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Chronicling Citizens: A History of Newspapers in Brookline, MA

Introduction

The town of Brookline, Massachusetts is older than the nation itself. Incorporated in 1705, Brookline is 306 years old. For 140 of those years, Brookline has had a newspaper in print. Reflecting a growing population, advancements in technology, and fluctuations in media consumption, Brookline newspapers offer a compelling narrative of town history. An outlet for community news, opinion, advertising, and dialogue, a local newspaper is a precious commodity, only enjoyed if useful to its patrons. Brookline's population has been held in the highest regard by its newspapers, whose publications strive to match the standards of its readership. As put by one such paper, "In point of intelligence and learning our constituency is the peer of any community in the world."¹ Written in 1894, that sentiment has remained constant through almost a century and a half of citizenship, community, and change.

Early Papers

The dominant newspaper in Brookline throughout its history has been the *Brookline Chronicle*. Founded in 1874, the newspaper was traded among many hands, took various formats, and survived a few mergers. And while the best-known, it was not the first. That title belongs to F.O. Wellman and W.G. Wilson who published *Young Americans*, the first paper of which there is a record. Produced from 1855 to 1858, it would be Brookline's only paper until 1870. Bradford Kingman began his publication of the *Brookline Transcript* in that year, but the weekly was finished after three years. Between 1873 and 1903 a number of papers came and went, among them the *Brookline News*, an illustrated weekly

¹ "The Chronicle: A Brief History of its Eventful Career." *The Chronicle* 6 Oct. 1894.

published by Louis Cassier from 1886 to 1888, and the *Brookline Press*, published by Ambrose Pratt from 1903 to 1911.² The *Press* wavered in its ownership until 1913, when Walter D. Allen became president, editor, and business manager, renaming the paper the *Brookline Townsman*.³ The *Townsman* was the only commercial paper of this era to survive past the turn of the century.

Some papers were special interest publications. The *Brookline Independent* was established in 1873 in opposition to efforts to annex Brookline to Boston.⁴ Other papers of the decade were founded due to business rivalries. In 1885, a different *Brookline Independent* was published by J.D. Emmons with whom the *Chronicle* had come into disagreement. The unexplained feud nearly approached a libel suit, but the storm passed and the *Independent* closed shop.⁵ Trouble arose again in 1899 when the *Brookline Suburban* was published by an antagonistic former employee of the *Chronicle*. It did not last long, however, and ceased operations in 1901, its final issue even lacking a valedictory.⁶ Brookline should be especially proud of its longest running publication still in print, the *Sagamore*. The high school paper was established in 1895 and is still produced by students today, one hundred and sixteen years later.

The Brookline Chronicle: 1874-1916

“On account of its proximity to Boston, Brookline has not been a good field for local newspapers.”⁷ This was the opinion of John William Denehy, an early historian of Brookline, in his book commemorating the two-hundredth anniversary of the town in 1905. The *Brookline Chronicle*, already in print for 31 years at the time of Denehy’s assessment, would continue to prove him wrong.

² “Newspapers Have Been Part of Town Nearly 100 Years.” *The Chronicle* 15 Nov. 1951.

³ “Two Papers Join Forces: Chronicle and Townsman Merged in this Issue.” *Brookline Chronicle* 4 Oct. 1919.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John William Denehy. *A History of Brookline, Massachusetts: From the First Settlement of Muddy River Until the Present Time, 1630-1906*. Brookline, MA: The Brookline Press Company, 1906.

The first issue of the *Brookline Chronicle* appeared on May 9, 1874. For five cents, it offered four 20x26 inch pages filled with local news, town schedules and events, advertisements, and a weekly prayer. Captain W.H. Hutchinson was the paper's founding editor and publisher, but only remained so for little over a year. On July 10, 1875, Murray M. Wing and Alexander S. Arthur purchased the paper and moved the offices from the Colonnade Building to the Dun-Edin Building on Washington Street. The paper itself was originally printed in Boston. The changing location of the offices and printing press would become a theme of the paper's history, representing its wavering status of permanence. After Mr. Arthur sold his interest to Mr. Wing in November 1876, the offices were moved back to the Colonnade Building. Its stay, however, was short-lived as the building was destroyed by fire a few weeks later.⁸

Another owner and a move back to the Dun-Edin Building marked the year 1877 for the *Chronicle* as Charles M. Vincent took the helm. He installed the first newspaper press, a hand-powered "Fairhaven" cylinder press. While modest, the machine marked another theme of the *Chronicle* – a continued effort to modernize with technology. Despite his initiative, Mr. Vincent failed to meet the financial obligations of the paper. The property was returned to the mortgagee and Mr. Arthur was called back to assume management in February 1878. A year and a half later, in July 1879, Mr. Arthur and C.A.W. Spencer purchased the plant and offices of the *Chronicle* from the mortgagee. Mr. Spencer would become the longest-serving publisher of the paper. Mr. Arthur, however, fell into poor health and sold his share to Mr. Spencer in 1881. The paper dropped "Brookline" from the title and officially became the *Chronicle*. Marking a new year, Elliot F. Soule bought an interest in the paper on January 1, 1883. The offices were relocated once again to the Harvard Building in Harvard Square where they

⁸ "The Chronicle: A Brief History of Its Eventful Career." *The Chronicle* 6 Oct. 1894.

would remain for more than thirty years. On November 1, 1883 Mr. Spencer repurchased Mr. Soule's share and became its sole proprietor for the next thirty-three years.⁹

The Spencer era was marked by expansion in production, office space, and technology operated under Spencer's company, the Riverdale Press. The format of the paper was changed from a 28-column folio to a 40-column quarto form. The hand-cranked Fairhaven press was replaced by a steam-powered press in 1880. By the end of the decade, the *Chronicle* had converted to the electric-powered Cranston press, evolving with the rapidly changing technology of the time. The new equipment and larger printing capacity required the addition of office space to the Harvard Building workrooms. Along with the newspaper, the press also produced law and philosophical works, library catalogues, municipal records, the Annual Town Report, and other publications.¹⁰ As the paper itself put it, "In the way of job printing, nothing is too small – nothing too large to be undertaken."¹¹ Under Spencer, the paper matured and flourished.

Mergers, Moves, and Fifty Years

In 1916, the success of the Riverdale Press required more of Mr. Spencer's personal attention. After 37 years with the paper and 15 as its editor, he sold the *Chronicle* to Walter C. English. Mr. English established the Brookline Chronicle Publishing Company, becoming its treasurer and general manager.¹² The *Chronicle* continued its excellent operations and was soon ready to expand once more.

The other paper in town, the *Brookline Townsman* had only been in operation for 16 years in 1919. It had, however, already cultivated a respectable readership, efficient production practices, and a talented editor, Walter D. Allen. Combined with the larger printing capabilities and reputation of the

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "The Chronicle: A Brief History of Its Eventful Career." *The Chronicle* 6 Oct. 1894.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "The Brookline Chronicle's Interesting Career for Fifty Years." *The Chronicle* 8 May 1924.

Chronicle, the two papers would mutually benefit from a merger. On September 4, 1919 the *Chronicle* incorporated the *Townsmen* and reorganized the Brookline Chronicle Publishing Company. Mr. Allen became treasurer of the company and general manager of the *Chronicle* while Mr. English became the president of the corporation, and Mr. Spencer stayed on as vice president and managing editor.¹³ It was a powerful marriage of skill and resources.

By 1924, the *Chronicle* showed no signs of slowing down. It produced over three thousand copies every week of its 24 page paper, maintained a subscription list of Brookline's most notable citizens, and conducted a healthy advertising business. Its 50th anniversary that year was certainly an achievement to celebrate. The *Chronicle's* reputation exceeded Brookline's borders and the paper received congratulatory notes from President Calvin Coolidge, Secretary of War John W. Weeks, Governor of Massachusetts Channing H. Cox, Massachusetts Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, and Mayor of Boston James M. Curley.¹⁴

Indeed, the *Chronicle* continued its steady expansion. In 1928 a new building was erected on Harvard Street in Coolidge Corner for the express purposes of the paper. Once again, modern technology was a must. The new machinery included a large cylinder press, proof presses, steel and marble imposing stones, a metal melting furnace, and new type.¹⁵ Readers were encouraged to visit the new building. Purposefully omitting guide rails, the paper wanted citizens to "make of this office a clearing house for the frank discussion of matters that pertain to the advancement and welfare of the town and of all its citizens."¹⁶ The announcement of the new plant overflowed with pride and pleasure.

¹³ "Two Papers Join Forces: Chronicle and Townsmen Merged in This Issue." *The Chronicle* 4 Oct. 1919.

¹⁴ "The Brookline Chronicle's Interesting Career for Fifty Years." *The Chronicle* 8 May 1924.

¹⁵ "Note and Comment: The Chronicle's New Plant." *The Chronicle* 20 Dec. 1928.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The Brookline Citizen

For sixteen years after the merger with the *Townsmen* in 1919, the *Chronicle* was the only Brookline newspaper. It defeated or incorporated its competition over its half century in print. But in 1935 Joseph M. Boyd and Gardner Barker began publication of the *Brookline Citizen*. Two years later, G. Russell Phinney became a third partner. After disagreements over how to divide shares, Mr. Phinney acquired the entirety of the paper and its parent organization, The Press Publishing Company, in 1939. The offices of the *Citizen* were located next door to the *Chronicle* on Harvard Street, and the two papers were neighbors for seven years.¹⁷

The *Brookline Citizen* was only one of the papers published by Phinney. The Press Publishing Company also produced the *Brighton Citizen* and the *Allston Citizen* for these neighboring towns. The *Citizen* newspapers were free and had a combined circulation of 36,300 by World War II. Along with traditional advertising, the *Citizen* papers also employed classified ads, including “for sale,” “help wanted,” and “instruction”.¹⁸ In its early years, the *Citizen* had to work hard to establish its credentials. In an interesting piece of self-commentary eight years in, the *Citizen* wrote, “Few new undertakings ever meet with a ready welcome. It is well that they do not. Too much approval and eulogy is often fatal to a new enterprise. And not infrequently disastrous to older ones.”¹⁹ The *Citizen* was a challenger and determined not only to survive, but thrive.

The Brookline Chronicle-Citizen

The Golden Age of the *Chronicle* under Spencer and Allen was coming to a close. The appearance of the *Brookline Citizen* changed the landscape. Combined with its readership in Allston and Brighton, the *Citizen* had a larger circulation and attracted most of the advertising revenue. Faced with

¹⁷ “Chronicle Began in Room Over Paint Shop.” *Brookline Chronicle Citizen* May 1974.

¹⁸ “The Celebration of Newspaper Week.” *Brookline Citizen* World War II.

¹⁹ “The Citizen and the Community: This is the Eighth Year of the Citizen.” *Brookline Citizen* 1942.

growing competition, Allen sold his financial interests in the Brookline Chronicle Publishing Company in 1950 to Joseph L. Gordon and Aaron Sternfield.²⁰ The offices were moved down Harvard Street and the mechanical work was contracted out to the Wellesley Press.²¹ The endeavor did not last long. Twenty months later, Phinney bought the *Chronicle* in November of 1951 and the paper was relocated again farther down Harvard Street. For the next eight years, the *Chronicle* and *Citizen* were published separately.²²

In 1959 Phinney combined the two papers into the *Brookline Chronicle-Citizen*. The new paper adopted the format of the *Citizen* but maintained the paid circulation status of the *Chronicle*. Under Phinney, the Brookline Chronicle Publishing Company produced the *Brookline Chronicle-Citizen*, the *Allston-Brighton Citizen-Item*, and the *Boston Ledger* along with commercial printing. In 1966, the offices were moved to another location on Harvard Street and switched from old “hot type” to new “cold type”, a photographic method of typesetting. The *Chronicle-Citizen*, continuing its legacy of technological prowess, became one of the first weeklies typeset by computer in New England.

G. Russell Phinney had cultivated a small network of local papers and provided a touchstone for his community. He would continue to serve as publisher until his death in 1982. At that time his son, Frederic N. Phinney, took control forming Citizen Group Publications to manage the various papers. The *Brookline Chronicle-Citizen* was renamed the *Brookline Citizen* in 1984, to keep continuity among the Group’s papers. The newspapers peaked during the 1980s. For instance, the *Boston Ledger* averaged forty pages each week and had a circulation of 48,000.²³ But what goes up must come down, and Citizen Group Publications was on the decline.

²⁰ “Meet Your New Publishers.” *The Chronicle* 9 March 1950.

²¹ “Chronicle Began in Room Over Paint Shop.” *Brookline Chronicle Citizen* May 1974.

²² “New Management.” *The Chronicle* 15 Nov. 1951.

²³ John King. “Boston Ledger Calls It Quits.” *Boston Globe* 12 July 1989.

The Last Citizens

After fifty-two years in print, the *Boston Ledger* was the first of the CGP family to shut down in 1989. With a shrinking circulation of 29,000 and a forty percent decline in advertising, the free tabloid newspaper that served the Back Bay and Beacon Hill neighborhoods of Boston could no longer stay afloat. The paper was founded in 1937 and acquired by G. Russell Phinney in 1967. Despite the loss, Frederic Phinney recommitted himself to the three remaining papers, the *Allston-Brighton Citizen*, the *Brookline Citizen*, and the *Charlestown Citizen*.²⁴

Declining ad sales and financial insolvency continued to haunt the CGP family through the remainder of 1989 and early 1990. Faced with mounting debt, Phinney had few other choices but to sell his beloved publications. In May of 1990, mega-millionaire and Boston real estate mogul Harold Brown purchased a controlling 73.5% interest of the Citizen newspapers.²⁵ Phinney retained a 26.5% interest in the company and believed he would stay on as publisher. But he and his wife, Judith, were fired from their positions at the paper, beginning an embittered legal battle over contract negotiations.²⁶ In the meantime, speculation on the CGP's financial troubles proved true and in the spring of 1990 the *Charlestown Citizen* was closed, followed shortly by the shutdown of the *Allston-Brighton Citizen* in July. The papers had been losing an estimated \$15,000 a week in advertising.²⁷ All eyes were now on the *Brookline Citizen*, ending where it had all began.

Over the next three years, the *Brookline Citizen* struggled to stay in business. Circulation declined from 25,000 to less than 12,000 as the paper faced competition from the *Brookline Journal*, the *Brookline Tab*, and the *Boston Globe's* City Weekly section. By 1994 the paper had its third owner in a decade, Eric Benjamin. With mounting debt and few prospects, the *Brookline Citizen* closed its doors in

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "Harold Brown Develops a Shine for Citizen Newspapers." *Boston Herald* 8 May 1990.

²⁶ Diane Lewis. "Allston-Brighton Newspaper Closes." *Boston Globe* 18 July 1990.

²⁷ Ibid.

January of 1994.²⁸ Over one hundred and twenty years, the *Brookline Citizen* had been a town fixture of independent local journalism. Its closure marked a changing media landscape and for the first time the *Citizen* could not keep up.

GateHouse Media and the Massachusetts Market

In the past decade, news in Brookline has reflected broader trends in media. A major shift online has been combined with the hyperlocal news ventures of corporations. Other than The New York Times Co., which owns the *Boston Globe*, the major publisher in Massachusetts is GateHouse Media Inc. The company, headquartered in Fairport, NY and started by New York venture capitalists in the late nineties, went on a buying spree in the Massachusetts newspaper market. In June 2006, GateHouse paid \$230 million for four dailies and 93 weeklies held by Community Newspapers Co., owned by Boston Herald publisher Patrick J. Purcell. By August 2006, GateHouse had also purchased 23 weeklies and the two major local dailies south of Boston for \$180 million from Enterprise News Media LLC.²⁹ Rounding out the year, GateHouse paid \$70 million in December 2006 for the holdings of the Journal Register Co.³⁰ Papers owned by GateHouse now stretched from the North Shore to the Rhode Island border and Boston's western exurbs, operating more than one hundred papers in the state. Nationwide, the company owned more than four hundred publications across eighteen states.³¹

As noted by Lou Ureneck, a journalism professor at Boston University, GateHouse's business model is based on "a strategy of building geographic clusters, which aggregate readers, offer attractive markets to advertisers, and reduce costs by sharing operations among papers."³² Their umbrella online publication is Wicked Local, a collection of news sites and blogs from the various town papers. Wicked

²⁸ Michael Grunwald. "120-Year-Old Weekly in Brookline Closes." *Boston Globe* 23 Jan. 1994.

²⁹ Christopher Rowland. "Chain Aims to Sell Papers in Region." *Boston Globe* 29 Aug. 2006.

³⁰ Robert Gavin. "GateHouse Buys More Mass. Papers." *Boston Globe* 2 Dec. 2006.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Local had 529,000 individual visitors among its one hundred and sixty sites last year.³³ Wicked Local joins other hyperlocal online publications, including the *Boston Globe's* "Your Town" sites and the newly launched Patch sites by AOL. Brookline is covered by all three outlets. Its Wicked Local site, however, provides the most traditional coverage of the town as it is the online forum for the *Brookline Tab*.

The *Tab* was founded in 1979, along with the neighboring *Newton Tab*, as an ad-heavy alternative weekly. The expansion of the *Tab* brand grew to cover fourteen other Massachusetts towns before being bought by Fidelity Investments in 1990. It was later dissolved into the Community Newspaper Company in 1996.³⁴ The CNC is now a division of GateHouse Media. Erin Clossey, the News Editor at the *Brookline Tab*, says their Wicked Local site does something different from "Your Town" or Patch. While "Your Town" can be distracted and spotty in its coverage, Patch relies on submitted free content. "We [the *Brookline Tab*] focus on hard news coverage, so our mission is slightly different," she said. "Our advantage is longevity and reach in the community. We have the institutional memory. People know us."³⁵

The recession of the past few years has put that longevity at risk for many Boston-area publications. From the *Boston Globe* to the *Boston Herald* and all the local papers in between, print has seen a steady decline. The *Boston Herald* has downsized its newsroom by nearly half since a decade ago, and its circulation is down 38%. The *Boston Globe* has cut 546 jobs since 2001, lost \$50 million in 2008, and was projected to lose \$85 million in 2009. GateHouse Media has equally felt the crunch. It was de-listed from the New York Stock Exchange in 2009 after losing \$673 million.³⁶ All of the companies have cut their staff, reduced salaries, and renegotiated with unions over benefits in an effort

³³ Johnny Diaz. "With Patch, AOL Offers Challenge to Local News; A Risky Web Strategy in a Crowded Field." *Boston Globe* 5 August 2010.

³⁴ Krasner, Jeffrey. "Fidelity Investments Unit Buys Out TAB Newspapers". *Boston Herald*, December 5, 1992.

³⁵ Clossey, Erin. Personal Interview 29 April 2011.

³⁶ Keith O'Brien. "Front Page Blues; Jobs Cuts Spread Across the Region as Newspapers Try to Regain Footing." *Boston Globe* 16 April 2009.

to salvage their print publications. Like media entities across the nation, these companies are trying to develop new business models both for print and online to make the news profitable again.

Lessons From the Past, Reporting the Future

Boston is often called the PhD capital of the world and has the highest concentration of college students in the United States. Fifty-two percent of the *Boston Globe's* readership holds a college degree.³⁷ It is no surprise, then, that quality remains an important tradition in Boston-area papers. The newspapers of Brookline have demonstrated a commitment to its readership. In 1894, the *Chronicle* wrote, "As a local family newspaper The Chronicle has constantly striven to be worthy of the patronage of the community which it serves, and a credit to the town."³⁸ The *Brookline Citizen* wrote during World War II, "The editors of the CITIZEN have a single aim – to present all the local news in an interesting manner. That the weekly press serves a valuable need cannot be doubted. Bombarded continually by news of earthshaking importance, readers must nevertheless live within the community. There they have their friends, their businesses, their entertainment."³⁹

At the closing of the paper fifty years later, one Brookline resident said, "It's a real tragedy. Not because The Citizen was the world's greatest newspaper, but because it was passionately devoted to this community, and only this community."⁴⁰ As a lifetime resident of Brookline, Jim Duggan remembers when everyone had the same local newspaper. As he recalls, "Newspapers were fun and kicky and distinct and discreet. They were in your hands and everybody shared them."⁴¹

³⁷ "The Boston Globe." High Beam Research <http://www.highbeam.com/publications/the-boston-globe-boston-ma-p2935> accessed 1 May 2011.

³⁸ "The Chronicle: A Brief History of Its Eventful Career." *The Chronicle* 6 Oct. 1894.

³⁹ "The Celebration of Newspaper Week." *Brookline Citizen* World War II.

⁴⁰ Michael Grunwald. "120-Year-Old Weekly in Brookline Closes." *Boston Globe* 23 Jan. 1994.

⁴¹ James Duggan. Personal Interview 30 April 2011.

Today, as news increasingly moves online and our information sources span the globe, local outlets are finding new ways to keep us close to home. It's a challenging time and a period of transition. But Brookline's long history of local news offers an important lesson. President Coolidge articulated the piece of wisdom nicely in his 1924 congratulatory note to the *Chronicle* on its fiftieth anniversary: "[T]he high place which the Chronicle holds in the community is a tribute to [its] devotion to the best ideals of journalism."⁴² Whatever shape local news outlets may take in the future, they would be wise to live up to the traditions of the past. Brookline should be proud of its journalistic tradition and optimistic for its future.

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⁴² "The Brookline Chronicle's Interesting Career for Fifty Years." *The Chronicle* 8 May 1924.

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