By Joseph F. Nunes

The Political Fires that Fueled *THE COURANT*

The Hartford Courant's 250th anniversary in October 2014 is a meaningful milestone in Connecticut history. Here Courant *historian Joseph F. Nunes, a former* Courant *city editor and copy chief, looks at the key role politics has played in that newspaper's evolution.*

It was a pivotal moment in Hartford newspaper history: In early 1836, George Goodwin, the venerable 79-year-old owner of *The Hartford Courant*, was looking to sell the paper. He badly wanted the new proprietor to be Alfred E. Burr, *The Courant*'s precocious composing-room foreman, who was just 20 years old. Goodwin and his partners had become immensely fond of Burr since hiring him as a 12-year-old printer's apprentice. Not only was Burr unusually talented and industrious, he had a strong moral compass that resonated with the conservative *Courant* owners, as noted in the *Commemorative biographical record of Hartford County* (J.H. Beers & Co., Chicago, 1901). There was just one hitch: his politics.

Under Goodwin, *The Courant* had established a staunchly conservative editorial course that would guide its owners for generations to come, evolving from Federalist to Whig to Republican principles, as J. Bard McNulty chronicled in *Older Than the Nation* (Pequot Press, 1964). Young Burr, on the other hand, supported the states'-rights principles of Gen. Andrew Jackson, whose election as president in 1828 gave rise to the modern Democratic Party. "It broke the heart of old George Goodwin … that Mr. Burr was bound to join the Jackson party," noted *The New York Times* in a profile of Burr (January 2, 1894). The article recorded Goodwin's entreaty: "'Alfred, Alfred,' said he, with deep feeling in his voice, 'how can you become a Jackson boy after being brought up in this office?'"

Goodwin proposed to sell him the paper on favorable terms, under two conditions: that Burr join the Whig party, and that he attend the Congregational Church, noted the *Commemorative biographical record*. Burr turned it down, and Goodwin instead sold to the politically more compatible John L. Boswell, 26, a Norwich native, former *Courant* apprentice, and steadfast Whig and Congregationalist. Burr stayed on long enough to oversee production of the debut issue of *The Hartford Daily Courant* a year later, on September 12, 1837, before seizing an opportunity at the rival but struggling *Hartford Times*.

In 1841, Burr began publishing the *Hartford Daily Times*, which he quickly molded into a major force in local and state politics. Thus was born one of the most enduring rivalries in American newspaper history. For the next 137 years, the *Times*'s mostly liberal editorial stance provided a stark counterpoint to *The Courant*'s conservative leanings in a mutually respectful but often intensely competitive relationship that ended when the *Times* folded in 1976.

After that turning point with Burr, *The Courant* (as it was commonly known through the ages) became one of the nation's preeminent Republican journals for much of its history before adopting a more centrist editorial policy in modern times. And it was principally George Goodwin who built *The Courant* into an enduring stronghold of conservative Yankee values that found deep roots in the Land of Steady Habits.

Joseph Nunes, who worked at *The Hartford Courant* for 37 years, was city editor from 1984 to 1986 and copy chief from 1986 until 2011. He is currently working on a history of *The Courant*.

The Courant's Beginning

According to J. Eugene Smith's *One Hundred Years of Hartford's Courant* (Yale University Press, 1949), George Goodwin started work at *The Connecticut Courant* less than a year after Thomas Green founded it in Hartford on October 29, 1764; that would have made Goodwin, born January 7, 1857, a mere eight years old. Goodwin's tasks in those early years included carrying buckets of water to the second-floor print shop above Mooklar's barbershop, wetting the sheets before they went to press, hanging them to dry, then peddling the paper. *The Courant* office became the perfect classroom for the otherwise unschooled child. Working with Green and his assistant Ebenezer Watson, Goodwin soon mastered the art of setting type, which would become a lifetime love.

Under Green and Watson, Goodwin also learned first-hand the keys to *The Courant*'s remarkable success at a time when early colonial newspapers were struggling to survive. From the start, the paper sought to become a regular, indispensable source of reliable news and advertisements, and it quickly began to champion principles that resonated with readers. There was no better cause for the early *Courant* to identify with than the anti-British groundswell that triggered the American Revolution. "This journal has been acknowledged as one of the forces that led to the separation of the colonies," Charles Hopkins Clark, who would himself serve as *Courant* editor (1900-1926) wrote in *Memorial History of Hartford County, Volume 1* (edited by James Hammond Trumbull, E.L. Osgood, 1886).

While *The Courant* was Thomas Green's brainchild, he returned to New Haven after just three years to start yet another paper. (There his Loyalist leanings became overt enough that Yale University President Ezra Stiles pulled Green's printing commission in 1781 because "the press in New Haven is a Tory press," as recounted in a *Courant* retrospective, October 25, 1914.) He left *The Courant* to Watson and his now teenage protégé Goodwin during what would prove to be extraordinary, often desperate times. Through their tireless efforts, the newspaper became the leading voice for the patriot cause after the British shut down larger papers in New York and Boston. *The Courant*'s circulation was reported as being "equal to, if not greater, than that of any other paper printed on the Continent," according to historian and publisher Isaiah Thomas in *History of Printing in America Vol. II* (Isaiah Thomas, 1810).

Watson fanned the revolutionary fervor with riveting accounts of the independence movement, despite a chronic paper shortage that forced him to constantly plead for "Patriot rags"—old cloths needed to make the rag paper on which the newspaper was printed. He ran rousing accounts of what came to be known as the Boston Massacre in March 1770, the Boston Tea Party in December 1773, the Battle of Lexington in May 1775, and the signing of the Declaration of Independence in July 1776. And he published in full such influential revolutionary tracts as Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" in February and March 1776.

During the height of the Revolution in September 1777, Watson contracted smallpox and died at age 33, leaving the paper to his 27-year-old widow, Hannah B. Watson, who quickly made 20-year-old George Goodwin a business partner. Despite continued crises—including a mill fire that destroyed their paper stock and threatened to close the newspaper for good—they found ways to continue *The Courant*'s flow of patriotic war news.

In January 1778, Watson married her widowed next-door neighbor, businessman Barzillai Hudson, who took over her ownership stake in a new partnership with Goodwin. While Hudson focused on the business, Goodwin handled both the printing and editing duties, becoming "the first printer of *The Courant* to call himself an editor," noted Smith.

With the rise of Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party in 1800, *The Courant*'s editorial tone tilted toward scurrilous rage, at a time when many newspapers had evolved into mouthpieces for their owners. A regular contributor named "Burleigh," one of the many pseudonyms commonly used before bylines became commonplace, on September 15, 1800 warned of an apocalyptic collapse if then-Vice President Jefferson were elected president: "Murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will openly be taught and practiced, the air will be rent with cries of distress, the soil soaked with blood, and the nation black with crimes."

The Courant's anti-Jefferson rhetoric soon got the attention of federal authorities,

who in 1806 indicted Hudson and Goodwin on charges of criminal libel for a story, published April 16, accusing Jefferson of secretly shipping 60 tons of silver to France as a bribe for Napoleon to stop seizing American ships. *The Courant*'s popular agriculture columnist Oliver Ellsworth of Windsor (who had recently retired from his post as the nation's third chief justice) helped the paper win a seminal decision in *United States v. Hudson and Goodwin* (1812), in which the high court rejected the use of English common law as a basis for federal charges.

Under Hudson and Goodwin, *The Courant* also became widely viewed as pandering to the rich and powerful while belittling the growing population of immigrants as "rabble," according to Smith. The paper firmly opposed movements to legislate separation of church and state and to expand voting rights, which were then limited to white male property owners. The paper's intransigence led directly to the founding of the *Hartford Times* in 1817 as a political voice for the new Tolerationist Party. Within a year, the upstart paper helped lead the anti-Federalists to victory, resulting in a new state constitution in 1818 that disestablished the church but upheld restrictive voting rights.

The Civil War Years

As the abolition issue was wracking the country, *The Courant* in 1855 became a soapbox for its new owner, Hartford lawyer Thomas M. Day, whose narrow-minded rants made him an occasional laughingstock. With the Whig Party on the decline, Day aligned *The Courant* with the anti-immigrant Know-Nothing movement and its rallying cry, "America for the Americans," referring to native-born colonials. He also promoted white supremacist views not uncommon at the time in diatribes that the *Hartford Times* dismissed as "vapid twaddle" and "driveling, puerile inanity." Day published an editorial on March 6, 1856, titled "Sam and Sambo," that stands as one of the most racist tracts in *Courant* history. In it, Day misreads the nascent Republican Party as "the white man's party. … The Republicans mean to preserve all of this country that they can, from the pestilential presence of the black race. Some people think themselves witty and smart, in calling this cause the Black Republican cause; to our minds it is intrinsically aristocratic; it aims to save the country to the white man…."

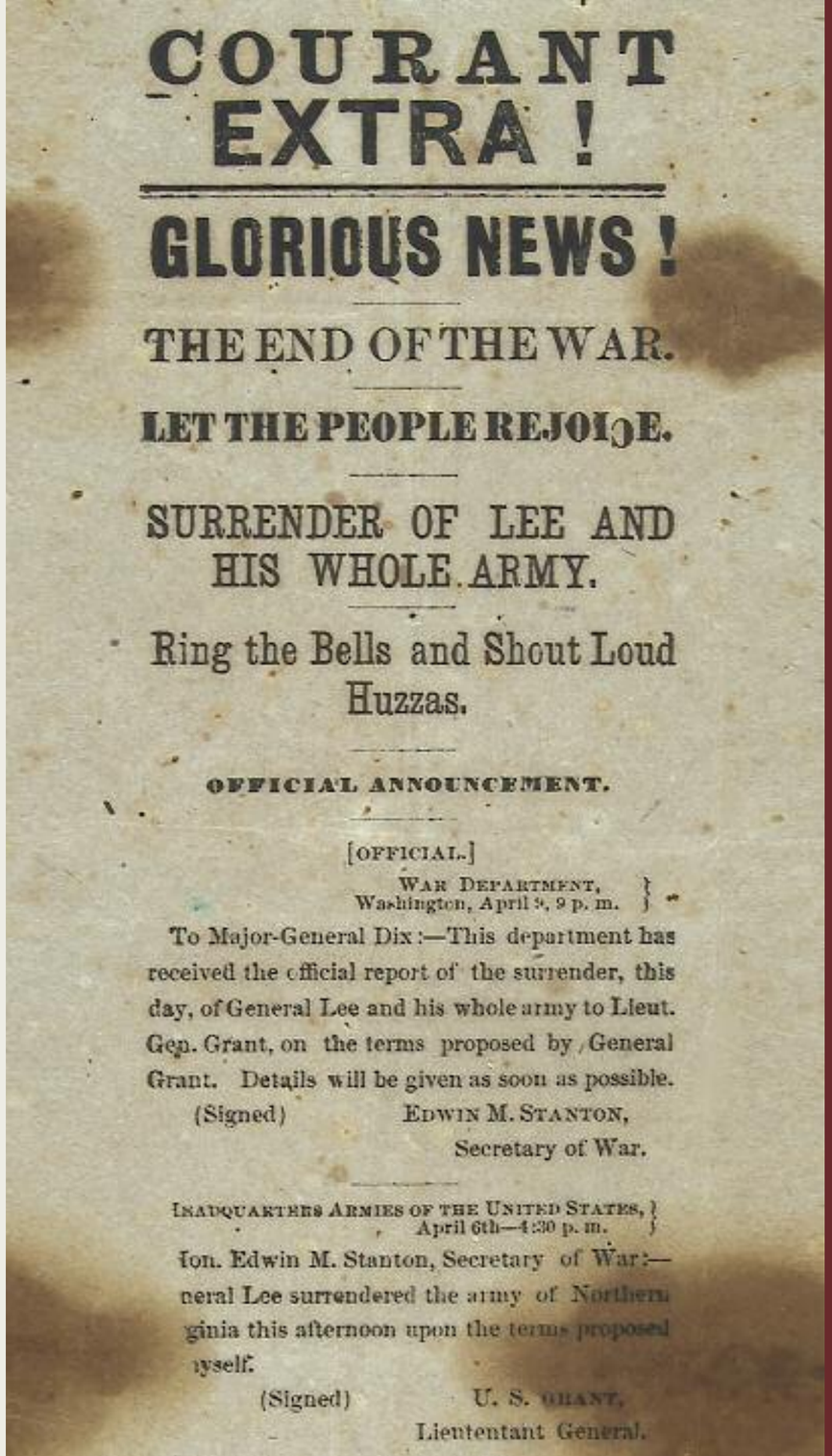
Day gradually toned down his invective. Four years later, he steered *The Courant* decisively into the Republican fold after seeing Abraham Lincoln electrify Hartford on March 5, 1860, days after the politician's famous Cooper Union speech catapulted him to fame. On November 7, 1860, *The Courant* crowed about Lincoln's election with a banner announcing "GLORIOUS NEWS! The Day of Jubilee Has Come… Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

Among the founders of the new Republican Party were a young Hartford lawyer named Joseph R. Hawley and former *Hartford Times* stalwarts Gideon Welles and John M. Niles, both of whom had become disgusted with the Democratic Party's controversial repeal of the Missouri Compromise in 1854. According to Clark's entries in the *Memorial History of Hartford County*, together they collected $100 from Republican Party organizers to form *The Hartford Evening Press* as a party organ. *The Hartford Evening Press*, under the editorial guidance of Welles and then Hawley, quickly caught the imagination of a growing citizenry electrified by Lincoln's presidential campaign. Hawley lured to the paper his longtime friend Charles Dudley Warner, who would emerge as one of the finest writers of his time. *The Evening Press* soon outshone *The Courant* with its literary elegance and intelligence, although it struggled to stay afloat financially with the outbreak of the Civil War.

The Courant, by contrast, was enjoying continued prosperity as the demand for war news caused circulation to boom, peaking at 30,000 by war's end in 1865, according to *Older Than the Nation*. But as the paper struggled with a series of management changes that decade, the new owners in 1867 made a pivotal decision. They agreed to merge with *The Hartford Evening Press*. That essentially led to a coup by Hawley, Warner, and a third *Evening Press* partner, Stephen Hubbard, as they gained control of the profitable, advertising-heavy *Courant* and proceeded to turn it into one of the nation's premier Republican organs.

Under Hawley and company, *The Courant* sharpened the ethics-focused Yankee conservatism of the previous owners while adopting as a guiding principle what they called "gentlemanly journalism." They refused to stoop to the sensationalism and invasive "keyhole journalism" sweeping the increasingly competitive newspaper industry. Hawley, meanwhile, emerged as a major force in national politics. After a one-year term as Connecticut's governor and two terms as a congressman, Hawley served 24 years as a United States senator, leaving *The Courant* largely in the hands of his associates.

The Courant's owners made an auspicious hire in Charles Hopkins Clark, who began work October 8, 1871, the night of the Great Chicago Fire. Clark, 23, a recent Yale graduate and Hartford Public High School alumnus, gradually became the newspaper's driving force, rising to the position of co-owner by 1888.



COURANT EXTRA !

GLORIOUS NEWS !

THE END OF THE WAR.

LET THE PEOPLE REJOICE.

SURRENDER OF LEE AND HIS WHOLE ARMY.

Ring the Bells and Shout Loud Huzzas.

OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT.

[OFFICIAL.]

WAR DEPARTMENT, Washington, April 9, 9 p. m.

To Major-General Dix:—This department has received the official report of the surrender, this day, of General Lee and his whole army to Lieut. Gen. Grant, on the terms proposed by General Grant. Details will be given as soon as possible.

(Signed) EDWIN M. STANTON, Secretary of War.

HEADQUARTERS ARMIES OF THE UNITED STATES, April 6th—4:30 p. m.

Hon. Edwin M. Stanton, Secretary of War:—
neral Lee surrendered the army of Northern
ginia this afternoon upon the terms proposed
yself.

(Signed) U. S. GRANT, Lieutenant General.

Handbill issued by *The Hartford Courant* announcing the surrender of the Confederate army, 1865.

Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut

Heading into the Progressive Era

Clark dramatically expanded the staff and modernized the plant as circulation, which had fallen below 5,000 during a prolonged economic depression, started rising again in the 1890s. One of Clark's key hires was Clifton L. Sherman, who became managing editor in 1893 at age 27. Sherman introduced many popular new features, including puzzles, editorial cartoons, and a children's page, which were becoming standard in the industry.

Meanwhile, *The Courant*'s editorial stance under Clark, while still Republican, became more progressive as it championed community activism, civic causes, and social justice. The newspaper even defended labor unions in the face of well-publicized workplace abuses. "The labor union is the development of the self-interest of the employed against the selfishness of the employer," Clark wrote on July 2, 1902, in advocating for following the Golden Rule in business dealings. But the paper remained so politically Republican, for a time it publicized only the GOP candidates for office, rarely mentioning the Democrats.

With the death of Warner in 1900 and Hawley five years later, Clark continued fine-tuning *The Courant*'s Republicanism. Like Hawley, Clark was prominent in the national Republican Party and counted presidents William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Calvin Coolidge, and William Howard Taft as personal friends. Clark considered Roosevelt "our greatest man"—until Roosevelt bolted the Republican Party in a split with President Taft in 1912 to form his own Progressive Party.

Clark in his later years became more idiosyncratic in his editorial policy, staunchly opposing Prohibition and women's suffrage, for example, while supporting a woman's right to smoke. (Famously, Connecticut was not one of the 36 states to ratify the 19th Amendment giving women the vote.) His hardened Republicanism and unrelenting criticism of President Woodrow Wilson increasingly alienated his managing editor. In a twist reminiscent of Alfred Burr's falling out with *The Courant* and move to the *Times*, in 1919 Sherman left and soon became editor of the *Hartford Times*, leading it to a new era of prosperity as the state's dominant newspaper from the 1920s through the mid-1960s.

A Break with the Republican Party

With Clark's death in 1926, *The Courant* moved to a more moderate, even liberal, Republicanism under new editor Maurice S. Sherman (no relation to Clifton Sherman), who laid the groundwork for an editorial philosophy that would continue for nearly half a century. Sherman, who was hired away from *The Springfield Republican*, was, like Clark, personal friends with U.S. presidents. Unlike Clark, he quickly made clear that *The Courant* would no longer be a Republican Party organ. Instead he promoted an editorial mindset that welcomed a diversity of opinions. Sherman instituted "The People's Forum," which generated letters to the editor by the thousands. He also established a new fairness policy: "To gather all the news worth gathering within its field and to present it without bias," joining many other newspapers that had moved away from overt partisanship except on the editorial pages.

The Courant continued espousing moderate Republican principles under succeeding editorial directors Herbert Brucker (who became a nationally known champion of freedom of information), William Foote, and Charles Towne. It was only after the *Hartford Times* folded in 1976 that *The Courant* took on a more clear-cut nonpartisan editorial stance under editorial director John Zakarian, who served from 1976 until he retired in 2004.

Even after the Times Mirror Company bought *The Courant* in 1979, ending 215 years of local ownership, the Hartford editorial board continued presenting a largely independent, nonpartisan perspective without any interference—with notable exceptions. Though the editorial board wanted to endorse Democrats Jimmy Carter in 1980 and Walter Mondale in 1984, higher-ups overruled and *The Courant* endorsed Independent John Anderson in 1980 and Republican Ronald Reagan in 1984. *The Courant* did not endorse a Democrat for president until 1992, when it supported Bill Clinton.

The nonpartisan editorial stance continued under his successors Robert K. Schrepf (2005-2007), and Carolyn Lumsden, who remains *The Courant*'s editorial page editor. Zakarian, who died in March 2014, in a 2012 interview expressed pride in *The Courant*'s ability to mature editorially despite the divisiveness inherent in politics. Readership surveys, he said, showed that *The Courant* had achieved a remarkable editorial balance. "The majority of respondents, like 46 percent, said we were middle of the road; 28 percent said we are too conservative, 26 percent said we were too liberal. So we were sort of right down the middle." ✒