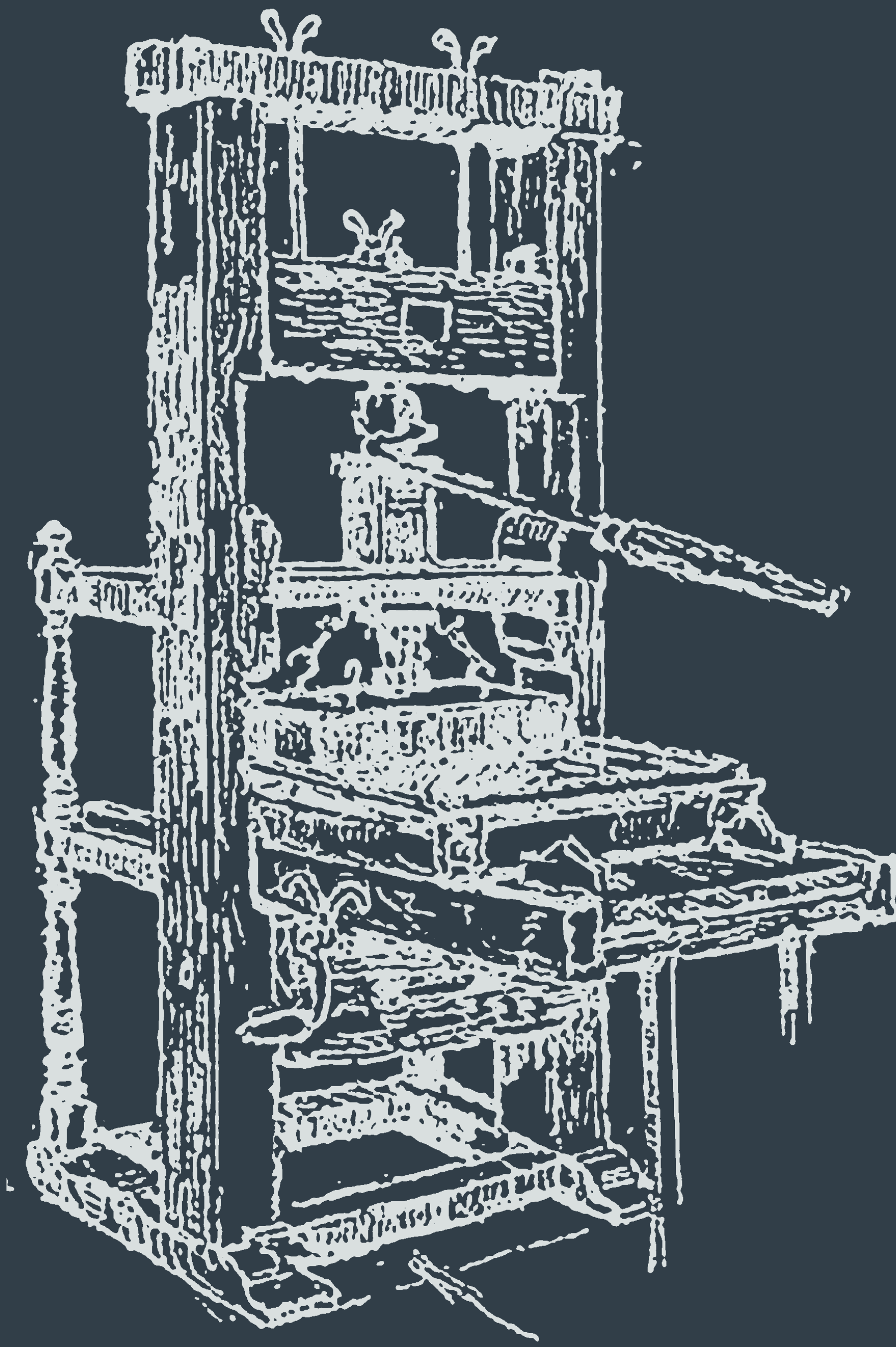


# EARLY NEWSPAPERS AND THE COLONIAL PRINTER

Printing was one of the first tasks that the colonial settlers carried out in the New World. A British clergyman, Reverend Joseph Glover, set out to establish the first printing press in the colonies. While he died on his voyage, his partner, a British locksmith Stephen Daye (c. 1594–1668), founded the first printing press in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1638. Many printers followed suit setting up presses in urban centers such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Charleston, and Williamsburg. By 1775 there were about 50 presses in the colonies.

From early on, printers looked to newspapers as an important way to exercise their beliefs in freedom of speech and political liberty, and to create an enlightened society. However, they faced many challenges, as well as the British government's suppression of information unfavorable to the monarchy. Due to such censorship, *Publick Occurrences*, the first newspaper published in colonial America in 1690 in Massachusetts, was discontinued after only one issue.



**Stephen Daye Press.** First printing press in America, brought to Cambridge from England in 1638. Sketch by Jack Frost, from *Harvard and Cambridge: A Sketch Book*.

Source: Harvard Square Library

Despite these limitations, newspapers continued to grow with the strong initiatives of printers such as Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790). Because of operational difficulties, printers had to be multi-talented and act as editor, publisher, bookseller, businessman, and craftsman. But this also gave them ample opportunities to foster a burgeoning American democracy as they guided the political discourse of the time, which also led many printers to play prominent political roles in their communities.



**The masthead of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*.** Printers in early America played important roles in the local government and were in charge of printing official documents and disseminating information through newspapers. The masthead on Benjamin Franklin's *The Pennsylvania Gazette* served as an important colonial emblem. The image of a lion with the banner "Mercy & Justice"—the motto used by the Penn family and in official documents of the province at the time—adorned the frontpage of the newspaper. Franklin later designed one of the early colonial flags with a similar design (but with a different motto) in 1747.

Source: *The Pennsylvania Gazette* (November 3, 1763), The Printing Museum Collection

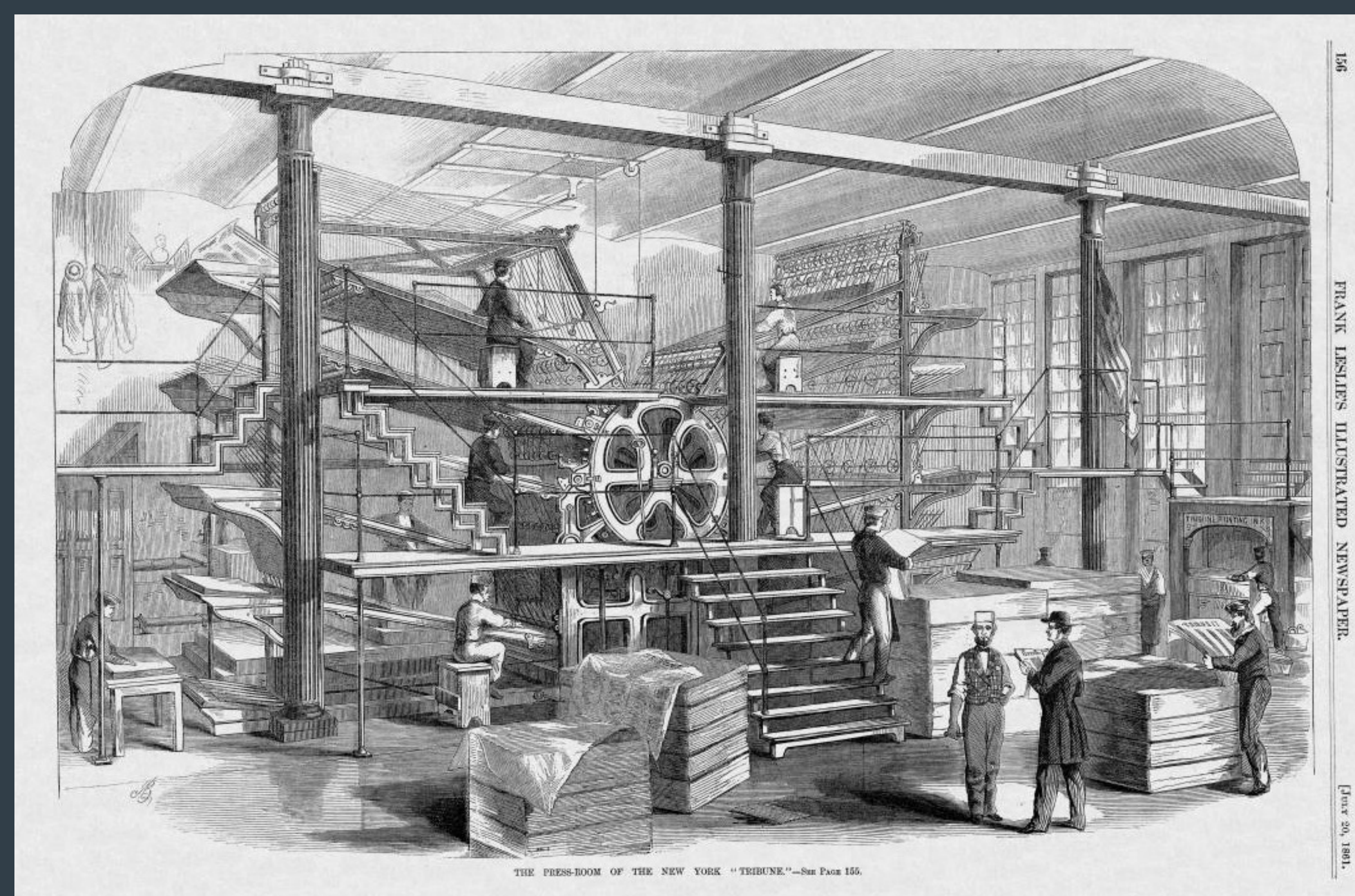
# AN AMERICAN IDENTITY: NEWSPAPER LAYOUT AND DESIGN

Initially, the colonists did not possess the infrastructure for printing and the British guarded their trade secrets and supply of materials. This scarcity of materials limited the newspapers' appearance. Typefaces primarily came from abroad, such as those created by British type founder William Caslon (1692–1766), while paper and ink were mostly imported. Early newspapers resembled pages of books with an emphasis on including as much content as possible and only a few decorative images made predominantly from woodcuts.



A type specimen (London, England, 1730) by William Caslon. Typefaces designed by Caslon were hugely successful in England and the United States. The American Declaration of Independence, known as the Dunlap Broadside, was printed using a Caslon typeface, likely Four Lines Pica for the title and English Roman No. 1 or No. 2 for main text.

Source: Cary Graphic Design Archives, Rochester Institute of Technology



“The Press-Room of the New York ‘Tribune’” shown in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*. The rotary printing press dramatically improved the efficiency and speed of newspaper printing. The same rotary printing press portrayed here appears in the masthead of the *New-York Daily Tribune* on display.

Source: *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* (July 20, 1881, page 155), archived on *Illustrated Civil War Newspapers and Magazines*, HarpWeek, LLC

The eighteenth century saw the growth of various industries around print shops, which freed the newspaper printers to print more visually appealing newspapers in larger quantities. America’s first paper mill was established in 1690 by William Rittenhouse in Philadelphia, and over 180 mills were in operation by 1810. Advancements in illustration and printing techniques allowed the printers to include more images. By the 1810s, Binny & Ronaldson, the first American type foundry, could respond to the growing demand for high quality type and decorative ornaments.

The Civil War marked a period of great change in newspaper design.

By this time, Americans possessed a high degree of literacy, as well as a sensitivity to visual materials due to the spread of photography. This fueled an appetite for detailed, up-to-date news on the ongoing war, encouraging the newspaper industry to rapidly respond. Improvements to the printing press, such as the incorporation of cylindrical drums, enabled newspapers to be printed at a faster speed and in even greater quantities. The news was enlivened with eye-catching headlines using different typefaces, colored illustrations, and hierarchically-organized page layouts that were easier to read. These advances demonstrated a marked improvement in the reading experience from colonial days.

# READING AMERICA: THE RISE OF LITERACY AND JOURNALISM

**F**rom very early on, the Founding Fathers considered the ability to read to be a paramount quality for achieving true democracy and fostering an environment for learning. By the early nineteenth-century, almost all white New England men and women could read and write. Literacy also became crucial to the identity and advancement of emancipated African Americans. Altogether, Americans achieved a much higher literacy and a more robust readership than their European counterparts, making reading and publishing essential to the American identity.

The American newspaper industry evolved with its readers. Using a system of “exchange” where articles from one newspaper were copied and reprinted freely by another, early newspapers overcame limited reporting resources and provided news and a sense of unity to the colonies. As the publisher-printers took more politically active roles, the growth of literate readerships in

eighteenth-century urban centers boosted the number and volume of newspapers. Following the Stamp Act (1765) and throughout the American Revolution (1775–1783), newspapers gave focus to political news and essays. They abandoned the earlier practice of maintaining neutrality and included more partisan voices, continuing to provide anonymity to those who wished to write under the protection of the free press.

Newspapers’ relationships with politics only intensified throughout the nineteenth century. As American political parties took shape, newspapers formed close ties to parties

who subsidized their operations and provided materials to print.

## Among white New England men

(based on evidence from legal records)

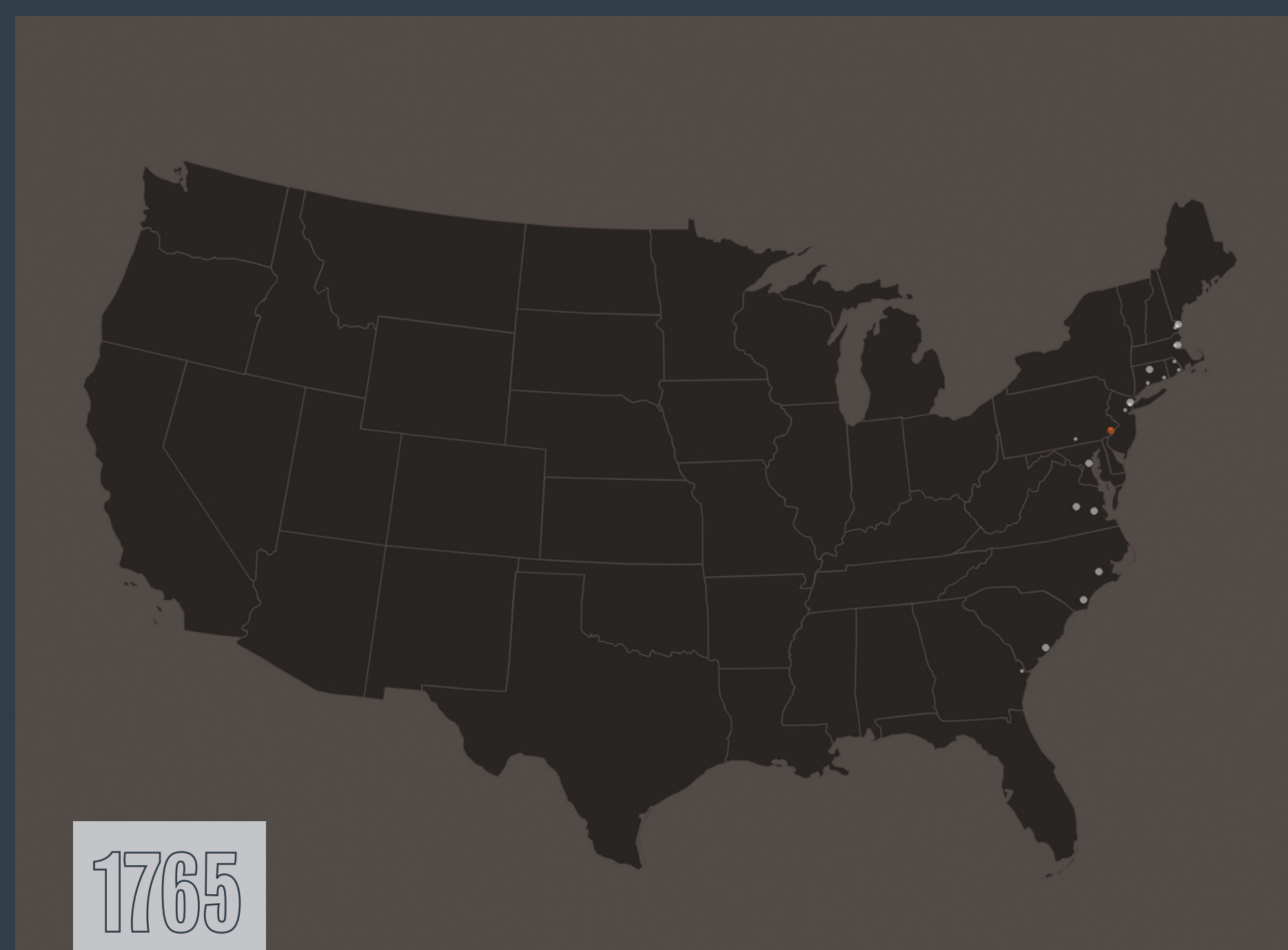
60% literate in  
1650–1670

85% literate in  
1758–1762

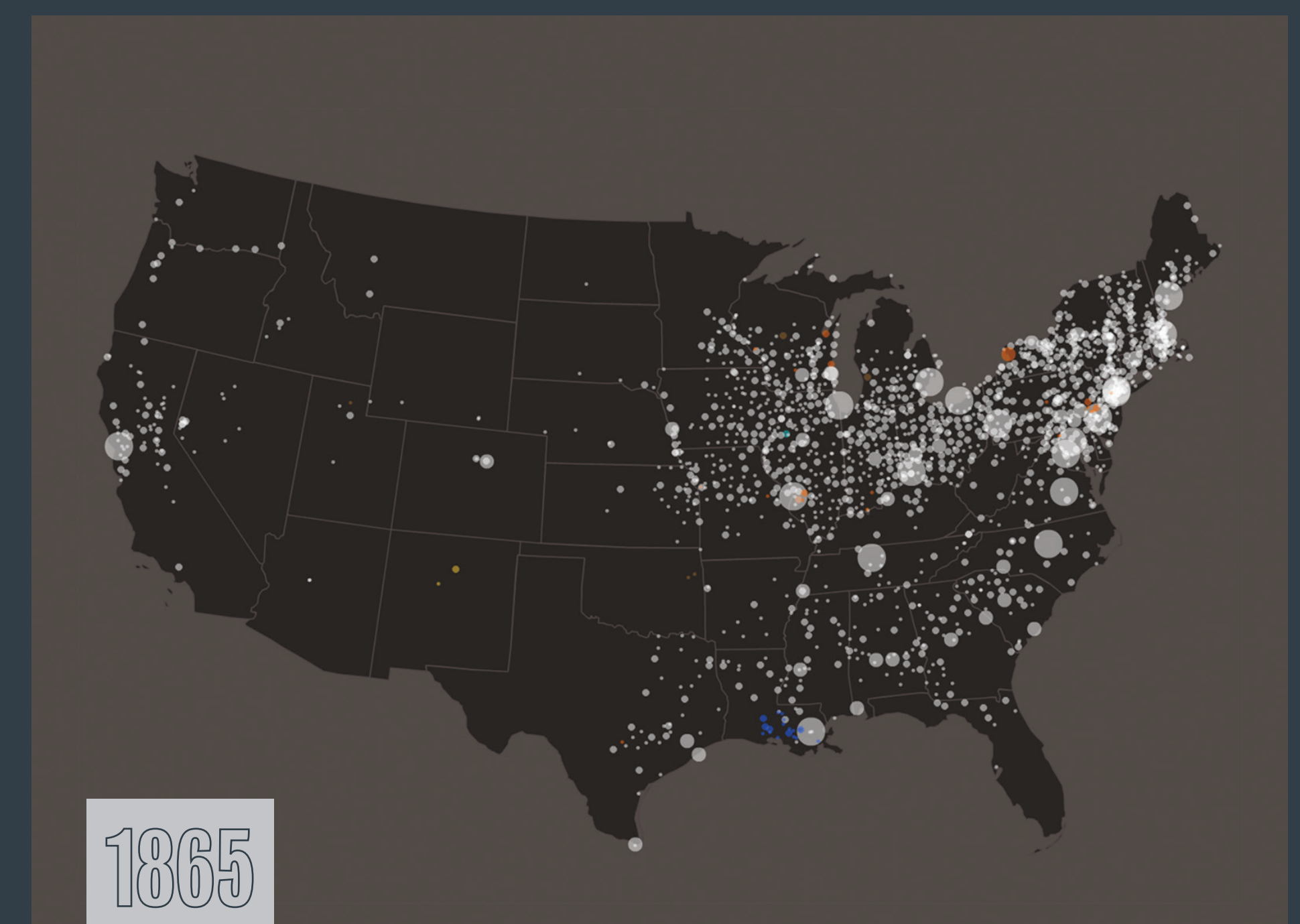
90% literate in  
1787–1795

Literacy among white New England men based on signatures found on legal records.

Source: Kenneth Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co.), 1974



Locations of newspapers in 1765 at the time of the Stamp Act (left, 47 publications) and in 1865 at the end of the Civil War (right, 4,372 publications). Newspapers started in urban centers along the East Coast and rapidly spread westward with the territorial expansion in the nineteenth century.



● 20+ publications in city  
● 10-19 publications in city  
● 2-9 publications in city  
● 1 publication in city

Source: “The Growth of Newspapers Across the U.S.: 1600-2011” with data visualization by the Rural West Initiative, Bill Lane Center for the American West, Stanford University with data from *Chronicling America* collection, Library of Congress, Urban population estimates from NASA