

## “Let Me Chat a Little”: Letter Writing in Rhode Island before the Revolution

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**I**n the late summer of 1755 Benjamin Franklin was a busy man. Though retired from his Philadelphia printing business, he was engrossed more than ever in a “perpetual Hurry of publick Affairs” as he wrangled over war preparations with his fellow Pennsylvania legislators. By 11 September, Franklin was eager to escape his hectic schedule, and he did so by writing a whimsical letter to a young woman in Rhode Island. “Begone, Business. for an Hour. at least. & let me chat a little” was how Franklin began his letter to Catharine Ray. Ray was an unmarried young woman, the same age as Franklin’s son, who had innocently charmed Franklin when they had journeyed together from Boston to Rhode Island the previous winter. By dint of fate the two became lifelong friends, and although they would see each other only five times altogether, they would exchange letters filled with “small News” and “domestic Occurrences” every few months or so. The pretense was that their letters bridged the great distances separating Rhode Island, where Ray lived with her family, and Philadelphia or London or Paris, where Franklin relished the life of a cosmopolitan gentleman. These amiable letters were not so much letters, the two friends reassured each other, as they were “chats” that brought them face-to-face.<sup>1</sup>

The current consensus among historians is that such exchanges of letters were a rarity before the American Revolution. Ordinary Americans were too poorly educated, too busy with hard work, too immersed in family life, and too involved in local affairs to be exchanging letters with anyone in the wider world. Only a handful of urban elite white men enjoyed the privilege of a proper education, the luxury of leisure time and disposable income, and the advantage of cosmopolitan connections, and only they could indulge in writing letters. Most other Americans, historians have argued, were quite content to lead circumscribed lives because they could simply visit neighbors and nearby friends whenever they wanted to socialize or do business. The historical record seems to confirm these assumptions, since the letters most assiduously gathered into archival collections have been those of the government officials, merchants, and ministers who made up the elite. Yet the bias of such collections does not necessarily mean that less prominent people did not write and exchange letters before the American Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Rhode Island archives contain a cache of rare records that allow a more systematic investigation into the cultural practice of letter writing at that time. Records survive for the Newport post office spanning the years between 1748 and 1775. Of particular interest are seven daybooks in which the postmaster listed, by name, the recipient of every letter sent to the Newport post office for more than two decades.<sup>3</sup> The daybooks reveal that the volume of mail increased substantially before the Revolution, and that the number of people receiving mail increased at an astonishing rate. By the eve of the Revolution the Newport

*A 1770 letter addressed to one of Newport's most prominent merchants. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8290).*

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post office was being patronized by more middling and poorer people, more women, and more rural residents than ever before.



The Newport post office was the first in Rhode Island, and one of the first in what is now the United States. The American postal system (which today encompasses over twenty-eight thousand post offices, including more than fifty in Rhode Island)<sup>4</sup> can trace its ancestry back over three centuries. It was in 1692 that the British government decided to sponsor a postal system in what was then a remote corner of its burgeoning global empire—the North American colonies. The colonial postal system was the brainchild of an entrepreneur, Thomas Neale, and Neale was expected to carry out the project without an iota of government support. Prospects for his success appeared dim, since Neale had never been to the colonies, he had no experience in the English postal system, and he was distracted by other speculative ventures (such as recovering sunken treasure). The best decision he made was to persuade the newly appointed governor of East and West Jersey, Andrew Hamilton, to oversee the undertaking. The persistent Hamilton badgered several colonial legislatures into allocating money for the postal system, and he used those funds to install post offices in major seaports between Massachusetts and Virginia. By 1710 there were fourteen post offices in the North American colonies, including one in Newport.<sup>5</sup>

Little is known about either the Newport post office or the colonial postal system between 1710 and 1753. This is so, in part, because the fledgling system was a victim of chronic neglect. In 1710 the entire imperial postal system—in England, Scotland, the West Indies, and North America—was consolidated under the authority of the postmaster general in London. Once the British government had taken over the system, the colonial legislatures gladly spent their money elsewhere. Rather than filling this void, though, the British government assigned charge of the colonial postal system to a deputy, whose meager salary would be the only funds devoted to the system. In this era powerful London politicians doled out patronage jobs throughout the British Empire to family and friends, but since the office of deputy postmaster general for North America was not terribly lucrative, it was filled by neither the best nor the brightest administrators. One such official shirked his duties and dissipated himself “sotting about with the Dregs of the People,” a critical grumbled in 1740.<sup>6</sup> Without proper leadership by the deputy postmaster general in the colonies, without clear direction from imperial authorities in London, and without any subsidy from the colonial legislatures, the postal system was fortunate to have stagnated when it might have crumbled altogether.

The vagaries of patronage nearly destroyed the colonial postal system, but in the 1750s it was patronage that helped to save it. In 1753 the system entered a period of remarkable growth when Benjamin Franklin began his long tenure as deputy postmaster general for North America. Unlike his predecessors, Franklin had had many years of experience as a postmaster, and he had some concrete sense of how the postal system might be improved. Though he was no grand visionary, his reform instincts and practical tinkering were a breath of fresh air after decades of neglect. His most important asset was that he was not only a beneficiary of someone else’s patronage; he himself was also a dispenser of patronage. Ever striving to expand his sphere of influence beyond his adopted

hometown of Philadelphia, Franklin spun a vast web of patronage up and down the eastern seaboard, granting postmasterships to eager business partners like Peter Timothy in Charleston, South Carolina, to struggling kinfolk like his own nephew Benjamin Mecom in New Haven, Connecticut, and to grateful friends like Joshua Babcock in Westerly, Rhode Island. In the two decades following Franklin's appointment as deputy postmaster general, the number of post offices in the North American colonies quadrupled.<sup>7</sup>

Slowly but surely the postal system shed its aura of fragility and assumed one of permanence. By 1766 the overworked comptroller in New York City was pleading for a salary increase, since "there are many more small Offices to look after . . . than there were a few years ago."<sup>8</sup> Rhode Island shared in this widespread expansion as new post offices were established in Bristol, East Greenwich, Providence, Tower Hill (South Kingstown), Warren, and Westerly. These offices formed two postal routes through Rhode Island, one on either side of Narragansett Bay, linking the colony to Boston to the northeast and New York City to the southwest.



1764  
 To  
 Mr. Nicholas Brown & Co  
 Providence

1767  
 To  
 Mr. Nicholas Brown & Co  
 Providence

Letters were folded in such a way that they could be sealed and addressed without envelopes. These letters to the Providence firm of Nicholas Brown and Company were from Issac Hart (top) and Thomas Robinson (bottom), both of Newport. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8291).

The process of conveying mail from sender to recipient was much different in the eighteenth century from what it is today. To send a letter then, the writer folded it in such a way that the outside was blank and could be addressed and sealed with wax; envelopes were not used, and postage stamps would not appear until the next century. Addresses contained the recipient's name, town, and colony, but not a street name, and zip codes, of course, were far in the future. Once the letter was sealed, it had to be brought to the local post office, since street-corner mailboxes were also a future invention; yet with so few post offices in existence, the local post office might be miles away. From there the letter was forwarded by horseback to the post office nearest to its destination, which likewise could be miles away from where the recipient lived. And there the letter sat until the recipient somehow learned of its existence and picked it up, since there was no home delivery. Trusting that a letter would reach its intended recipient was, in the eighteenth century, something of a leap of faith.

Since uncertainty plagued every step of this process, many people chose to entrust their letters only to someone they knew personally. "Gave my . . . letters to Mr. Cole to carry to Boston," South Kingstown minister James MacSparran noted in his journal in 1745. "He promised to come to my House for more; as he does not go away till Wednesday."<sup>9</sup> Such informal conveyance of mail was not recorded in any post office daybook, so historians have no way of comparing the volume of mail sent this way to that carried by the colonial postal system. Still, the preambles to innumerable letters surviving in the archives suggest that informal conveyance was a deeply ingrained habit in the eighteenth century, when most people were accustomed to having personal knowledge of everyone they dealt with in their day-to-day affairs. Using the postal system, on the other hand, meant entrusting one's letter to strangers—postmasters and postriders—who could not offer any personal assurances. In addition, use of the postal system cost money. Postage was not cheap, and since it was paid by the recipient (rather than the writer) of a letter, it amounted to an imposition on those receiving mail. When MacSparran received three letters one day in 1751, for example, he was acutely aware of the steep cost, noting in his journal that

the letter conveyed by the postal system cost "30s postage." To pay for a service that was customarily free understandably registered as a bit of a shock.<sup>9</sup>

Though more certain and less expensive than the postal system, informal conveyance of mail had drawbacks of its own. A sender had to find someone traveling to the desired destination who would promise to deliver the letter. Typically, letter writing was prompted less by fresh news to relate than by an opportunity to have a letter delivered, news or no news. "I embrace this opportunity by Mr Leonard Duson to write you," Nathanael Greene informed a correspondent in 1773, "not because I have anything to write" but because Duson was going on a trip and could carry a letter.<sup>11</sup> If a person had particular cause to write a letter, he or she would have to wait patiently for an opportunity to send it, no matter how frustrating that wait might be. Yet waiting was not the only problem caused by informal conveyance of mail; another problem was the haste required when an opportunity to send a letter suddenly presented itself.

"Charles hurries me," Nathanael Greene scribbled frantically on another occasion. "Blame him for bad writeing and a bad Letter, for I knew not of his going till a few minutes ago."<sup>12</sup> Relying on informal conveyance meant aligning one's letter-writing needs with the haphazard rhythms of eighteenth-century travel. Sometimes the timing was right; often it wasn't.

The one clear advantage of the postal system was its regularity; by the end of the 1750s it operated on an established schedule along the main post road stretching from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to Williamsburg, Virginia. The Newport post office received mail once a week from Boston as well as from New York City. Except in the worst of winter snow or spring thaw, when overland travel by horse was quite arduous, this weekly schedule was reliably maintained for much of the year. In theory, people could write a letter as soon as the occasion arose and then send it with the next scheduled mail. "I have waited more than a week for an opportunity of writing by some private hand," a Boston correspondent wrote to Ezra Stiles in 1761, "but hearing of none think it proper to inform you by the Post."<sup>13</sup> To save money, people tended to use the postal system only as a last resort, when no informal conveyance was available or seemed imminent. "I should have wrote by the post," a Philadelphia merchant admitted to a client in Newport in 1773, "but Capt. Whitman is going so soon and I thought it would save the postage."<sup>14</sup>



For thirty years, beginning in 1745, the Newport post office was located in the home of postmaster Thomas Vernon. Vernon's older brother William and younger brother Samuel ranked among Newport's wealthiest merchants, and although Thomas had also pursued commerce as his first career choice, he did not have the same zeal for business that his brothers did. In 1744 he dissolved a business partnership after five years of lackluster profits and cast about for a new way to earn his livelihood. Within a few months he managed to secure two minor royal offices, one as Newport postmaster and the other as register for the vice-admiralty court. These positions afforded Vernon only middling economic rank, but he boosted his social status by becoming an active member of the Redwood Library and Trinity Church, two leading cultural institutions where he could mix with Newport's most prominent citizens and cultivate his own predilections for the English, the royal, and the refined.<sup>15</sup>

Vernon and his wife lived on what is today called Division Street, around the corner from Trinity Church and down the block from Touro Synagogue. Their home was a short stroll from the Parade, which, with its impressive city hall and bustling commercial district of stores and shops, was the heart of old Newport. By the eve of the Revolution the city had a population of over nine thousand people, but by modern standards it was still a compact place, and most people lived within easy walking distance of Vernon's home. The post office there became sufficiently known for Benjamin Mason, a leading merchant, to advertise in the newspaper that his store was "opposite the Post Office."<sup>16</sup> Vernon conducted a variety of petty selling at the post office during his early years as postmaster. On 13 April 1749, for example, he recorded both the arrival of mail

Thomas Vernon's 1748-1752 daybook, pages 98 and 99. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8293).

The image shows an open handwritten daybook with two pages, numbered 98 and 99. The pages are filled with a list of names and amounts, organized into columns. The entries include names such as 'Mr. Harrison', 'Mr. Grant', 'Mr. Mason', and 'Mr. Brown', along with various amounts and dates. The handwriting is in a cursive script typical of the 18th century. The right page has a vertical margin on the far right with some additional markings.

for twelve people and his sale of "colleflower seeds."<sup>17</sup> By the 1770s, though, the work of the post office left no room for extraneous business there, and if Vernon was still selling goods now and then, the sales were not recorded in the post office daybooks. Vernon's last daybook ends in July 1775, when revolutionaries wrested the colonial postal system from imperial control a full year before the colonies declared independence from England. Unlike his wealthier brothers, Vernon chose the path of a Loyalist during the Revolution, and he was unceremoniously replaced as Newport's postmaster.<sup>18</sup>

Vernon's thirty-year tenure as postmaster gave stability to the Newport post office and, fortunately for the historian, consistency to the seven surviving daybooks. These contain only data that was useful to Vernon, whose bottom line was the amount of postage owed to the post office. Vernon was expected to collect all of this postage and forward it to the comptroller in New York City, who in turn conveyed it to London to be placed in the royal coffers. Since Vernon was personally liable for this postage, and since he drew his own salary from it, he carefully recorded the name of every person who received mail in the two weekly deliveries to his post office, together with the amount of postage owed by each recipient. The tall, narrow daybooks are filled with thousands of names, all inscribed in Vernon's fairly legible hand. These

daybooks provide us with valuable information, for by counting the names that Vernon recorded each year, we can determine how the volume of mail changed during the pivotal decades before the American Revolution.



A comparison of the first and last years recorded in the daybooks, 1749 and 1774, shows that the volume of mail delivered to the Newport post office increased substantially. For 1749 Vernon entered 1,191 names in the daybook; for 1774 he entered almost double that number, 2,249 names. During those twenty-five years the annual volume of mail increased by 89 percent, a rate of increase more than twice that of Newport's population growth.<sup>19</sup>

Some people received mail week after week, and their names were entered repeatedly in the daybooks. To determine how many different individuals received mail at the Newport post office, all of the repeated names must be factored out. Removing the repetitions from among the 1,191 names recorded for

1749 leaves only 103 individuals, a small set of people. By 1774 the situation was greatly changed: among the 2,249 names recorded for that year were 790 individuals. In just twenty-five years the number of different people receiving mail had increased by an astonishing 667 percent. Not only was much more mail being delivered to the Newport post office, but many, many more people were receiving that mail.

Not all of these 790 people received mail week after week; some received mail intermittently or only seldom over the course of the year. For purposes of comparison, mail recipients may be divided into three categories: frequent recipients, who received mail twelve or more times a year; intermittent recipients, who received mail between three and eleven times a year; and infrequent recipients, who received mail only once or twice a year. As table 1 shows, between 1749 and 1774 there was a marked shift in the percentage of people falling into these three categories. During that time the percentage of frequent recipients decreased substantially, while the percentage (as well as the number) of infrequent recipients greatly increased. In a parallel shift, shown in table 2, frequent recipients received a far smaller proportion, and infrequent recipients a far greater proportion, of the post office's total volume of mail in 1774 than they did in 1749.

These dramatic changes suggest that letter writing was becoming a more common cultural practice by the eve of the Revolution than it had been earlier. The amount of mail received at the Newport post office nearly doubled between 1749 and 1774, but even more noteworthy was the astonishing increase in the number of people receiving that mail, especially among infrequent recipients. Although these changes might be interpreted

Table 1  
Recipients of Mail at the Newport Post Office  
in 1749 and 1774

	1749		1774	
	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%
Frequent recipients <sup>a</sup>	35	34	34	4
Intermittent recipients <sup>b</sup>	33	32	153	19
Infrequent recipients <sup>c</sup>	35	35	603	77
<b>Total</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>101<sup>d</sup></b>	<b>790</b>	<b>100</b>

SOURCES: Newport post office daybook, 1748-1752, Rhode Island Historical Society; Newport post office daybook, 1774-1775, Newport Historical Society.

<sup>a</sup> Received mail 12 or more times a year.

<sup>b</sup> Received mail 3 to 11 times a year.

<sup>c</sup> Received mail 1 or 2 times a year.

<sup>d</sup> Does not add up to 100% because of rounding.

Table 2  
Amount of Mail Received at the Newport Post Office  
in 1749 and 1774

	1749		1774	
	NUMBER OF LETTERS	% OF TOTAL	NUMBER OF LETTERS	% OF TOTAL
Frequent recipients	912	77	747	33
Intermittent recipients	239	20	768	34
Infrequent recipients	40	4	734	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,191</b>	<b>101<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>2,249</b>	<b>100</b>

SOURCES: Newport post office daybook, 1748-1752, Newport post office daybook, 1774-1775.

<sup>a</sup> Does not add up to 100% because of rounding.

as meaning that people who had once had their mail carried by friends were now using the postal system instead, the prevailing reluctance to accept the uncertain and expensive new way of sending mail points more clearly toward an expansion and diffusion of letter writing rather than a mere substitution of one means of conveyance for another.

Vernon's daybooks do not define the full extent of letter writing in this era. There is no way of knowing how much additional mail was delivered to the Newport area via informal conveyance, unrecorded in the daybooks. Vernon protested to his superiors that fewer than half the letters sent from Boston were ever delivered to the Newport post office; the rest were being distributed by the brazen royal postrider Peter Mumford, who simply pocketed the postage without reporting it to Vernon. The familiar adage in Newport, Vernon reported sulkily, was "Well there must be letters, we'll find them at Mumfords."<sup>20</sup> Mumford in fact kept a private mailbox at his house for his best merchant customers, an arrangement that helps explain why the amount of mail that frequent recipients received at the Newport post office actually declined somewhat over time.<sup>21</sup> Mumford was undoubtedly only one of numerous people who were conveying and delivering letters on a private basis, beyond the purview of the postmaster. All in all, the evidence both inside and outside the Newport post office daybooks suggests that the expansion and diffusion of letter writing in this era was quite substantial. Historians have thus far assumed that such a process started only later, as a *product* of the Revolution, yet in doing so they have given insufficient attention to the period before the Revolution.<sup>22</sup>



Today virtually every adult American receives mail frequently, even if it is mostly unwelcome bills or intrusive junk mail, but this was not the case before the Revolution. In 1749 the men who received mail at the Newport post office represented a mere 5 percent of the city's adult white male population. Almost everyone who received mail—frequent, intermittent, and infrequent recipients alike—ranked among Newport's economic elite, the merchants whose aggressive overseas trading underwrote the city's vibrant economy.<sup>23</sup> By 1774 this pattern had been transformed. The 790 people who received mail that year amounted to the equivalent of 38 percent of Newport's adult white male population, hypothetically reaching below the elite into the ranks of middling taxpayers. In fact, not all of those 790 people enjoyed elite or even middling status, not all were men, not all were white, and not all lived in Newport. Not only were many more people receiving mail at the Newport post office in 1774, but more *kinds* of people were doing so.<sup>24</sup>

The frequent recipients of mail in 1774 fell into three groups. Most were rich merchants ranking in the top 5 percent in wealth, like Aaron Lopez and George Rome. A second, smaller group consisted of successful ship captains ranking among the next 10 percent in wealth, like Stephen Deblois. A third group was composed of royal officials like Charles Dudley, who did not appear on the tax list because they were exempt from local taxes, no matter how rich they were. Altogether, in 1774 the frequent mail recipients made up a sizable slice of Newport's elite white men. To appreciate the leverage of this elite in Newport's community life, we need only calculate the proportion of the city's taxable wealth that they owned: the richest 5 percent of the population owned 63 per-

cent of the wealth. Newport's upper middling sort (the next 10 percent) owned another 26 percent of the wealth, while the lower middling sort (the next 33 percent) and the poor (the bottom 52 percent) together owned a mere 11 percent of the wealth.<sup>25</sup>

While some intermittent and infrequent recipients were also among Newport's economic elite, many ranked lower in the social scale, as table 3 shows.<sup>26</sup> People who received mail intermittently or infrequently were a diverse group that included an array of merchants, ship captains, lawyers, and doctors at the top

of the social scale. However, a sizable percentage of intermittent and infrequent recipients were among those working in Newport's vast service sector: the artisans and others who, directly or indirectly, helped keep the city's precious merchant fleet afloat. Some of these men were comfortable enough to rank in the upper middling bracket, including Josiah Flagg, who ran a popular coffeehouse; Daniel Servat, a sailmaker; William Burroughs, a house carpenter; and John Stevens, Jr., a stonemason. Others ranked in the lower middling bracket, including Cornelius Dillingham, a blacksmith; Thomas Lueby, who made leather breeches; James Anthony, a hatter; Adam Maxwell, a school-

teacher; and Robert Proud, who repaired watches. Nearly one-fourth of the post office's infrequent recipients ranked among the poorer residents of Newport, owning no taxable property. These men included James Bradley, who ran a tavern; William Hooky, a silversmith; and Frank Skinner, a bookbinder.<sup>27</sup> All in all, many different kinds of men, spanning the social scale from the rich to the laboring poor, were receiving mail at the Newport post office on the eve of the Revolution. The post office was no longer the exclusive domain of the city's economic elite, as it had been in 1749.

One out of every thirteen people, or 8 percent, receiving mail at the Newport post office in 1774 was a woman. In all, sixty women received mail that year, in strong contrast to the three women who received mail in 1749. The number of women receiving mail was likely even greater, since not all letters intended for women were addressed to them. For example, Valentine Wightman, a Newport ship captain who was a frequent mail recipient at the post office, sent letters home regularly whenever he sailed to New York City and Philadelphia. Although he addressed the outside of these letters to himself, the contents were for his wife Molly at home.<sup>28</sup> Women also sometimes added postscripts to letters exchanged by their husbands. At the end of her husband's letter to Aaron Lopez, the wealthiest merchant in Newport, Ann Pollok of South Carolina "intrude[d] a Line of Thanks" and promised to "write a long Letter" to Mrs. Lopez. This long letter would be in reply to three letters that Mrs. Lopez had sent her, Mrs. Pollok remarked.<sup>29</sup> More women were receiving letters than the 1774 post office daybook indicates.

Table 3  
Adult White Male Residents of Newport  
Receiving Mail at the Newport Post Office in  
1774, by Economic Class

	Frequent Recipients		Intermittent Recipients		Infrequent Recipients		All Recipients	
	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%
Elite <sup>a</sup>	23	82	31	33	25	14	79	26
Upper middling <sup>b</sup>	5	18	41	44	51	28	97	32
Lower middling <sup>c</sup>	0	0	16	17	65	36	81	27
Poor <sup>d</sup>	0	0	5	5	42	23	47	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>99<sup>e</sup></b>	<b>183</b>	<b>101<sup>e</sup></b>	<b>304</b>	<b>100</b>

SOURCES: Newport post office daybook, 1748-1752; Newport tax list, 1775. Newport Historical Society; John R. Bartlett, ed., *Census of the Inhabitants of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations...1774* (Providence, 1858).

<sup>a</sup> Top 5% of population.

<sup>b</sup> Next 10% of population.

<sup>c</sup> Next 33% of population.

<sup>d</sup> Bottom 52% of population.

<sup>e</sup> Does not add up to 100% because of rounding.



even here there was at least one exception to the rule. Phillis Wheatley, the Boston slave who published a stunning book of poetry in 1773, exchanged a series of letters with her friend Obour Tanner, a female slave who labored in the home of James Tanner in Newport. All of Obour Tanner's letters to Wheatley have unfortunately disappeared, but several of Wheatley's letters to Tanner have survived. Wheatley rejoiced in the pious tone of her friend's letters and hoped that their correspondence, which lasted at least eight years, would have "the happy effect of improving [their] mutual friendship," despite the fact that the two women rarely saw each other.<sup>37</sup>

More than a quarter of the people who received mail at the Newport post office in 1774 lived not in Newport but in rural communities around the city. Mail was conveyed to Newport that was intended, for example, for Nathanael Greene, an ironmaster in Coventry; for John Turner, a physician in Tiverton; for Nathan Miller, a boatbuilder in Warren; for James Varnum, a lawyer in East Greenwich; for Billings Throop, a trader in Bristol; and for Peleg Peckham, a shopkeeper in South Kingstown.<sup>38</sup> Even Joshua Babcock, the postmaster at Westerly, received mail at the Newport post office. That these letters came to Newport reflected, in part, the lack of post offices in rural areas before the Revolution. The colonial postal system had from its inception been organized along a string of key seaports like Newport; only after the Revolution did the new national government aggressively extend the postal system into the rural hinterland. Some Rhode Island villages like Warren and East Greenwich already boasted a post office in 1774, but letter writers and perhaps even postmasters elsewhere were unaware of this fact. Nevertheless, people were willing to use the postal system without knowing for certain whether their letters would get from Newport to their intended destination. Thomas Vernon periodically notified people via the *Newport Mercury* that there were letters waiting for them at the post office, but only a small proportion of these people were noted as living outside Newport. Many letters destined for rural communities did apparently reach their proper recipients.<sup>39</sup>

Some people listed in the 1774 daybook were visitors to Newport who had their mail forwarded during their sojourn there. Clement Biddle, for example, lived in Philadelphia, but he received mail in Newport because he visited there regularly on business and social trips. Rich folks from Charleston, South Carolina, like Charles Crouch, Isaac DaCosta, Philip Mines, John Murray, and Thomas Shubrick, flocked to Newport for its cooler summer climate and elegant social life, and they too appear in Vernon's daybooks.<sup>40</sup> Some of the people listed in the daybooks remain a mystery, however, either because they had recently arrived in Newport or because they did not stay very long and had already gone elsewhere. In either case, their identities could not be established from contemporary records in Newport or, more broadly, Rhode Island archives, a symptom of how fluid Newport's population had become by the eve of the Revolution. One transient resident was Andrew Balfour, a Scottish immigrant who had established himself as a merchant in Enfield, Connecticut. In 1774 Balfour married Elizabeth Dayton of Newport and lived in the city for a brief spell before seeking his fortune in North Carolina.<sup>41</sup> Balfour received a number of letters in Newport during the time he lived there.



The evidence from the Newport post office daybooks suggests that in the years before the Revolution letter writing not only increased but also became remarkably diffused throughout the population. Contrary to what historians have assumed, urban elite white men were not the only people receiving mail in this era; by 1774, recipients included significant numbers of middling and poorer people, women, and rural residents. Among the white adults living in Newport that year, 17 percent of the men and more than 2 percent of the women received mail.<sup>42</sup> This evidence raises new questions and problems. As always, the essential question is *why*—why did the cultural practice of letter writing expand and diffuse as it did?

In 1749 the post office in Newport stood alone in Rhode Island, part of a fragile postal system that suffered from mismanagement and neglect at every administrative level. Twenty-five years later Rhode Island featured seven post offices, and the number of post offices along the eastern seaboard of North America had quadrupled. This expansion of the postal system meant increased convenience for both senders and recipients of mail and contributed to the growing popularity of letter writing itself. More post offices tended to generate more letters, and letters themselves tended to beget more letters. Writing a letter was not a solitary but a social act, inviting a reply, perhaps an ongoing exchange, and possibly even a correspondence stretching over a lifetime, as in the case of Catharine Ray Greene and Benjamin Franklin.

But these factors do not fully explain the striking growth and diffusion of letter writing during these years. Why were so many more people buying paper and

ink, composing letters, and sending them via an expensive and often unreliable postal system? The daybooks of the Newport post office document a dramatic increase in letter writing, but they do not explain it. For the reasons, we must look at the letters themselves. What were the relationships between senders and recipients? What impulses prompted the letters? What purposes did the letters serve for individuals, for groups, for communities?

The evidence from the Newport daybooks indicates that if historians are to determine the cultural meanings of letter writing, they will have to consider a diverse cross section of the populace rather than a narrow coterie of urban, elite white men. A wide variety of letters will have to be examined before conclusions can be reached about the motivations that prompted people to communicate with the wider world in the decades before the American Revolution.

A Block Island resident promises to settle a financial obligation with the eminent William Ellery of Newport.  
RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8289).

Mr. Ellery Newshoram<sup>th</sup> 25 Feb 1770  
Sir  
I Received your Letter  
and will soon Comply with y<sup>r</sup> Request Res-  
pecting my ~~not~~ taking up the Obligation  
you have of Mr. W<sup>m</sup> Rodmans Against me.  
I am Extreamly Sorry it is not Immediately in  
my Power to ~~take it up~~ <sup>do it</sup> however I will shortly  
I am with Respects Y<sup>r</sup> Hum<sup>ble</sup> Serv<sup>t</sup>  
Abel Franklin  
W<sup>m</sup> Ellery  
Newport

## Notes

1. William Greene Roelker, ed., *Benjamin Franklin and Catharine Ray Greene: Their Correspondence, 1755-1790* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1949), 11-15.
2. Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13-15; William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 380-83.
3. Five of the daybooks are at the Newport Historical Society and two are at the Rhode Island Historical Society. These daybooks are the equivalent of numbers 2, 4-8, and 10 in a series; daybooks 1, 3, and 9 are missing.
4. United States Postal Service, *National Five-Digit Zip Code and Post Office Directory* (Washington, D.C.: United States Postal Service, 1994), 11-37.
5. The best overview of early American postal history is Wesley Everett Rich's *The History of the United States Post Office to the Year 1829* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924).
6. "The Letters of the Byrd Family," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 37 (1929): 31. This criticism was aimed at Head Lynch, deputy postmaster general for North America from 1739 to 1743.
7. The best account of Franklin's impact on the colonial postal system is Ruth Lapham Butler's *Doctor Franklin: Postmaster General* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1928).
8. James Parker to Benjamin Franklin, 27 Aug. 1766, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree et al., 30 vols. to date (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959—). 13:394.
9. Diary entry for 4 July 1745, *A Letter Book and Abstract of Out Services Written during the Years 1743-1751 by the Revd. James MacSparran*, ed. Daniel Goodwin (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1899), 32.
10. Diary entry for 18 Nov. 1751, *Letter Book and Abstract*, 67.
11. Nathanael Greene to Samuel Ward Jr., 2 Mar. 1773, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, ed. Richard K. Showman, 7 vols. to date (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976—), 1:56.
12. Nathanael Greene to Samuel Ward Jr., 21 July 1773, *Papers of General Nathanael Greene* 1:59.
13. Charles Chauncey to Ezra Stiles, 7 Feb. 1761, *Extracts from the Itineraries and Other Miscellanies of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D., 1755-1794, with a Selection from His Correspondence*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916), 439-40.
14. William Barron to Christopher Champlin, 10 Dec. 1773, *Commerce of Rhode Island, 1726-1800*, 2 vols. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1914-1915), 1:470.
15. There is no single biographical source for Thomas Vernon (1718-1784), but his biography can be constructed from the following sources: Vernon Papers (Misc.) vault A, box 79, folder 3 (Thomas Vernon, 1752-1783), Newport Historical Society; *Reminiscences of Thomas Vernon, an American Loyalist*, ed. Thomas Vernon (New York: n.p., 1880), 5-9; *The Diary of Thomas Vernon: A Loyalist Banished from Newport by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1776*, ed. Sidney S. Rider (Providence: S. S. Rider, 1881); George Champlin Mason, *Annals of Trinity Church, Newport, Rhode Island, 1698-1821* (Newport: George C. Mason, 1890), 102, 104; George Champlin Mason, *Annals of the Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, R.I.* (Newport: Redwood Library, 1891), 44; Dorothy S. Towle and Charles M. Andrews, eds., *Records of the Vice-Admiralty Court of Rhode Island, 1716-1752* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1936), 90.
16. *Newport Mercury*, 19 Mar. 1764, 30 Sept. 1765, 3 Nov. 1766, and 28 Nov. 1768. See also Susan Braley Franklin, "Division Street: A Memory and a Warning," *Newport Historical Society Bulletin* 104 (1948): 11 and plat following page 40, and Antoinette F. Downing and Vincent J. Scully, Jr., *The Architectural Heritage of Newport. Rhode Island, 1640-1915*, 2nd ed. (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1967), 501.
17. Newport post office daybook [no. 2], 1748-1752. Rhode Island Historical Society.
18. Vernon was later detained for his political views, but with the help of his brothers he escaped exile and died in Newport after the war. See *Diary of Thomas Vernon*.
19. Daybook no. 2 (which follows the missing daybook no. 1) records the full calendar year 1749. Daybook no. 10 (which follows the missing daybook no. 9) begins in May 1774, but I have carried my tabulations forward through April 1775 to compile a full year of data. The latter daybook is at the Newport Historical Society. Between 1748 and 1774 Newport's population increased by 41 percent. See Lynne Withey, *Urban Growth in Colonial Rhode Island: Newport and Providence in the Eighteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), app. A.
20. Frank H. Norton, ed., *The Hugh Finlay Journal: Colonial Postal History, 1773-1774* (Brooklyn: Frank H. Norton, 1867; reprint, n.p.: U.S. Philatelic Classics Society, 1975), 32.
21. Joseph Rotch to Aaron Lopez, 8 Mar. 1769, *Commerce of Rhode Island* 1:275. This also helps explain why Peter Mumford ranked higher on the 1775 tax list than his boss Thomas Vernon. See Newport tax list, 1775. Newport Historical Society.
22. The Revolution itself was not a cause of this expansion and diffusion, since both the increased volume of mail and the increased number of people receiving mail were already apparent by 1760. See Newport post office daybook [no. 5], 1758-1761, Newport Historical Society. Indeed, in 1770 Thomas Vernon complained that the volume of mail, and along with it his income, had "diminished since the late [French and Indian] warr." Thomas Vernon to J. R. [John Robinson], 27 June 1770. Vernon Papers (Misc.), folder 3 (Thomas Vernon, 1752-1783).
23. The status of these 1749 mail recipients was determined by reference to a 1760 Newport tax list (the closest year available) as well as to lists of Newport freemen. "Economic elite" here refers to those in the top 5 percent of the city's wealth. The best general account of Newport's mercantile economy in this era is Elaine Forman Crane, *A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island, in the Revolutionary Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985).
24. Information in John R. Bartlett, ed., *Census of the Inhabitants of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Taken by Order of the General Assembly, in the Year 1774* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1858) and the 1775 Newport tax list makes it possible to

- locate these 790 mail recipients along a socioeconomic scale. There is also a 1772 tax list for Newport, but it was unavailable when this study was being researched. The *Newport Mercury* of 12 Mar. 1853 printed the names of those included in the 1772 tax list but not in the tax list for 1775. The *Mercury's* listing is useful because Newport's population declined precipitously at this time, from 9,208 in June 1774 to 5,299 in September 1776. See John R. Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*, 10 vols. (Providence: A. Crawford Greene, 1856-1865), 7:616. The main exodus from Newport occurred when English warships threatened to bombard the town in July 1775. See W. G. Roelker and Clarkson A. Collins III, "The Patrol of Narragansett Bay (1774-1776) by H.M.S. *Rose*, Captain James Wallace," *Rhode Island History* 9 (1950), 11-12.
25. Statistics on wealth were derived from the 1775 tax list and the 1774 census.
  26. Table 3 tabulates only adult white men living in Newport. The poor are those residents (excluding ministers and recent refugees) who were not assessed taxes, as identified by a comparison of the 1774 census with the 1775 tax list. These nontaxpaying mail recipients seem to be laboring rather than indigent poor. I am grateful to Ruth Wallis Herndon for sharing with me her computerized database of Rhode Island's indigent poor.
  27. Occupations were determined primarily through advertisements and other notices in the *Newport Mercury* in the late 1760s and early 1770s.
  28. See letters dated 11 June 1767, 3 Nov. 1767, 23 Sept. 1769, 22 Aug. 1770, and 22 Dec. 1770 in the Vernon Papers (Misc.), vault A, box 79, folder 2 (Wightman Family Papers), Newport Historical Society.
  29. Postscript from Ann Pollok in letter from Cullen Pollok to Aaron Lopez, 16 Jan. 1772, *Commerce of Rhode Island* 1:384-385.
  30. See E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England," *American Quarterly* 40 (1988): 18-41.
  31. See Roelker, *Benjamin Franklin and Catharine Ray Greene*.
  32. See *Newport Mercury*, 22 May 1759, 19 Sept. 1763, 26 Dec. 1763; also see entry for 4 Aug. 1770, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D., President of Yale College*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 1:61. The increase in writing skills among women in the decades before the Revolution is discussed in Gloria L. Main, "An Inquiry into When and Why Women Learned to Write in Colonial New England," *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991): 579-89. On the more general trend toward the refinement of writing skills, see Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 90-96.
  33. See *Newport Mercury*, 23 May 1774, 8 Nov. 1773, 29 Oct. 1772, and 14 June 1773. See also Patricia A. Cleary, "The Merchants' of Colonial America: Women and Commerce on the Eve of the Revolution" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1989), 144-46, 251-52. Adult women far outnumbered adult men in Newport in 1774, and quite a few women had to join the work force to eke out a livelihood. See Crane, *A Dependent People*, 69-72.
  34. The race of these men is indicated by their forenames, which were distinctively African-American in the eighteenth century.
  35. See Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1790: Rhode Island* (Washington, D.C.: General Printing Office, 1908); William H. Robinson, ed., *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824* (Providence: Urban League of Rhode Island, 1976). I am grateful to John Wood Sweet of Princeton University for searching his computerized database of Rhode Island blacks.
  36. *Providence Gazette*, 27 June 1767 and 2 May 1772. I am grateful to Maureen A. Taylor of the Rhode Island Historical Society for making her computerized database of *Providence Gazette* runaway ads available to me.
  37. Letter dated 19 May 1772, in *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Julian D. Mason, Jr., rev. ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 190.
  38. These occupations were determined through advertisements and other notices in the *Newport Mercury*.
  39. See list of letters "remaining in the post office," *Newport Mercury*, 6 Dec. 1773 and 8 Aug. 1774.
  40. See Carl Bridenbaugh, "Charlestownians at Newport, 1767-1775," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 41 (1940): 47, and "Colonial Newport as a Summer Resort," *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections* 26 (1933): 6.
  41. See *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* 1:439, 2:374.
  42. Population figures were derived from Bartlett, *Census*, 239. In 1749, 5 percent of the men and 0.2 percent of the women received mail.