A SKETCH OF THE GROWTH OF JOURNALISM

IN THE UNITED STATES.

No people are equal to Americans in their appreciation of newspapers, and, as a consequence no country is better supplied with them. The traveler cannot, by public conveyance, penetrate any wilderness whose people may not point with local pride to the office of their newspaper. That this is a matter for congratulation, there can be no doubt. The printing-press cannot better perform its part in the work of civilization than by recording the work of to-day—to do so is to prepare for the labor of to-morrow.

In its early days, however, the press was considered in any but a philosophical light. Its writers scarcely knew, in fact, that in promoting the ends of commerce by quotations and comparisons of prices they were advancing the country toward its high destiny.

The newspaper is the exclusive literature of a considerable class of Americans. There are many men who would pass for being well-informed, if not well-educated—who would be considered to have knowledge if not wisdom, but whose reading never goes beyond newspapers; who never buy a book, and who would be surprised at a question concerning the state of their library. It is true that many of those who have libraries seldom think of reading books. But the rule holds that very many persons depend for all literary food upon periodical literature, and that it has in consequence, grown to proportions that could not have been suspected by those who published our first newspapers.

It is probable that newspapers will always be popular with Americans. They are suited to the character of the people. They are the guardians of their liberties, their instructors and their companions, they but echo and repeat their opinions, and often ably defend them. They are useful, too, in business or in pleasure, and the tremendous growth of journalism in the United States can hardly be wondered at when we consider how perfect a repository of all that can by possibility be recorded, the American newspaper has become.

Under the fostering care and protection of our liberal institutions, with the education of the masses, the pressure of great enterprises and the needs of trade and commerce, our journalism has become a power which on this continent would cause the desires of any would-be usurper of our liberties, to roll up like a scroll and pass away. "A journalist," said the great Napoleon, "a giver of advice, a regent of sovereigns, a tutor of nations. Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a hundred thousand bayonets." Thomas Jefferson said: "I would rather live in a country with newspapers and without a government, than in a country with a government but without newspapers." David Hume, too, perceived the connection of newspapers with the liberties of the people, for he says: "Its liberties and the liberties of the people must stand or fall together."

A good newspaper press makes books less necessary because it gives their substance. Henry Ward Beecher says: "The newspaper is an ever-unfolding encyclopedia; an unbound book forever issuing and never finished." When we think of the arms of a great journal stretched to the ends of the earth, gathering in everything of importance and sending the matter forth again to parts yet unacquainted with the history of the day, we must put the press, as a source of information, above all other classes of literature. Thackeray appreciates its power and its comprehensiveness where he says: "There she is; she never sleeps. She has her ambassadors in every quarter of the world—her couriers upon every road. Her officers march along with armies, and her envoys walk into statesmen's cabinets. They are ubiquitous. Yonder journal has an agent this moment giving bribes at Madrid, and another inspecting the price of potatoes at Covent Garden."

Since newspapers have become recognized in America as being of the very highest social, political and commercial importance, their growth has been extraordinary. At the start, however, it will be seen that newspapers, though they certainly proved of value to the country in the gaining of its independence, were by no means so advantageously used as they might have been. Their capacity for usefulness was in fact hardly understood, while our facilities for newspaper-making was small. In the following pages will be found some details concerning the early days of journalism in the United States:—