

Nathaniel Coverly and Son, Printers, *1767-1825*

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IN JUNE 1814, Isaiah Thomas was in Boston for a meeting of the American Antiquarian Society that he had founded two years earlier. On the second day of the month, he walked across the bridge to Charlestown to visit Dr. Moore, minister of the Congregational Church.¹ That same day, perhaps on his way back to his lodgings, he stopped at the printing office of Nathaniel Coverly, with whom he had long been acquainted, to

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1. Benjamin Thomas Hill, ed., 'The Diary of Isaiah Thomas, 1805-1828,' *Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society* 9 (1909): 229.

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pick up an armful of sheets of songs and ballads that he had ordered the previous year.² Thomas took the collection home to Worcester, where he had it bound in his own bindery, and, in the first volume, described the contents.

Songs, Ballads, &c. In Three Volumes.

Purchased from a Ballad Printer and Seller in Boston, 1813. Bound up for Preservation to shew what articles of this kind are in vogue with the Vulgar at this time, 1814.

N.B. Songs & common Ballads are not so well printed at this time as ~~they~~ 70 years ago, in Boston.

Presented to the Society by

Isaiah Thomas

Augt. 1814.

The purchase of more than three hundred ballad sheets was an important act, saving the evidence of Boston's street literature printed in 1813.³ Since nearly half of the 334 sheets in the collection bear the imprint of Nathaniel Coverly, Jr., and another 120 were probably printed by Coverly, it is likely that Thomas made his purchase at Coverly's small shop on the corner of Milk Street and Theatre Alley, now Devonshire Street. Thomas, who was apprenticed to the Boston printer Zechariah Fowle in mid-1756, had known the Coverly family from that time. He had indeed preserved the material he wanted, but could not resist observing the poor quality of paper and presswork.⁴

2. Hill, *Diary of Isaiah Thomas*, 232. His cash book shows his expenditure of \$4.50 'paid for songs, ballads, &c.' He spent \$1.50 on binding the three volumes, bringing the total to \$6.00.

3. Thomas's purchase preserved examples of most of Nathaniel Coverly's actual shop stock for the year 1813, which is what makes this collection—a virtual catalogue—unique. Scholars cherish the few surviving catalogues of early broadside printers, checklists of their stock that also offer clues to their customers' tastes. Only the smaller ballad collection of the Thomas Ford press in the 1830s in Chesterfield, England, is as extensive for a single printer in the English language for so short a span of time. A little more than half the size of Thomas's, this collection has 167 sheets with 296 different texts. See *Thomas Ford's Ballads*, ed. Roy Palmer (Felinfach, Wales: Llanerch Publishers, 2001), a facsimile publication.

4. Thomas exhibited a bit of pique here and he restated this rather unfair opinion on the flyleaf of the third volume, forgetting that it was 1814, not 1813. 'N. B. Songs and

However, even if Thomas had not made the collection, Coverly's broadsides would still be found in other collections. There are copies of the same broadsides in many repositories and several dozen more with Coverly's imprint that are not included in the Thomas collection. Even so, Thomas's remarkable collection shows that Coverly was the main provider of broadside ballad sheets in Boston from 1810 to 1815. He continued to print broadsides after Thomas had taken his collection to Worcester.

Most studies of early American printers dismiss the Coverlys as insignificant and unimportant. The Coverlys frequently packed up their press, type, and family in a horse-drawn wagon to travel in search of a new start in a more promising location. Up to the time of their bankruptcies in 1802, both father and son were careful to document their output with clear imprints. After that time, thanks to the Thomas collection and the holdings of AAS, we have evidence of twenty more years of their presswork, by then in Boston and reflecting a more established situation. By tracing the imprints and studying the broadside collection in depth, and by searching court, newspaper, and other sources, a coherent picture of the careers of Nathaniel Coverly and his son has emerged.

Nathaniel Coverly, Sr., supplied material for everyday reading in New England from 1767 to 1805; Nathaniel, Jr., joined the family business in 1795 and then carried on by himself. The checklist that follows demonstrates that they were contributors to the reading material of adults and children in New England for more than fifty years, from *The History of the Holy Jesus* in 1770 and the rabble-rousing broadsides of 1775 and 1776 (see pp. 60-61) to patriotic songs praising the naval exploits of Boston's own U.S.S. *Constitution*

common ballads were much better printed in Boston 70 ages past than they now are in 1813.' He was actually only sixty-five at the time—it was August 1814 and he was born on January 8, 1748/49, old style, or January 19, 1749, new style. This date is corroborated by Thomas's indenture documents. While the paper on which the broadsides were printed was certainly of inferior quality, the printing of the type and cuts in most cases was quite good. While Thomas realized that he needed the documents to round out his collection, he clearly did not respect them or their printer very much.

in the War of 1812 and the popular contemporary narrative of *The Female Marine*. To scan the publications of the two printers is to learn much about the ordinary people who lived in Boston, Concord, Chelmsford, Medford, Salem, Plymouth, and Middleborough, Massachusetts; Amherst and Haverhill, New Hampshire; and Newbury, Vermont—all towns where the Coverlys set up presses and tried to make a living.⁵ The imprints tell a bittersweet tale of a repeated cycle of success followed by failure, a bankruptcy, and finally, out of the ashes, a successful business.

The Coverly Family

Records of the Coverly family can be found in Boston from the early eighteenth century.

The family may have originated in northwest England, via the West Indies.⁶ Captain Thomas Coverly (168?-1747) was married in Boston to Mary Wells on September 4, 1707, by the Reverend Cotton Mather. During the early decades of the eighteenth century, Coverly commanded ships (one of which he named for his infant daughters, Hannah and Mary), trading chiefly with the West Indies.⁷

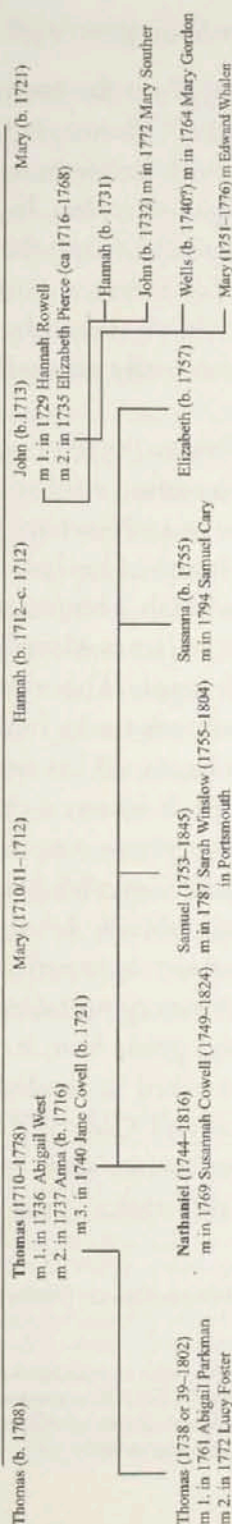
5. For an essay on the overall tenor of the output of Nathaniel Coverly, Sr., as popular culture, see Barbara A. Vayo, 'Nathaniel Coverly, Popular Printer, 1767-1816,' typescript, American Studies Seminar, American Antiquarian Society, Fall 1997.

6. Internet searches on www.familysearch.org indicate that Coverly families lived in the Bahamas and Barbados from the seventeenth century to the twentieth. A Thomas Coverly was listed for 1638 in *Early Inhabitants of Barbados*, in the *Historical and Genealogical Register* 39 (1885): 134. A Nathaniel Coverly, Jr., married in 1728 in Providence Island. In the 1740 census of the Bahama Islands, William Coverly is listed with a wife, Jane, and three children whose names, Thomas, Mary, and Nathaniel, are similar to those found in the Boston Coverly families. (<http://boards.ancestry.com/mbexec/message/5535/localities.caribbean.bermuda.general/70.74>, accessed January 12, 2005.) Yorkshire as a point of origin appears often in genealogical searches in England for the name Coverly/Coverley/Caverley.

There is no connection, of course, with the mythical figure of 'Sir Roger de Coverly' who was a literary invention of Addison and Steele for *The Spectator* of 1711, although the name of a tune, associated with a Lancaster hornpipe called 'Roger of Cauverley,' can be found in a 1648 tract. For details see Kate Van Winkle Keller and George A. Fogg, *Country Dances from Colonial New York: James Alexander's Notebook, 1730* (Boston: Country Dance Society, Boston Centre, 2000), 43. During the Revolutionary War, Jonathan Sewall (1728-96) used 'Sir Roger de Coverly' as a pen name.

7. 'Thomas Coverly, ye sloop Hanah & Mary, [from] Surrenam, no passengers.' *Passengers and Vessels to America* (Boston: New England Historical Genealogical Society, June 1712), 11. See also Custom House records in the *Boston Gazette* from 1716 to 1747. Sailings to Bermuda, Newfoundland, Madeira, and Rotterdam are also recorded.

CAPT. THOMAS COVERLY (1682-1747) M. SEPTEMBER 4, 1707, MARY WELLS



All events in Boston unless otherwise noted.

SOURCES

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