

# James Parker



A Printer on the Eve of Revolution

Gordon Bond



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# Introduction



James Parker has become something of a silent friend to me—someone who I bump into from time to time in the dusty shelves of libraries and archives. On those tantalizing occasions when he has spoken to me from the yellowing pages of his letters, he relays glimpses of a time and a world that are at once alien and familiar. It is the story of one man set against the fall of one world and the birth of another. It is both his own very personal story and the greater story of the emergence of a new nation. Were that history a play, James Parker wouldn't be cast as a leading man. But neither would he be relegated to a bit player. If anything, Parker would be a supporting actor—and such an analogy isn't entirely hyperbole. As a major printer in New York and New Jersey, he provided his services to everyone from the clergyman looking to print last Sunday's sermon to the proclamations of the king. Indeed, many of the most important political and cultural events of the region, reflecting the last gasps of British colonialism in America, were included among the products of his presses.

In some respects, there is nothing particularly unusual about Parker's experiences as a printer. All the practitioners of the trade, throughout the Colonies, were going through more or less the same trials and tribulations. It fell to Parker, however, to play the critical role in the New York area during a key period in its literary and journalistic evolution. Freedom of the press—or “liberty of the press” as it was known back then—was still something of a new idea. Printers of the generations before Parker's had started newspapers as just another way of making money. Contributors as well as advertisers paid to have their submissions printed—a sort of 18th century “pay-to-play”

system. And, assuming they kept up with their accounts, it could be a steady enough income. It didn't take long, however, for various interests with their various agendas to appreciate the tool a newspaper could be for them. Inevitably, dissenters of every ilk were using these public forums-in-print to espouse their points of view. Just as inevitably, the opposite sides of their arguments felt obliged to respond in kind. And, perhaps just as inevitably, printers often found themselves caught in the crossfire. The occasional "newspaper war" certainly could make for entertaining reading, which translated into sales and income for the printer. But when the injured side was the government (or particularly powerful individuals), the printer could find himself in a difficult position. Evocation of the principle of freedom of the press by printers often was as much a reflection of the economic necessity to print almost everything that was offered as any higher ideals of serving the collective public good. Yet there was a growing realization that "the press" was starting to mean more than just the physical apparatus upon one printed. It was emerging as a true cultural and social force. Printers who began newspapers to expand their product line were becoming—if by default—editors and even, in an albeit very rudimentary sense, journalists. The fundamental decision of whether or not to print a piece, or even what page it was put on, could have much larger consequences.

James Parker arrived on the scene in the New York of the early 1740s, and played a central role in this evolving definition of "the press," its role in society, and just what this "liberty of the press" really meant. Several times over his career, he would find himself caught between competing interests, struggling to find some balance between the idealism of liberty and the pragmatic realities of keeping food on his family's table. More than once, the threat of a jail cell tipped the balance of this ethical calculus.

To study the products of Parker's several presses is to explore the 18th century world on the eve of revolution—from lottery tickets to the first physics book printed in North America; from the legal documents of New Jersey's lengthy "land wars" to one of the most controversial magazines in New York of the age—Parker's career included them all. It became obvious to me early on in this project that as much as this was—obviously—a book about the *life* of James Parker, it also—necessarily—had to be a book about his *times*. To fully appreciate the significance of what he printed (and to understand why he got in such trouble for some of it), it is necessary to have the context afforded by something greater than a passing exploration of the social, cultural and political landscape he inhabited. I have chosen to embrace this and to use Parker's life and career as the common thread by which so much of our fascinating colonial history can be better understood.

Along the way we meet a diverse cast of characters—the iconic polymath, Benjamin Franklin; the intellectually curious but fatally conservative, Cadwalader Colden; the courtroom combatant, James Alexander; the quixotic zealot, William Livingston; the martyr Alexander McDougall; the Sons of Liberty darling, John Holt; the undermining William Weyman; the opportunistic Hugh Gaine.

Beyond this larger picture, of course, stands a man—a flesh and blood human being who was a husband, a father, a friend, an enemy. He could be immensely generous and drearily depressing. He could wallow in self-pity about his misfortunes one moment and then proclaim his implicit faith that God and hard work would enable him to overcome all in the next. He embodied *both* the characteristics implied by the mean-spirited nickname a later historian gave him—the weeping philosopher. Plagued

in his later years by poor health, unscrupulous business partners and just plain bad luck, his personal story is one of rising to prominence in his field, a bitter fall and then scrapping his way back. It is frustrating that so few of his personal letters survive to allow him to tell his story in his own words. The largest and best known cache is those written to his friend, mentor and partner, Benjamin Franklin. Yet, as these date mostly from his darkest days, they have only served to underscore the “weeping” part of the nickname.

This is rather unfortunate, as it has caused historians to cast Parker in the role of the curmudgeon—but without the implied literary charm. Once these letters are placed within the full and proper context of his life, however, far from being the self-pitying, unpleasant man modern historians have sometimes described, James Parker emerges as a complex and sympathetic character.

Like many of the more prominent men of his age, Parker had his hand in more than a few concerns. His meticulous account-keeping attracted the notice of Benjamin Franklin. When he needed someone to take over as Secretary and Comptroller of the North American post office while he was back in England, it was to Parker that he entrusted stewardship over the system he had worked so hard to overhaul. Parker would hold the position until his death—indeed, he was traveling on postal business when he died—and though Franklin gets all the credit, it was actually under Parker’s tenure that the service first showed a profit for the crown.

Parker might have been reluctant to turn to the law to deal with cheating business partners who plagued his career, but the legal world seems to have held a fascination for him. Not only would he serve as a Justice in Middlesex County, New Jersey, but he would also undertake an extensive overhaul and customization of the main guidebook for government officials in America—one that would be used into the 19th century.

Parker wore other hats as well, although his activities are not always clear. He was a lay reader at the Episcopal Church in his native Woodbridge, commissioned as a Captain of a Troop of Horse in the Middlesex County militia and tasked with raising men for an expedition against the French in Canada, a librarian for the Corporation of New York and a land waiter (a customs position) on Manhattan’s bustling docks.

But whatever jobs he held, James Parker always approached them with a strong sense of duty and responsibility. He didn’t suffer well the lesser concern for duty exhibited by others. Yet in the latter days of his life, when he took pride in being a crown official even as that role was becoming more controversial and less popular, he presented a few contradictions to keep historians guessing as to just where his sympathies lay in the brewing troubles. He was a proponent of law and order, and lamented the violence that characterized the dissent in New York and elsewhere. Yet he had friends among the most radical Sons of Liberty. In the last year of his life, he would find himself at the center of controversy yet again for publishing the vitriolic broadside of one of its leaders. Was he simply doing it for the income he needed so badly by then? Or did he perhaps harbor at least some empathy—if not sympathy—for their cause? He would not live long enough for circumstances to force him to choose sides, leaving the question of his allegiances a matter of speculation. Yet, in a sense, this ambiguity is a poignant example of the personal struggles so many of his countrymen were wrestling with as their once-ordered world seemed to be crashing into chaos about their ears.

I have spent many untold hours trying to get to know that man and that world. One of the many memorable experiences I had while researching this book was when

I first got to see and hold his actual handwritten letters in New Haven, Connecticut. It was the little, historically inconsequential details that stood out—where his hand must have tired, where he was rushed, where he paused to dip his pen in more ink, etc. Little things that reminded me this was about more than an abstract concept—this was a human being. When I found another cache of his letters in New York, seeing the characteristic little flourish he gave to the letter “P” in his signature was like seeing an old friend.

I have sometimes speculated, if I were to meet James Parker, would I like him? Would he like me? Of course one would want to like the subject of a book he has been working on for nearly a decade. But while I see traits in him I seem to recognize and even admire, I must admit to the differences. Religion was a far greater force in his life than my own. Certainly we would disagree on the matter of keeping slaves. Indeed, one of the less pleasant moments in my research was when I read how he had paid off a postal debt to Benjamin Franklin by sending him a slave named George. I know intellectually that it is unfair for me to judge him by my 21st century standards. But there was something about paying off one’s debt with a human being that drove home a crucial fact—while unchanging human nature may result in many similarities between his time and mine, in some fundamental ways, his was indeed an alien world.

There are, of course, many features of his person to which I may never be privy. Though his neighbor for a time on Beaver Street in New York was the American portrait artist, Lawrence Kilburn, no known likeness exists to put a face behind the words. But beyond that are a myriad of minor, idiosyncratic but defining traits that can’t be readily known. What was his favorite color? Did he have a pet? Was there a special dish his wife would make him? We are offered only brief, albeit at times penetrating, glimpses into who James Parker really was. When writing about someone in whose life there are such sizeable gaps, there is the danger of interpreting their motivations and reactions based on how you would think if you were in their shoes. The trick is to attempt to fill in the gaps with who Parker most likely was, not my version of him. The shortage in extant contemporary materials has forced a somewhat myopic view of Parker. In some ways, his memory has been overly simplified and in a perhaps unintentional manner, even maligned. I hope that I have been able to set the record straight at long last.

There have been times when I have paused to dwell on the fact that I am dealing with someone who was actually once as alive as I. The process of getting to know him, as much as I have been able, has been a wonderful challenge and an immensely enjoyable and satisfying experience. Of course he could never have known that, well over two centuries later, his life would be the subject of such interest and scrutiny. I have endeavored to treat his story with honesty and fairness. I would like to think he would have expected nothing less.

One of the enjoyable aspects of writing this book has been to discover the wonderful community of historians, librarians, archivists and history buffs, not only in the New Jersey and New York area, but all over the country. This work could never have been completed without their generous support of knowledge, time and encouragement. I acknowledge them here with sincere gratitude.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the Parker scholars that have come before, albeit we are a small and specialized band. One of the earlier historians to feature James Parker was William H. Benedict, who published a basic “James Parker, The

Printer, of Woodbridge” in *The Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* for 1923. Later, in 1941, the noted historian, Beverly McAnear wrote two detailed articles about Parker’s conflicts with his business partners for the *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society* and a piece on Parker’s reaction to the provincial New York stamp act in a broadside of 1759 for *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association*. Lewis D. Cook did Parker scholars a favor by sorting out the confusion over the genealogy of Parker’s parents in the *Genealogical Magazine of New Jersey*. The lesser-known article, “James Parker and the Dutch Church,” by Virginia L. Redway in *The Musical Quarterly* for October of 1938 shed light on Parker’s involvement with the printing of the Psalms of David—the first sheet music printed in America. But where these authors focused on very specific periods or subjects, Alan Dyer advanced the study when he published his 1982 thesis, “Biography of James Parker, Colonial Printer.” This was the first true attempt at a complete biography of Parker. While I have endeavored to create a much deeper biography, Dyer’s bibliography of known Parker imprints remains the best resource of the kind.

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Thank you to everyone, for not only believing James Parker's life story was a tale worth telling, but for giving me the opportunity—indeed, the *privilege*—of being the one to tell it.

### For the Second Edition

Mark Twain once said, "History doesn't repeat itself—at best it sometimes rhymes." Marry that sentiment with Oscar Wilde's "Life imitates art far more than art imitates life," and you have a fair approximation of the first edition of this book. Regrettably, the publisher of that edition was anything but, resulting in a product flawed by typographical and formatting errors. But it was his failure to settle accounts, effectively cheating me of my due, that brought to mind the experiences of James Parker himself, thus proving the wisdom behind the words of Twain and Wilde.

I have often felt empathy for James Parker—perhaps a dangerous thing for any historian attempting an unbiased look at his subject. Yet, his bad luck in selecting business partners and their failure to settle accounts resonates with my own experience. So, perhaps, I should adopt his style of sanguine philosophy. Such trials have, ultimately, served me, by bringing me closer to an approximation of what Parker might have actually felt.

It is hoped that this second edition will make up for the scars of the first, not only by its correction but the addition of images and a new appendix. Any remaining faults are solely my own.

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### A Note About Quotes in This Book

It should be noted that an effort has been made in transcribing quoted passages from contemporary letters and printed materials to remain as true to the original form as possible. In some instances, it has resulted in what might first appear as errors. James Parker, for example, was fond of using a "—" combination between thoughts. These have been preserved in transcription as a characteristic of his style. It was also not uncommon to find extra spaces between words and punctuation, even in printed material—"Parker was a printer ; so was Franklin." This may have been a function of stretching out a line of type to fill the space. Abbreviations and other stylistic quirks have been reproduced and clarified as needed.



# Prologue



How had it come to this?

In his fifty-six years on this earth, he had always tried to do what was right. He had been a God-fearing Christian who treated others with fairness and charity—even when those same others had ill-treated him. He had been a hardworking printer since he was a twelve-years-old boy and, even when the fruits of his industriousness were usurped by others, he managed to have

never lost faith in the virtue of honest toil.

Yet there James Parker sat, summoned to Fort George, down at the end of Manhattan Island, by New York's sheriff. He shifted a little in his seat, wincing at the twinge of pain that perhaps heralded yet another onset of the gout. He was to be questioned as to his involvement in what the authorities were terming, "a certain wicked, false, seditious, scandalous, malicious, and infamous Libel."

Yet what had he really done wrong? As a printer, he was merely affording a fellow British subject his ancient rights to express his views. It isn't clear that Parker even necessarily agreed with what it had said about New York's government. But that wasn't really the point. The author of the broadside in question was an Englishman and, as a matter of birthright, was entitled to enjoy the liberty of Parker's press. Of course, just where he and his fellow American colonists really fit in the great empire England had created was the question of the moment. The politicians some three-thousand miles distant in London seemed to eye the Americans as truculent, spoiled children to be reminded of their subservency. Like many in America, Parker took pride in being the subject of the good and wise King

George III. But being a “subject” was different than being a “slave”—something the more emotional amongst the colonists felt they were being driven towards.

Not that this was the first time he had found himself in trouble for something he had printed. Indeed, it seemed that trouble was a natural part of the printer’s lot. But this time was a bit different. It was more than just the typical bickering between Royal Governors and Assemblies that had characterized so much of colonial politics—squabbles where the “liberty of the press” was wielded like a fickle weapon, so long as it supported one’s particular side. No; this was something different than Parker was used to. The New York that lay beyond the Fort’s walls that Wednesday, the 7th of February in 1770, was restless with the unease of discontent. At times, it had boiled over into outright violence, much to Parker’s disappointment. Perhaps he could sympathize with their angst—he too had been a victim of the stubborn and shortsighted mindset that seemed to afflict the London politicians recently—but it was still hard to abide by such destructive mob mentalities.

Among those that were there to question him were men he had known—even been friendly with in earlier times. Parker had printed Lt. Governor Cadwallader Colden’s book trying to expand on Sir Isaac Newton’s theory of gravity—a hobby of Colden’s and the first work of physics printed in North America. Though perhaps not as close as with Benjamin Franklin’s family, the Parkers and the Coldens had been on a friendly enough basis. Among the first jobs he ever printed in New York was Chief Justice Daniel Horsmanden’s official account of his investigation into the alleged slave revolt of 1741. Then there was William Smith, Jr.—he would have remembered Parker from the early 1750s, when he printed a rather controversial, anonymously-penned magazine for himself and two other young fellow lawyers, John Morrin Scott and William Livingston. They were all caught up in a youthful—ultimately Quixotic—crusade of public service. Now, almost two decades later, Smith was a Justice. Still, the spirit of his younger days kept him at intellectual odds with the steadfastly loyalist Colden.

But if Parker searched their eyes for some sympathetic recognition of the relationships they once had shared, he would be disappointed. This was different. This was serious. They all must have understood that the world they once knew was in trouble. The stakes were too high to be distracted by nostalgic sentimentality.

Parker must have also known that his inquisitors needed him. They already knew he had printed the offending broadside. They were even pretty sure they knew its author. But that intelligence had been badgered out of mere boys—apprentices and journeymen from Parker’s shop. They had revealed enough to form these conclusions, but the testimony of such youths wouldn’t hold up very well in a courtroom. They needed to hear it from the lips of a man of Parker’s stature.

But if they were playing for keeps, so too was James Parker. He had been in the printing business long enough to be a veteran of many such battles—too long to simply cave in now. Plus, he had a card of his own to play. Smith later wrote that Parker commented, “if I conceal I shall be bailed If I divulge I shall be wrecked.” The broadside’s author knew this day would come. If Parker held his tongue, there was the promise he would be bailed out of any trouble he got into for it. Of course, even if he did reveal his secret, it wouldn’t be a disaster. So long as Parker held out long enough to elicit frustrated threats from the government, there would be fodder enough to brand these King’s representatives as bullying tyrants who trampled

the liberty of the press beneath their cruel heels.

And, sure enough, James Parker was threatened. If he wanted to keep his position as the Secretary and Comptroller of the Post Office for all of British North America, he had better cooperate. Parker held his ground at first, but he *needed* the money from that job. His printing business wasn't what it once had been, back when these men who now threatened him were his customers. Besides, they had already coerced the truth from his young employees. What would be the point now of martyring himself? The broadside's author was more than fit for that role—eager, in fact, to play it. James Parker was just fifty-six, but felt older. The years weighed heavily on his gout-ridden frame. A jail cell would be as good as a grave. Perhaps he could reveal the author now—he wouldn't be admitting to anything they didn't already know and his customer would get the show-trial he and his supporters seemed to desire. Maybe he should work out a deal—secure a pardon. As he rationalized this ethical calculus, perhaps he paused and mused on his ironic reversal of fortunes.

How, indeed, had it come to this?