

Chapter Title: Learning Journalism

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I

Learning Journalism

HHe arrived at the new five-story granite building at the corner of Fulton and Nassau streets at 7:00 A.M. The neighborhood was busy, with the post office, city hall, stock exchange, and many hotels nearby. HERALD BUILDING said the signs running the length and width of the building, and below that JAMES GORDON BENNETT. A visitor would no doubt have noticed Bennett, despite his careless dress. He was “a tall, slender man, well-formed,” although he walked with a slight stoop, his movements abrupt and nervous. He wore his silver hair long and had a small chin beard. But it was Bennett’s crossed eyes that would have first attracted the attention of a stranger.¹

Bennett went directly to his second-floor office that summer day of 1845. Ten years after its opening there was a well-established daily routine at the *Herald*. His secretary had put the mail and newspapers on his desk marked for his attention. While breakfasting on tea and dry toast, the editor-publisher read and noted matters that he would pursue — on that morning, perhaps, an account of the expulsion of Cassius M. Clay’s abolitionist organization and newspaper from Lexington, Kentucky, and an editorial from the local nativist *American Patriot* calling for the restriction of the political rights of immigrants. The first was worthy of a long editorial defending the mob; the second called for a shorter response supporting the political rights of the newcomers. Bennett next examined the overnight reports from Washington to see if there were any new developments in the combustible situation with Mexico (there were not) and, closer to home, reports from Delaware County of the grand jury investigation into the anti-entire violence there.

After dictating editorials to his stenographer, Bennett conferred with his managing editor, Frederic Hudson. During that week in August the paper was featuring a series about itself. Each day a woodcut of one part of its plant appeared on the front page and a story about the various

departments of the paper. No doubt Bennett scrutinized these carefully.

The editor and managing editor were almost alone on the second floor that morning. Most of the other thirteen editors and reporters were out on assignments in Wall Street, in the courts, at city hall, and in Brooklyn. They would come in later to write their stories, as would the theater and cultural critics who had been at their task late the previous evening. Others examined the exchange papers that were received daily, clipping enough short items to fill several columns of miscellany.

At noon Bennett received visitors for a short time — his gruff, impatient manner did not encourage small talk — but there were not many that vacation season because most of New York's important people were at Saratoga Springs (where the *Herald* kept a reporter). By about two o'clock the first of the material was ready for the compositors to set into type, and Bennett looked at it before starting his daily inspection of the plant.

He began his inspection in the basement, where twenty-two men operated the four two-cylinder flatbed presses, two for the twelve thousand daily *Heralds* and two for the twelve thousand weekly papers. One man wet the paper in preparation for the presses, eight men fed it into the machines, and eight more removed the printed sheets at the other end. A foreman and an engineer supervised the operation and ensured the steam supply from an engine below. Several others cut, folded, and counted the finished papers and then turned them over to a clerk, who distributed them, for cash, to the dealers and newsboys gathered outside. To cool the basement, a ditch covered with a grate ran the entire length of the building. That afternoon the pressroom was empty. In 1845 the presses started their daily run about two o'clock in the morning so the first *Heralds* were ready for distribution about four.

The mailroom was directly in front of the pressroom in the basement. Here six clerks sorted and routed the incoming mail and addressed the *Herald* to out-of-town subscribers, directing the paper to the proper railroad, stage, packet, or postal route.

Back on the first floor, Bennett entered the business office managed by his brother-in-law Robert Crean. The outside entrance to the building was on Fulton Street, and here the clerks took subscriptions and advertisements. The hundreds of ads, all of which would be termed "classified" today, ranged in August 1845 from help wanted to lost and found, from services such as dentistry and ophthalmology, French lessons, moneylending and daguerreotyping to commodities such as fishing tackle, needles, Aeolian harps, wigs, hats, paintings, hardware, and wine, to agricultural products like hemp seed, lard, wheat, and cotton. The largest number announced pharmaceuticals such as "diarrhoea cordial" and "Elixir of Love," medical

treatises and treatments, and physicians who offered cures for “private diseases.”

Back on the second floor, the four-room editorial department began to fill with reporters writing their stories. A large table in the center of the room held current books and periodicals; files of exchange papers were suspended from the walls. On that day the police court reporter featured an abortion case, which was also the subject of a short editorial. The money market column, entrusted to the managing editor's brother, Edward W. Hudson, discussed the annual foreign trade deficit, France's overseas trade, and a settlement that a bankrupt local bank had reached with its creditors. Another reporter was promoting the coming match between St. George's Cricket Club and the Cricketeers of All Canada.

Theater critics judged the performance of James H. Hackett at the Park Theatre in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the opening of Eugène Sue's *Mysteries of Paris* at the Bowery Theatre, the French opera *Ambassadress* at Niblo's, the “Infant Sisters” performing at Palma's Theatre, and the exhibition of the Mammoth Electrical Machine at Castle Garden.

Another reporter prepared the “Latest Intelligence” from the last evening's mail: cabinet discussions about Mexico, the nativist convention in Baltimore, and local politics in Philadelphia. A letter from Saratoga Springs was featured on the front page, and the leading local news story concerned appointments and removals at the custom house. Reporters in the commercial department wrote stories about the corn and cotton crops in the South and the sugar market at Havana and compiled lists of ship arrivals and departures and the registrants at the city's hotels.

This work was often routine without much glamour, and those who did it worked long hours for low salaries. They would have echoed the sentiments of a *Tribune* staffer who wrote a few years later:

My work continues to be . . . not very inspiring. Shall I say it—there is drudgery connected with my work, a good deal of drudgery, a very little real hearty work, which leaves one better than it finds him. Drudgery in reading newspapers and scissoring them for things of no earthly interest to myself but of supposed interest to others; drudgery in looking over the telegraph & saying what shall be in this type & what in that; drudgery in fixing up other people's bad English & no apparent utility in either of these branches of labor; an occasional pleasure in turning a paragraph relative to the news, or “Ed. Head” as we call it, but oftenest drudgery therein also; and a climax of drudgery in hanging around the “forms”, deciding what shall go in, out of several things.

On his way to the fifth-floor composing room, Bennett looked in on the book and job-printing departments on the third and fourth floors. The job presses had their own compositors and pressmen. Most of the hand-bills for New York's theaters were printed there.

The composing room was at the top of the building, lighted during the day through large windows and at night by one hundred gaslights. Here twenty men worked each day from ten o'clock one morning to two the next, with three hours off for meals. At one end of the room were the desks of the foreman and proofreaders. The compositors worked at their cases perpendicular to a long table that ran the length of the building and held the type forms. A good compositor could set seventy lines of type each hour, and in 1845, when two presses were used for the daily *Herald*, everything had to be set into type twice. The length of the paper was the equivalent in type to a 350-page octavo book. After the press run was completed, each piece of type had to be removed and returned to the proper case. The forms were carried to and from the basement pressroom by a dumbwaiter.

The inspection completed, Bennett went home to dine, usually alone. His wife, Henrietta, and four-year-old son, James, spent most of the year in Paris. After dinner Bennett returned to his office, sometimes looking in at the theater or opera on the way. He dictated any last-minute editorial changes and, after putting the paper to bed, went home to bed himself, almost always by ten o'clock.

The finished four-page *Herald* with its circulation of twelve thousand was in 1845 the most popular and profitable daily newspaper in the United States. Its niche was so secure that its success seemed almost inevitable. But Bennett was fifty years old, and his success had come very late, after many years of apparent failure.

All that is known about the early life of James Gordon Bennett is what information he was willing to disclose in a highly selective fashion. Bennett was born on September 1, 1795, in the highlands of Scotland and migrated to America in 1819.² He grew up in the tiny hamlet of Old Town in the village of Keith, Banffshire, about sixty miles north of Aberdeen. According to family tradition, the first Bennett (then Benoit) came to England from France with William the Conqueror. The Bennetts were relatively prosperous compared to their neighbors, and James's father was one of the few independent farmers in an area where nearly all the land was owned by the Earl of Fife. The Bennett house was large and comfortable and the family was well fed.

The Bennetts were different from most of their neighbors in another way: they were Roman Catholics, and this made them suspect in the com-

munity. Many of the harsher restrictions on Catholics had been repealed, but there was still an atmosphere of fear and superstition toward papists, and the elder Bennett was courageous to maintain his faith in a land that was so overwhelmingly Presbyterian. At the time James was born there were only twenty-five thousand Catholics in all of Scotland. He and his brother Cosmo were taught Catholic dogma and martyrology at home by their father, and grisly tales of persecution left James permanently prejudiced against the English.

He attended the public school each day as required by law. Latin and Greek were the basis of the curriculum; the Bible was the fundamental text; and the schoolmaster's rod was the main instructional tool. James was an apt pupil with a good memory, and he read many of the classics at Keith. Although he enjoyed swimming and outdoor games, he was a shy boy who took many solitary walks among the historic sites of Banffshire.

His father intended that James, the eldest son, should be trained for the priesthood at the Catholic seminary in Aberdeen. Therefore, at age fifteen, James was sent to Blair's College. The population of Aberdeen was forty thousand when he arrived, no doubt intimidating to the youth from Old Town with its 136 inhabitants. The college was small and undistinguished, but it had abler teachers than James's schoolmaster at Keith and the curriculum was broader—Greek, Latin, French, history, geography, bookkeeping, logic, church history, and science.

Bennett was an eager student, and he spent four happy years at the college, enjoying the atmosphere in which the teachers mixed in sports and play, reading widely in Burns, Smollett, Scott, Paine, Boswell, Rousseau, and Voltaire and sampling the world of letters through the *Edinburgh Review*. Lord Byron was a hero to Bennett and the other young would-be intelligentsia of Aberdeen. They belonged to a literary club that met in the Aberdeen grammar school, which Byron had attended.

Influenced by his reading in the rationalism of the Enlightenment, Bennett began to see shortcomings in the Catholic church, and after four years at the college he decided that he could not enter the priesthood. His crisis of faith could not be resolved, and he ended in a position of religious indifference. Eventually he developed a strong antagonism toward Roman Catholicism, blaming it for the death of his younger brother Cosmo at age twenty-three while undergoing the rigors of training for the priesthood.

When he left college in 1814, he had surely acquired an education equivalent to that in an American college. Little is known about the next five years of his life until he sailed for America in 1819, but he published his first article, an admiring piece about Napoleon, in a small Aberdeen periodical shortly after the Battle of Waterloo. He read philosophy and

economics, including David Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature*, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, and Thomas Reid's *Inquiry into the Human Mind*. He probably also became familiar either directly or through the periodical press with other writers of the Scottish Enlightenment such as Lord Kames, Francis Hutcheson, Adam Ferguson, and Dugald Stewart. Scotland's universities surpassed Oxford and Cambridge during the late eighteenth century to make it the intellectual leader of the British Isles, especially in political economy. Bennett's reading was probably responsible for his interest in economic analysis and his support of laissez-faire economic doctrine. But though Adam Smith is evident in Bennett's later economic writings, he did not subscribe to the antislavery views of Smith and other leaders of the Scottish Enlightenment. His racist and proslavery opinions seem closer to those of Lord Kames and David Hume.

After leaving college, Bennett traveled extensively through Scotland, visiting many national shrines and especially the places described by Sir Walter Scott. Perhaps Bennett's father tolerated such prolonged aimlessness and continued to support his son in the hope that he would return to the Catholic faith. Bennett developed an interest in America during this time. The migration from Scotland to America was often at the rate of a thousand persons per week so this interest was not unusual. Books about America were very popular, and Bennett read Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* with great enthusiasm when it was published in Scotland in 1817, as well as three travel accounts that appeared in 1818.

According to Bennett, his decision to leave Scotland was made on an impulse. He met a friend on the streets of Aberdeen, learned that he was leaving for Halifax in April, and decided on the spot to accompany him. The family must have supported this whim and provided a small purse. On April 6, 1819, he sailed for America.

Bennett reached Halifax after a four-week voyage. The city of twelve thousand was undergoing a postwar boom, but Bennett saw it as merely a way station for points south. A rabid Anglophobe, he disliked the atmosphere of this loyalist stronghold and stayed only until he could earn enough as a schoolmaster to pay the passage on a schooner to Portland, Maine. He again taught school for a few months in the village of Addison. Although he admired the self-assurance of Maine's Yankees, then in the throes of the statehood movement, Boston and the scenes of Franklin's *Autobiography* beckoned. On New Year's Day 1820 he sailed to Boston.

Immediately on arrival, he visited and then revisited the famous revolutionary war sites he had read about. Then he searched for work and found a position as a clerk at Wells and Lilly, one of the leading publishers,

printers, and booksellers of the city. Bennett worked diligently, learned much about publishing and printing, and came into contact with some of the literary, business, and political leaders of the city, while broadening his education by reading and attending public lectures. But as a clerk he left something to be desired. He was careless about his personal appearance and never mastered politeness; he asked too many questions and offered too much advice; his dry, cynical humor offended the customers. He was shifted to proofreading at Wells and Lilly, a position that had no contact with customers.³

After three years in Boston, Bennett moved to New York City. The reasons for the move are not clear—perhaps he felt the proofreading job was a dead end—but certainly there were greater opportunities in New York, a rapidly growing metropolis of 130,000 people. It was easier for a newcomer to win acceptance in this heterogeneous and cosmopolitan city than in staid Boston. Bennett frequented the coffeehouses in search of work and at one of them met Aaron S. Willington, publisher of the *Charleston* (South Carolina) *Courier*, who was in New York to buy presses, type, paper, and ink for his journal and to hire an editorial assistant. Bennett agreed to buy the supplies while Willington warmed himself in the coffeehouses. He must have done a satisfactory job and, probably because of his publishing experience in Boston, was offered the editorial position.

Bennett spent only ten months working for Willington on the *Courier*, but it was a pivotal part of his life. He decided to make journalism his career, and training on the *Courier*, one of the best newspapers in the nation, was invaluable. He also got a firsthand view of slavery and the South, toward which he developed a sympathetic feeling that was to last throughout his life.

The *Charleston Courier* was a commercial newspaper; thoroughness, accuracy, and moderation were its watchwords. It catered to merchants and planters eager for the latest cotton prices from England, and Willington put a premium on speed. In 1815 he had scooped every other newspaper in the country in printing the news of the Treaty of Ghent, which he obtained by rowing out beyond Charleston harbor to meet an incoming schooner. The *Courier* then obtained its own newsboat and made this a regular practice. With many packets sailing from Cadiz to Havana in the 1820s, news from western Europe often first reached the United States at Charleston.

Bennett's primary responsibility on the *Courier* was to translate the latest news from the Havana packets from Spanish and French. This news concerned not only Europe but also the Caribbean and Latin America, then in the throes of postrevolutionary disturbances. He developed an in-

terest in and an expertise on Latin America which he never dropped. Later his *Herald* provided the most comprehensive and penetrating coverage of Latin America appearing anywhere in the press.⁴

Late in 1823 Bennett left the *Courier* and returned to New York, never explaining the reasons for his move.⁵ In October he issued a prospectus for a "Permanent Commercial School" but was unable to raise the capital to open it. For the next four years, until November 1827, when he became an associate editor of the *New York Enquirer*, Bennett supported himself by free-lance writing, mostly for the party newspapers of the city. In 1825 he wrote for John Tryon's weekly *Courier* and for a few weeks he edited the sheet. By 1826 he was a regular contributor to the *Mercantile Advertiser*, a commercial paper that resembled Willington's, and he began to write for Thomas Snowden's *National Advocate*, the Tammany Hall organ. He specialized in economic analysis and created a stir by his factual reports of the fraud trials following the commercial crisis of 1825-26. These exposures of stock speculations stirred up resentment in some of New York's business circles.⁶

Soon after this Bennett became disenchanted with Snowden, who had endorsed John Quincy Adams's bid for reelection. Bennett returned to free-lancing, assisting efforts to elect Andrew Jackson as president whenever he could. He made regular contributions to Mordecai M. Noah's *New York Enquirer*. Noah was a colorful and controversial editor and politician, a Jew who had written plays, tried to organize a Jewish colony on an island in the Niagara River, and served in minor patronage positions in New York. Since 1817 he had been an editor of Snowden's *National Advocate* but left the paper after a patronage dispute with Snowden and started his own paper, the *Enquirer*, in mid-1826.

Bennett and Noah were both ardent Jackson men, although they disliked each other personally. In the spring of 1827 Bennett persuaded Noah to allow him to write a series of humorous sketches for the *Enquirer*. The first, "Shaking Hands," appeared on April 27 and was the talk of the town, although the humor is very tortured for today's taste. The subject was forms of salutation around the world, and its freshness and impertinence created a demand for many extra copies. A second article, "Intemperance," had the same favorable effect on the *Enquirer's* circulation. But Noah received so many indignant protests from subscribers that he halted the experiment.⁷

The *Enquirer* prospered as Bennett confined his contributions to more appropriate subjects. On the paper's first anniversary, Noah boasted a circulation of twenty-four hundred, very good for that time. The *Enquirer* resembled its contemporaries in the New York press. It was a commercial

sheet, primarily offering news for merchants: ship arrivals and departures, market and financial conditions, the offerings of importers, and bank note values. Also like its fellows, the *Enquirer* had a political position—it supported Jackson. The paper contained four pages of six columns each, and pages 1, 3, and 4 were filled almost entirely with advertisements and legal notices. The news and editorials appeared on page 2, mostly short items clipped from other papers. Local news was slighted in favor of dispatches from Washington, Albany, and abroad. The *Enquirer* was dull by later standards but no more so than other New York newspapers.⁸

Bennett became an associate editor of the *Enquirer* in late 1827 after many months of irregular free-lancing. Since Noah did not relish the prospect of having the Scotsman around the office every day, he readily agreed to Bennett's suggestion that he cover the congressional session in Washington. For the next four years Bennett reported on politics and society from Washington, Albany, and Saratoga Springs. He became intimate with many of the leading political figures and was perhaps the most widely read political correspondent of the day.⁹

He had developed a distinctive style of correspondence patterned, he said, on the letters of Horace Walpole. His sentences were well constructed and rhythmical; his wit was sharp; his use of metaphor was effective. One day his pieces would be narrative, another day anecdotal, another analytical, and another moralizing. The reader never knew what to expect, and Bennett's unsigned pieces must have bolstered the *Enquirer's* popularity.

The first of these pieces appeared on January 8, 1828, and described President Adams's New Year's Day reception at the White House. It was chatty, colorful, and ended on a critical note. A week later he discussed the alignment of forces in Congress over an issue involving slavery. The following week he was at a testimonial dinner for Jackson. The intimate details he provided of social life at the capital were especially popular with the *Enquirer's* readers. But pro-Jackson politics was always in the background. Bennett brought to these partisan sallies an expertise gained from hard work and hours of research in the congressional library. His research proved, for example, that Jackson's spelling was no worse than that of the great men of the revolutionary generation.

During the summer of 1828 Bennett followed the politicians to the popular resort of Saratoga Springs, reporting the social life and gossip and making political predictions. In the fall he returned to Washington, and before Congress convened he filed a series of columns on political economy. He gloated over Jackson's election as president and described the inauguration at great length.¹⁰

The *Enquirer's* leading rival was James Watson Webb's *New York Morn-*

ing *Courier*, a commercial paper that was also devoted to Jackson. Noah and Webb had quarreled, and Webb's *Courier* spent most of its editorial space during the 1828 election not campaigning for Jackson but campaigning against Noah, the regular Jacksonian nominee for sheriff. Webb organized an independent Jackson ticket to oppose Noah, and he injected anti-Semitism into the campaign. He was delighted when Noah was defeated, although his defection cost him the political advertising from Tammany Hall. But on national issues Webb and Noah saw eye to eye, being hostile to the Bank of the United States and protective tariffs and siding with Martin Van Buren against John C. Calhoun's wing of the Democratic party. The circulation of the rival papers was about equal in early 1829.¹¹

Party leaders were disturbed by the competition between these two Jacksonian sheets that spent so much time attacking each other rather than the opposition. In the spring of 1829, when both Webb and Noah were in Albany seeking public printing contracts, the details of a merger were worked out. Bennett was also in Albany and was perhaps the first to suggest a union that would end the competition so that the new sheet could concentrate its fire on political opponents rather than fellow Jacksonians.¹²

Bennett was acting in his own self-interest in promoting the merger. He believed that the new paper would be unacceptable to the leadership at Tammany Hall, which distrusted Webb, and hoped that Tammany would ask him to start a new party organ in the city. He tried to undermine the newly merged paper, telling prominent New Yorkers that party leaders were dissatisfied with the merger and lacked confidence in Webb. When he failed to attract support for his own party paper, Bennett proposed that the local party appoint a political editor—himself, no doubt—to control the editorial policy of the *Courier and Enquirer*. Webb was aware of Bennett's scheming. He wrote to state party leader Azariah C. Flagg that "Bennett will never issue the first number of his paper." To check Bennett, Webb recommended to Flagg that the party issue a circular recommending the *Courier and Enquirer* to the party faithful.¹³

Bennett was without regular employment after the merger until September 5, 1829, when he joined the *Courier and Enquirer* as an associate editor. In the interim he probably lived off savings and occasional freelancing and perhaps a retainer from Nicholas Biddle, president of the Bank of the United States. While still on the *Enquirer* staff before the merger, when the editorial policy of the paper was decidedly opposed to the bank, Bennett began sending reports to Biddle about banking conditions and sentiment in New York, explaining why so many of the New York banks were hostile to Biddle's institution. He left Biddle with the pessimistic impression that the Bank could not be rechartered in its present form.¹⁴ Ben-

nett reported to Biddle for several years, although in public he firmly opposed the bank's recharter.

Bennett served as an associate editor to Webb and Noah on the *Courier and Enquirer* for almost three years, a very important period in his development as a journalist. During these years the *Courier and Enquirer* was the best, the largest, and the most important newspaper in the nation, and Bennett deserves part of the credit for its success.

The immediate effects of the merger were beneficial. Advertising increased so much that a regular four-page supplement appeared each Saturday. With income from the combined subscription lists, the proprietors were able to buy a new printing press with a capacity of thirteen hundred sheets per hour in late 1829 and to house it in a new building. The day the new press was installed, the paper was enlarged from seven to eight columns and each page was lengthened by five inches. Daily circulation stood at four thousand, Webb claimed, "*which exceeds the united circulation of our morning contemporaries.*" The new press was unable to keep pace with the circulation, and a faster press was installed in February 1830, which was also quickly outmoded. In January 1832 the *Courier and Enquirer* bought a new two-cylinder press with a capacity of two thousand sheets hourly.

Both physically and in circulation the *Courier and Enquirer* was the largest newspaper in the nation by 1832, netting the partners about \$25,000 annually. Limitations in equipment to fold, cut, and print the paper forced expansion by enlarging the four-page sheet. An observer remarked in 1832 that the *Courier and Enquirer* "would almost serve a small man for a blanket."¹⁵

The paper's success was largely the result of Webb's news-gathering expertise, which Bennett, from his experience on Willington's *Courier*, must have encouraged. The enterprise started in a rivalry with the *Journal of Commerce*, another mercantile paper, to meet incoming ships outside New York harbor and remove the foreign newspapers and dispatches in their mailbags. By 1831 five competing schooners were engaged in this activity. Webb's boat cost about \$5,000 annually to maintain, but it paid for itself, he claimed, in added subscriptions and the extras that were sold.

Webb also established an elaborate express system to bring Jackson's annual message to New York in December 1830. A pony express carried the document from Washington to Baltimore; from there a steamboat took it to Philadelphia, where it was transferred to another relay of express riders to New York. Here twenty-two compositors worked to produce an extra edition that sold for twelve cents—double the regular price. The time of twenty-seven and a half hours beat all rivals. The next year the *Courier*

repeated its coup when its express delivered the president's annual message fifteen hours after its release.¹⁶

Bennett was partly responsible for the *Courier and Enquirer's* success. Webb had been reluctant to hire him but was pressured to do so by the Jackson party's central committee in New York.¹⁷ Webb, like Noah, then made the best of the situation by keeping Bennett on the move as a correspondent covering Washington, Albany, Saratoga Springs, and special events such as trials and conventions. Bennett's Washington correspondence dealt with a variety of political topics, always in a partisan fashion. When in the New York office, he wrote mostly about economic matters, especially banking. His political counsel was valuable to the partners because he knew personally so many important political figures.

One of Bennett's special assignments was a widely publicized murder trial in Salem, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1830. Joseph H. White, a wealthy retired sea captain, was beaten and stabbed to death. Eventually indicted were two of his heirs, John and Joseph Knapp, and George and Richard Crowninshield, brothers hired by the Knapps to kill Captain White while they stole his will so that he would die intestate and they would inherit part of his estate. Joseph Knapp confessed, and Richard Crowninshield committed suicide, leaving the Knapp brothers and George Crowninshield to stand trial.¹⁸

The New York press took considerable interest in the White murder, clipping stories from the Salem and Boston papers. The *Courier and Enquirer's* coverage was typical, with grisly details of the murder and a lead editorial questioning Knapp's confession. Webb decided to send Bennett to Salem to provide his readers an exclusive account of the trial. Bennett first sent the paper a series of humorous travel letters from Boston, then went to Salem only to learn that the judge had died and the case was postponed for several weeks. He spent the time traveling in New England and sending more humorous filler to the paper.¹⁹

When the trial finally began in August, Bennett was one of a dozen special reporters there; the interest heightened when Daniel Webster arrived to assist the prosecution. Attorney General Perez Morton opened the prosecution's case with an attack on the press, questioning the propriety of the newspapers editorializing about the case. Bennett was enraged. "It is an old, worm eaten and Gothic dogma of the courts," he wrote, "to consider the publicity given to every event by the press as destructive to the interests of law and justice." If the publication of facts defeated justice, the best jurors would be those who were the most ignorant. "The honesty — the purity — the integrity of legal practice and legal decisions throughout the country, are more indebted to the American press than the whole

tribe of lawyers and judges who issue their decrees. The press is the *living jury* of the nation.”²⁰

Initially, the court did not follow up Morton’s admonitions, and Bennett was able to provide exciting coverage of the trial until August 10. On that day, the judge banned reporters from taking notes of publishing anything about the trial until its completion. Bennett exploded. In New York, he pointed out, “they ‘order these things better,’” and put no restraints on the publication of testimony while a trial was in progress.²¹

As Bennett indicated, in the recent legislative session New York had passed a law stating that no court could punish for contempt a true, full, and fair report of a trial. Bennett’s pieces publicized the problem, and eventually Massachusetts enacted similar legislation.²² The ban had no effect in Salem, however, because the case went to the jury the next day. After a hung jury, the three defendants were tried separately and convicted. Bennett was again on hand, filing briefer reports unrestrained by the court, and noting that the public was losing interest in the murder.²³

When he arrived back in New York, Bennett sent Nicholas Biddle an analysis of the political situation as he had observed it in his travels, especially attitudes in New England toward the Bank of the United States. These reports continued, along with advice about recharter.²⁴ As before, Bennett was sending confidential reports to the bank at the same time that the editorial policy of his paper opposed recharter. In late 1829 the *Courier and Enquirer* posed a series of damaging questions on the issue, furnished by Amos Kendall of Jackson’s Kitchen Cabinet, which forecast Jackson’s opposition to the bank in his annual message a week later.²⁵

Bennett continued to write articles against the bank at the same time he was supplying Biddle with information and implying that he would support the bank if he were in editorial control of the paper. He would then be able to make it a “most useful engine” to forward useful measures. A month later he directly asked Biddle for \$30,000 to buy half of the paper and again alluded to the probank stand he could then take. Nothing came of these overtures.²⁶

Until 1831, the *Courier and Enquirer*’s opposition toward recharter was mild, and the pieces that Bennett wrote about the bank were approved by Webb and Noah.²⁷ Then on February 5, 1831, he wrote a slashing attack on the bank, describing it as a vast and corrupt political machine, buying and selling votes, bribing officials and editors, and “erecting within the states and the Union, a new general government — an Imperium in Imperia, unknown to the Constitution, defying its powers — laughing at its restrictions — scorning its principles — and pointing to its golden vaults as the necessary weapon that will execute its behests whenever it shall be necessary

to carry them into action." These charges of political corruption were repeated a few days later, and in March Bennett called the bank a force for disunity in the nation.²⁸

After this, the paper said nothing about the bank for a month. On April 9 the *Courier and Enquirer's* position changed, and it supported a modified charter renewal. Bennett was silenced, and Webb made his own recharter views those of his newspaper.²⁹ What had caused the change? Bennett's negotiations to buy a share of the paper, for which he was unable to raise the money, resulted in the sale of a larger share to Noah on April 4, 1831. The money, however, had been indirectly furnished to Noah by the bank through Silas E. Burrows, a confidence man, speculator, lobbyist, and influence peddler. Burrows met Webb and Noah at Albany and loaned Noah \$15,000, which he told the editors had come from his wealthy father. Unknown to them, he had received the money from Biddle, whom he had convinced that a loan to Noah would modify the *Courier and Enquirer's* opposition to recharter. The resulting modification had led the New York City banks that opposed recharter to cut off Webb and Noah from their usual sources of credit there. The editors received two more loans from Biddle's bank in August and December, not knowing that the bank was the source of their earlier loan from Burrows. Their newspaper, in the meantime, had been almost silent about recharter.³⁰

Bennett was muzzled on the bank issue, but Webb found other matters to keep his associate busy. That summer Bennett was sent on a tour of western New York, and he sent back to the *Courier and Enquirer* a series of descriptive "Letters from the Country." He traveled with Martin Van Buren a part of the way and kept a diary to record his impressions. Some of this information he passed on to Biddle, emphasizing that the bank was unpopular there because it was misunderstood and that probank sentiment did not have proper direction.³¹

He also reflected on his position on the *Courier and Enquirer*. The paper, he confided to Van Buren, was edited "without dignity" and could not "excite affection" in its readers. In his diary he indulged in self-pity: "I feel very unhappy in my present condition — what care I for the C. & Enquirer? What care I for money? What care I for peace and gratitude? Nothing — nothing did I say? Yes, I do care — I care much — I have endeavored to procure a high position in parties, and settle myself in life. . . . I have always failed. Why so?" But by the next day his mood had changed, and he sang the praises of the *Courier and Enquirer*.³² It is clear that he chafed at the restraints Webb had placed on him and regretted that he had been unable to raise the money to buy into the paper when he had the opportunity.

With all the signs pointing to an early application by the bank for re-

charter in 1832 and of a possible congressional investigation that might divulge the bank's loans to the *Courier and Enquirer*, Webb pressured Bennett to put a signed statement in the paper on February 2, 1832, taking full responsibility for the antibank articles of 1831 and absolving Webb and Noah of blame. He did state the reason for his antibank position: it was a monopoly. "All banking institutions made exclusively by legislative acts, . . . are, to the extent of the privileges conferred on the few and denied to the many, infringements upon the natural rights of man."³³

Except for this statement, Bennett wrote no more about the bank and devoted himself to other matters. He worked tirelessly to obtain the gubernatorial nomination for William L. Marcy instead of contenders backed by other Van Burenites in the state. On April 12, 1832, the *Courier and Enquirer* endorsed Marcy for governor after Bennett had pressured Webb for weeks. Marcy was nominated and elected. But some state party leaders resented Webb's and Bennett's interference.³⁴

Webb had become antagonistic to the Albany Regency, the Jacksonian leadership clique at the state capital. Webb was an outsider, with no role in the decision-making process despite the circulation and influence of his newspaper. He retaliated with charges of corruption and mismanagement at Albany, which made it easier to break with the Jacksonians after the president's veto of the recharter bill in July 1832.³⁵ For his part, Bennett had confined himself to reports from Washington about nonbanking matters, the Jacksonian national convention in Baltimore, continuing to push Van Buren as the vice-presidential nominee, and other safe topics such as tariff reduction.³⁶ He must have become restive as Webb's antagonism to the party leaders at Albany increased. His own chances of political preferment were being damaged by his association with Webb.

Webb's newspaper remained silent on the bank question for about six weeks after Jackson's veto. During that time Webb received another loan from Biddle which enabled him to buy out Noah's share of the paper. On August 23, 1832, the *Courier and Enquirer* switched its political allegiance. The names of Jackson, Van Buren, and Marcy were removed from the top of the editorial column and replaced with the motto "Principles, not Men." A "Manifesto" signed by Webb asserted that the bank veto was the sole reason for deserting Jackson, and notice was given that Webb had bought out Noah because of their disagreement on the bank issue.³⁷

Bennett quit the *Courier and Enquirer* immediately after it changed its politics. He was placed in a difficult situation. Having left Webb's paper because of his uncompromising Jacksonianism, Bennett now found himself under fire by the Jacksonian presses of the city because he contemplated

establishing his own paper, and the columns of the Jacksonian *Standard* and *Evening Post* were closed to his attempts to defend his party regularly.³⁸

In the next three years Bennett made two more ventures into party journalism. On October 29, 1832, he began publishing the evening *New York Globe*. About half the size of the mercantile papers, and cheaper, the *Globe* began as a campaign organ in the closing week of the presidential campaign and lasted only one month. Until the election was over, Bennett told the public, "politics will be the staple article of the *Globe*; but after that event I shall give it all that variety which makes a daily paper the welcome visitor of the tea table and the counting room." He predicted a daily circulation of five thousand within two years because "I shall give my readers the cream of foreign and domestic events. My sheet is moderate in size, but neat and manageable." He boasted of his editorial experience and told his readers that as editor he would be "an acquaintance — a friend — an intimate." Unfortunately, there seemed to be no market for a smaller and cheaper version of the commercial newspapers. An examination of the *Globe* of November 29, 1832, the last and only surviving issue of the paper, indicates that its contents were no different from, although shorter than, those of its contemporaries and that the writing was just as dull. The *Globe* was not different enough. Bennett announced the demise of the paper in that issue. His main purpose, the reelection of Jackson, had been served, and now he had "other views and other purposes."³⁹

One of these was an opportunity to buy into Francis P. Blair's *Washington Globe*, the new national organ of the Jackson administration. The venture, buying one-half of the profitable paper, was suggested by Secretary of the Treasury Louis McLane, whose motives appear to have been irritation that the *Globe* had not pressed very hard for Van Buren's nomination for vice-president and anger at Blair's strident antibank editorials. Bennett discussed the proposition with Van Buren and Governor Marcy and sought aid from Nicholas Biddle. He also asked Secretary of the Navy Levi Woodbury to intercede. "I should like such a position remarkably well," Bennett wrote. "I think I could add a good deal of reputation and patronage to the *Globe*. . . . The approaching controversy with South Carolina will require every power of mind to manage it with success — argument, wit, good humor, courtesy, point, eloquence, all and everything manly and gentlemanly which give character to a newspaper." But the overture came to nothing. Blair was not ready to part with a piece of his profitable paper.⁴⁰

Almost immediately another opportunity came to hand. In January 1833, Bennett began working for a Philadelphia Jacksonian daily, the *Pennsylvanian*, and on May 24 he became the editor. The *Pennsylvanian* was established in the summer of 1832, and it was a typical mercantile paper.

Over half of its twenty-eight columns were filled with advertisements, and most of its news was directed at local merchants. Under Bennett's direction it devoted more attention to crime and the police courts, and it took a strong anti-Negro and antiabolitionist position that was always characteristic of Bennett.⁴¹

The *Pennsylvanian* was most important for its position in the Jacksonian intraparty politics of the state. It was the leading Amalgamation newspaper. The Amalgamators were the original Jackson men who had supported the Old Hero since 1824 and were hostile to the Calhoun faction of Eleventh Hour Men who were latecomers to the Jacksonian standard. After 1832 the Amalgamators, with Bennett in the lead, supported Van Buren for the succession and called for a national convention. More immediately, they opposed the election of Samuel McKean, an Eleventh Hour Man, to the United States Senate.⁴²

Bennett kept out-of-state Jacksonian leaders informed of the importance of his work in making Pennsylvania safe for Jackson and Van Buren and of the necessity of keeping McKean out of the Senate.⁴³ But he was unsuccessful in raising money from the Van Burenites to buy control of the *Pennsylvanian*. The failure caused a lasting bitterness between Bennett and Van Buren. The ingratitude of the vice-president, Bennett complained, was "*heartless in the extreme*."⁴⁴

Part of the problem was Bennett's reluctance to accept party direction and discipline and his penchant for striking out on his own. An example was his premature announcement in the *Pennsylvanian* of Jackson's removal of the deposits from the bank. This led to a reprimand from Amos Kendall, who remarked that Jackson made his own decisions and had not yet decided on removal. "I was sorry to see the article," Kendall wrote.⁴⁵

Bennett's role in keeping alive the intraparty feud in Pennsylvania bothered the administration more. The *Pennsylvanian* continued to assail McKean and his group as Calhounite nullifiers and to oppose McKean's election to the Senate. Blair's *Washington Globe* joined the fray, insisting that McKean was a regular and that the administration favored any Democrat who had the confidence of the party.⁴⁶

Bennett then accused "Amos Kendall and certain confederates" of trying to silence the press and take over the administration from Jackson and his constitutional advisers. Bennett sent these charges directly to Jackson and to Levi Woodbury, and they were published in the anti-Jacksonian *Pennsylvania Inquirer*. He was astonished, he told a friend, that the *Globe* and the Kitchen Cabinet were siding with the nullifiers in Pennsylvania.⁴⁷

Bennett realized that his days on the *Pennsylvanian* were numbered, and he again sought assistance from Nicholas Biddle. Administration officials in

Pennsylvania, he told the banker, were attacking "my conduct and my pecuniary resources. My friends must support me or they will break me up." He had a chance to buy the *New York Standard* but needed \$50,000. "The K.C. [Kitchen Cabinet] must be disrupted or the B[ank] will — If I can get hold of the Standard I can do it easily — I can make it appear that the funds came from the Regency banks of N.Y. & Albany — Not a moment is to be lost." Biddle did not respond to this letter or to a personal visit.⁴⁸

As expected, Bennett's connection with the *Pennsylvanian* was severed on November 30, 1833. He charged that "Amos Kendall and the irresponsible cabal stationed at Washington [were] the prime movers," and he threatened an exposure. A few days later, two columns of the *Inquirer's* editorial page were filled with Bennett's charges that Kendall and a group of corrupt stock manipulators dominated the administration, dictated its banking policies, and forced him out of the *Pennsylvanian*.⁴⁹

Bennett never again was a party editor. This experience had taught him that he could not comply with party discipline, that he could not march to another man's beat. He returned to New York and for the next year and a half waited for an opportunity, supporting himself by free-lancing again, mostly for George P. Morris's *New York Mirror*. Perhaps Nicholas Biddle provided a subsidy; at any rate, Bennett kept Biddle informed of the New York political scene. The time was ripe, he told the banker, to work out a compromise on modified recharter. Regency leaders in Albany seemed willing.⁵⁰

More important, Bennett made overtures to the *New York Sun* and the *New York Transcript* seeking employment. Both were new and successful penny newspapers, politically independent and aimed at a mass popular audience. He was not hired, but he watched them closely, studying their success. He talked to the printers who did the presswork for the *Sun* and *Transcript* and learned of the financing necessary to establish a penny paper. He tried unsuccessfully to interest printer Horace Greeley in a partnership. By May 1835 he was ready for his own independent venture.⁵¹

He was a few months shy of forty years old, and his material assets were only \$500 he had scraped together. But he did have other assets: a good formal education and a wealth of experience on the editorial side of newspapers, although none on the mechanical side. He had never set type or operated a press, which distinguished him from most of the printer-editors who established popular penny papers. He brought to his view of the world and his business the perspective of an educated professional, not that of a self-educated craftsman. Finally, he had a stubborn independence accentuated by his years of working for party newspapers. These assets would prove more important than material capital.