

Isaiah Thomas

Short Biographical Essay

Isaiah Thomas was the foremost printer of the generation that came of age during the American Revolution. He was instrumental in starting the Revolution and once the new nation was founded he became its principal and most successful printer, publisher, and bookseller. His success made him one of the wealthiest men in the country. Thomas's career is made even more remarkable by the fact that he was entirely a self-made man.

Thomas was born in Boston on January 19, 1749. His father, Moses Thomas, was a restless man who drifted from job to job. He left his family to seek his fortune in the southern colonies and was never heard from again. He was presumed to have died on the voyage. His grandfather, although a very wealthy man, was so infuriated by Isaiah's father's action that he disinherited him, thus leaving Isaiah's mother penniless with four young children to raise. Isaiah was placed in what was then a form of welfare. Because his mother could not afford to keep him, the Overseers of the Poor, a governmental agency in Boston, placed him in an apprenticeship with Zechariah Fowle. Isaiah was just seven years old when he entered into this apprenticeship.

Zechariah Fowle was not a very successful printer. He published one-page songs, called broadside ballads, and cheap pamphlets and other short printed materials. Thomas himself called Fowle "uncommonly ignorant" and was particularly upset that, despite his promises, Fowle did not adequately provide for Isaiah's education. In fact Thomas received no formal education at all. He learned to read and write by studying an "Ink stained Bible and Dictionary" in the pressroom and by setting type. Despite this, Thomas was extremely bright and soon was a better printer and businessman than his master.

When he was sixteen, Thomas left his apprenticeship illegally to learn his trade in the very center of the English-speaking world – London. Unfortunately he did not quite make it. In 1765, he left Boston and sailed to Halifax, Nova Scotia. In Halifax he worked for the town's only printer, Anthony Henry. Thomas was in Halifax when the Stamp Act was enacted, which imposed a tax on anything printed. Thomas, like many printers at this time, hated this action by the Royal government, as it was very harmful to business. Thomas published many articles against the Stamp Act, printed the tax stamp upside down, and even created images of the devil attacking the stamp, before he resorted to cutting all the stamps off of his supply of paper. For his actions he got into trouble with the local authorities and was forced to leave Nova Scotia after only seven months. On March 19, 1766, he sailed down to Old York, in what was then Massachusetts but is now Maine, and then on to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where he worked for two weeks at the *New-Hampshire Gazette*. There was not enough work at this paper so he soon left to work for its rival publication, the *Portsmouth Mercury*. Here he worked for two months before returning to Boston, where he worked briefly once again with his old master,

Fowle, before setting off for London, only this time by way of the southern colonies and the West Indies.

Thomas first went to Wilmington, North Carolina, and then to Charleston, South Carolina, where he worked with a printer named Robert Wells for the next three years. On Christmas Day, 1769, Thomas married his first wife, Mary Dill, in Charleston. After traveling throughout the southern colonies and Bermuda the couple returned to Boston in the spring of 1770.

Thomas was like many printers of his day who often traveled from one community to another seeking work. Some historians believe that this travel by printers gave them a worldlier outlook and in particular helped them envision a unified country made up of a number of united colonies rather than separate and distinct states.¹

Once in Boston Thomas soon entered into a partnership with his old master, Zechariah Fowle, and established a newspaper for the middling, or middle, class, entitled the *Massachusetts Spy*. Thomas was soon so successful that he could purchase the business from Fowle, including the printing press on which he learned to print, called “Old Number One.”

Although Thomas initially tried to keep the *Massachusetts Spy* impartial in its politics he soon found that public sentiment was so great towards the war that it became impossible to remain impartial and the *Spy* eventually became a voice for the Whig, or Patriot, cause. The *Spy* soon became one of the most successful newspapers in all of America with a circulation of 3,500. Postriders and ships carried the *Spy* to readers throughout the thirteen colonies. Of all the patriotic papers the *Spy* contained the most fervent rhetoric and did much to anger and unify Americans in their support against the mother country, England. It is believed that the Sons of Liberty met secretly in Thomas’s printing shop during this time as well.²

While in Boston, Thomas began publishing other books, pamphlets, and a yearly almanac. He also established and produced for two years the *Royal American Magazine*. This was an attempt to create a periodical of literature and intellect for the well-educated and wealthy upper class. Thomas frequently asked his friend Paul Revere to provide illustrations for this magazine.

During his time in Boston, Thomas was frequently in trouble with the authorities because of his radical ideas. He was called before the Governor’s Council twice, and even sought legal counsel from James Otis. However, the royal authority did not pursue prosecution and Thomas was never imprisoned.

In the spring of 1775, Thomas’s associates, including John Hancock and Joseph Warren, feared for both his safety and that of his printing shop. They were very concerned that if

¹ See especially Arthur M. Schlesinger’s *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain* (Boston, 1958).

² Shipton, Clifford, *Isaiah Thomas, Printer, Patriot and Philanthropist* (New York, 1948), 30.

his press was not removed from Boston the British authorities would seize it. In the middle of the night of April 16, 1775, Thomas packed up his press and moved it out of Boston to Worcester. Thomas had planned to establish a second paper in Worcester the previous year, and since Worcester was filled with ardent Whig supporters, it was considered a very safe and advantageous place to establish a Whig printing office. Thomas set up his press in the basement of Timothy Bigelow's home. Three days later the Battles of Lexington and Concord occurred and the American Revolution began. Thomas printed one of the earliest published accounts of this battle in the May 3 issue of the *Spy*, the first thing to be printed in Worcester.

His move out of Boston brought him hardship, for his business suffered greatly. There is also some evidence to suggest that the Provincial Congress promised Thomas more work, though he only printed one pamphlet for them. This was a group of depositions of eyewitness accounts of Lexington and Concord, entitled *A Narrative of the Excursion and Ravages of the King's Troops Under the Command of General Gage on the Nineteenth of April, 1775*. During the early years of the American Revolution, Thomas lived intermittently in Worcester and leased the daily running of the *Spy* to first William Stearns and Daniel Bigelow and then to Anthony Haswell.

All of these gentlemen proved to be poor printers and journalists and the *Spy* suffered in both quality and subscriptions under their tutelage. When the second lease was up Thomas again took control of the *Spy* with the issue of July 2, 1778. From this point on Thomas would remain in Worcester and in control of the *Spy* and an increasing number of other publications and books. Throughout the rest of the war years his business would fluctuate widely, but after the war it grew exponentially, reaching its greatest successes in the years 1790 – 1802.

As one example of the growth of his business consider his printing of almanacs. In 1781, he printed and sold 3,000 almanacs, while, in the year 1797, he printed and sold 29,000³. In order to insure the quality of all aspects of the printing process, Thomas set up a paper mill and bookbinding operation. He had a controlling interest in three newspapers, a magazine, and eight bookstores in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Maryland. At the height of his business, he operated 16 presses throughout the country and employed some 150 people in Worcester alone.⁴

As his business prospered Thomas became a very wealthy man. He purchased a great deal of property in and around Worcester and throughout New England. He purchased a stately home in Boston and built a mansion in Worcester. His vanity also included showing off his wealth. He was the first person in Worcester to have a coach, which he would rent out on occasion and in which he traveled regularly to Boston and other locations around New England.

³ Annie Russell Marble, *From Prentice to Patron* (New York: 1935), 158.

⁴ Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America* (Weathervane Books: 1970), 21.

Thomas was also a very civic-minded man. He was a lifelong, active Mason, rising to the rank of grand master. He believed that he and other members of his generation were creating a republic of liberty and equality and were ushering in a new order for the ages, filled with virtue, learning, and religion. Throughout his life Thomas sought to better both his immediate community and the nation. He was instrumental in improving transportation in the new republic by founding the Worcester Turnpike Corporation and holding stock in a number of other turnpikes throughout central New England. Thomas was also a founder and trustee of the first bank of Worcester. Throughout his life and in his wills he was extremely generous to friends, family members, and those less fortunate.

Thomas was a man who was highly intelligent, vain, charming, quick tempered, and very generous. His generosity extended beyond his material wealth for he was a man who was always genuinely interested in all kinds of intellectual pursuits as is exemplified by the diverse subjects that he printed in both his newspapers and in his books.

His personal life was tempestuous. He was married three times. His first marriage to Mary Dill ended in divorce in 1777. This marriage did produce two children: a son, Isaiah, Junior, and a daughter, Mary Ann. Both of these children grew to adulthood and had many children. Isaiah, Junior, followed his father into the printing business but was not very successful and died from injuries he suffered in a fall at the age of 45. Mary Ann had three marriages, two of which ended in divorce. She caused her father some great concern as, in the later part of his life, he was supporting her and her children and struggling to keep her living within a budget. Thomas married his second wife, Mary, in 1778. This was by far his happiest marriage. They lived together until her death at the age of 68. After her death, Thomas wrote in his diary, "I have buried my best friend and wife, with whom I had lived 40 years."⁵ He married his third wife, Rebecca Armstrong, who was a cousin and servant of his second wife, in 1819. This was also not a happy union and the couple decided to separate after two years of marriage.

Despite these often-tempestuous family relationships, Thomas remained very close to his family. He supported many of his grandchildren and remained close to his siblings and his mother throughout their lives. His generosity is evident in the simple fact that he continued to provide for his first wife twenty years after their divorce.

In addition to being a great creator of books, Thomas was also a great scholar and collector of them. He retired from active business pursuits in 1802 to write *The History of Printing in America*. This two-volume work, first published in 1810, is still considered an important source on early American printers and the publishing industry. Thomas collected an enormous amount of material from which he wrote his history of printing. In 1812, he founded the American Antiquarian Society as a learned society and library devoted to American history and culture. It is the third oldest historical society in the country but the first to be national in scope. The American Antiquarian Society was indicative of many institutions founded in the early nineteenth century that sought to promote America and to convince people that American culture was rich and important.

⁵ Isaiah Thomas, *The Diary of Isaiah Thomas 1805-1828* (Worcester: 1909), 36.

Thomas had the vision to see our country as one whole entity when most people were seeing it as distinct colonies or states. He envisioned that this country was great and that its cultural heritage was equal to that of the older countries of Europe and the Middle East. He wanted to insure that our history and heritage was not overlooked, securing its preservation before it could be lost. In his collecting, he had the foresight to acquire important documents and books as well as those of an ephemeral nature such as advertisements, daily newspapers, ballads, and jokes. Thomas understood that, although these are the things that most people read once and then throw away, future historians and writers would need them to understand how common people lived their everyday lives. This emphasis and support of the common literature is uniquely American, for it reflects our democratic principles that everyone and everything has a value.