

Two decades before the Civil War, Elijah P. Lovejoy used his newspaper to call for an end to slavery. His beliefs were dangerous enough. Taking his cause public proved deadly. Angry mobs destroyed his printing equipment three times. Then, two days before he turned 35, an Illinois mob shot and killed Elijah as he defended a fourth press. An editor and a minister, his efforts fueled the growing abolitionist movement, plus helped strengthen the commitment to freedom of the press and citizen protections from private acts of oppression.

Journalism really expanded in the early 1800s. There were about 200 newspapers in the U.S. in 1800. By the 1830s, this had jumped to about 1,200. Subscriptions in these early years typically cost a few dollars a year—or editors would accept produce and food as payment!

Printing press advances started making it easier for publishers to produce more papers or pamphlets. The iron hand press (what Elijah is believed to have used) could make about 250 newspapers per hour. It was easier to work than older wooden presses and it increased the printing area size.

Then, the steam cylinder press introduced in 1825 made production even faster. Soon, thousands of newspapers could be printed in a day. This prompted the birth of the “penny press” that made news affordable to many people. It is unclear if Elijah ever started using the steam press.

Things to Ponder

Elijah's life and death raised important points of debate. Many people thought he was too radical. Some were impatient with his unwavering sense of right and wrong, his firm religious beliefs and his stinging newspaper editorials. Many wished he would just stop causing trouble. But Elijah refused to fit popular opinion of the time or leave things alone.

Could he have acted differently without sacrificing his beliefs? Was he a victim and martyr who died fighting for a cause, as many believed? Or did he invite the violence, as others suggested?

Elijah's work influenced three types of freedom—freedom from slavery, freedom of speech, and freedom from punishment by private citizens.

Do you believe these freedoms are fully in place today in the United States?

In Elijah's time, news articles often blended fact and opinion. The mushrooming number of newspapers provided a battleground for words. Politeness did not always rule.

Do you think times have changed greatly? Are journalists better mannered now?

History Walk

Elijah Lovejoy lived from 1802-1837. What else was going on then? Some highlights:

- The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 doubled the size of American territories.
- Meriwether Lewis and William Clark made their famous expedition from 1804 to 1806, exploring water routes from the East to the Pacific Ocean.
- The U.S. and Great Britain fought “the Second War of Independence” from 1812 through 1815.
- U.S. Presidents during Elijah’s lifetime were Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson.
- Voting became a right for all white men, not only men who owned property.
- American heroes such as Davy Crockett were popular.
- Paper money became common as a cheaper alternative to gold and silver coins.
- Women’s groups sprung up protesting against the wearing of corsets, although women’s clothing was still designed for beauty rather than health or comfort.

Check Out Modern-Day Lovejoys

Elijah’s alma mater, Colby College in Watertown, Maine, presents a yearly Elijah Parish Lovejoy award to a courageous journalist fighting to preserve the truth.

Go to www.colby.edu/lovejoy to learn about the journalists who have earned this recognition. Read their own words about modern-day reporting and how they take inspiration from Elijah.

Links and Readings

Elijah Lovejoy Collection. Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield, Illinois:
www.state.il.us/hpa/lovejoy/table.htm

Lovejoy, Elijah Parish Papers, 1804-1891 and Undated. The Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas:
www.lib.ttu.edu/swc/newsite/swc_home.htm

Wilmore, Kathy. *A Day in the Life of a Colonial Printer*. The Rosen Publishing Group’s PowerKids Press, New York, 2000.

Printing Press. Ideas into Type. The Encyclopedia of Discovery and Invention. Lucent Books, San Diego, 1990.