic cause. This isn't to say they weren't dedicated to the cause, but it shows that their actions in regards to the newspaper were far more complex, and primarily profit-driven. However, none of this means that there isn't much to learn by analyzing only the newspaper article. The article itself offers clues to the type of revolutionary language that was being used throughout the colonies, and the types of acts that were being employed as forms of resistance, ranging from riots in different colonial cities, to a discovery "hanging on the gallows behind the Citadel Hill, the effigies of a stampman, accompanied with a boot and devil, together with labels suitable to the occasion," (No Stamped Paper to be had, November 7, 1765). Overall, this letter from a chain of correspondence between Franklin and Hall, when analyzed alongside the corresponding newspaper article that was later published, provides a complex look into motivations different people had for participating in the Revolutionary cause and why they chose certain means of resistance. Additionally, they provide an understanding of the type of language that was used, and range of activities pursued, throughout the colonies during this tumultuous time.

References

[No stamped paper to be had. Philadelphia: Printed by Hall & Franklin, 1765].

Philadelphia, 1765. Pdf. Retrieved from the Library of Congress,
<https://www.loc.gov/item/98160405/>.

“To Benjamin Franklin from David Hall, 14 October 1765,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified November 26, 2017,
<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-12-02-0165>. [Original source: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 12, *January 1, through December 31, 1765*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1967, pp. 319–321.]