

Colonial Trade and Advertisements

During colonial times, advertising one's shop or services was very important. Shopkeepers in the colonies used a variety of advertising strategies. The colonial economy relied on people being informed about various goods and/or services. One advertising strategy was to write up information about a business and publish it in a local newspaper or print it on a **broadside**. With printing on just one side, a broadside could contain a long list of goods with many details. A shopkeeper could pass out broadsides in the streets or post them on the sides of buildings or trees. Unlike newspaper advertisements, broadsides were flyers printed to order. These flyers were then distributed around the town, announcing sales, presenting political views, and displaying new song lyrics.

When Elizabeth Murray first set up her shop in Boston in 1750, she paid to have a broadside printed. The announcement described her location, the origin of her merchandise, and dozens of the items that she had for sale. A reader could learn a great deal about Elizabeth Murray's business from reading her advertising broadside.

Newspaper advertisements were also very important. Merchants designed advertisements using fancy types, illustrations, and borders to attract notice for their businesses. Advertising in print was a way to reach customers who could read. Newspapers, which came out weekly in larger colonial towns in the 1700s, had pages of advertisements describing goods for sale. In these notices, colonists let others know if they were selling land, livestock, tools, china, and many other items.

Since not everyone could read, though, another advertising technique had to be used. Some colonial businesspeople hung signs outside their shops that looked like what they sold, like a sign in the shape of a fan for a fan shop, or a shoe for a shoemaker's shop. Anyone walking down a street would be able to understand signs shaped like the objects for sale inside.

Elizabeth Murray spread the news about her new shop in Boston by creating a broadside. Elizabeth's first broadside served the important function of letting potential customers know where to find her. In Boston, local landmarks took the place of street numbers and directions. Thus, Elizabeth directed consumers to her shop across the street from the Brazen Head, another popular shop run by a woman, Mary Jackson. Elizabeth designed her broadside to appeal to fashion-conscious Bostonians, letting potential customers know her terms of trade. She would sell goods both retail and wholesale.

Elizabeth was exposed to business through her oldest brother, James. When James Murray arrived in North Carolina in the fall of 1735, he quickly began establishing himself in trade. Colonial men and women were buying increasing quantities of English manufactured items such as cloth and china. However, colonists' lack of hard currency rendered trade difficult for many merchants, including James. He, like others, found it difficult to collect money owed to him.

When James returned to London following his mother's death, he made plans to expand his commercial involvement. Besides chartering a ship filled with the best merchandise from London merchants, James invested his brother William's and sister Elizabeth's small legacies from their parents in the human capital of enslaved Africans from Charlestown, South Carolina, the primary port of entry for Africans.

With her brother's help, Elizabeth worked for ten years as a milliner and shopkeeper. At least ninety women in Boston pursued establishing shops between 1740 and the Revolution. Other colonial seaports, such as New York and Philadelphia, had substantial numbers of female vendors as well. Establishing credit was an important step to becoming a successful shopkeeper. Traders who engaged in overseas commerce needed to develop sound relationships with the merchants who supplied them.