

The Providence *United States Chronicle*

Bennett Wheeler (c. 1753–1806), a native of Halifax, Nova Scotia, arrived in Providence in September 1776, and after a few months he began working for the *Providence Gazette*, remaining there until December 1778. In March 1779 Wheeler formed a partnership with Solomon Southwick to publish *The American Journal; and General Advertiser* in Providence. Southwick left the firm in December 1779, and Wheeler printed the paper until August 1781, after which he continued working as a job printer. On Thursday, 1 January 1784, Wheeler published the first issue of *The United States Chronicle: Political, Commercial, and Historical*. The *Chronicle* continued to appear on Thursdays and by 1788 “circulated in every town in the State” (“A Rhode-Island Landholder,” *United States Chronicle*, 20 March 1788).

The *United States Chronicle*, as historian Carol Sue Humphrey has demonstrated, devoted more space to the publication of essays about the Constitution than any other Rhode Island newspaper. Moreover, declares Humphrey, Wheeler’s publication of these essays was “remarkably balanced.” The *United States Chronicle* devoted 71.75 columns in support of the Constitution and 75.25 columns opposing it. The latter figure considerably exceeded the amount of space allotted to pieces opposing the Constitution in either the *Providence Gazette* or the *Newport Herald*, which together printed only 45.50 such columns.

Beginning on 6 March 1788 Wheeler printed reports of the proceedings of the Rhode Island legislature. Not referring to arch-Federalist Peter Edes’s legislative reports in his *Newport Herald*, Wheeler gave his reasons for publishing the legislature’s proceedings:

It being the Wish of almost every Man in the State, that the Proceedings of the Legislature should be regularly published, as soon after their Meeting as possible, the Editor of the Chronicle attended at the late Session, in order, as far as in his Power, to gratify the Wishes of the Public.—Having but a very imperfect Knowledge of Short-Hand Writing, he has not been able to do Justice to the Debates—but thus far he engages, that the Votes are accurately stated, and that all the Ideas here found fell from some or other of the Gentlemen speaking.—His Aim is to be of Service in the Line of his Profession, and he hopes this first Attempt, in this Way, will meet the Candour of the Public.

Wheeler’s efforts to provide a balanced view of the debate over the Constitution were not appreciated by some Federalists. “Marplot, Jun.” in the *Newport Herald*, 9 April 1789, charged that the printer of the *United States Chronicle* “assiduously” attended every legislature in order “to pay his court to the paper money majority” and that the printer “was in fact admitted into the *sanctum sanctorum* of the late grand nocturnal convention at East-Greenwich!—These things, it is true, seem to be directly in the face of the *federalism* of the Printer of the *United States Chronicle*.” “Marplot, Jun.” admitted that, while some readers looked upon Wheeler as an Antifederalist, others viewed him as a Federalist.

On 23 April 1789 Wheeler apparently left it to essayists to make it easier for him to demonstrate his impartiality when he published this notice: “*The printing of*

controversial, or Party Pieces, being attended with much extra Trouble—in future we shall expect PAY for all such inserted in the Chronicle—as is the Custom in other Places.”

On 5 December 1789 “Veritas,” writing in the *Providence Gazette*, was angered by “the snarlings of certain demagogues of power” who used the *United States Chronicle* “to set the mechanic interest of this town at variance with the mercantile . . . making discord the constant source of their importance.” These “restless beings” had discharged their “venom so often and copiously” in the *Chronicle*. “Veritas” asserted that economic difficulties were not brought about by any class but that these difficulties “have arisen from the nature and present situation of our government, which has sunk both public and private credit in one common vortex of destruction.”

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