

Phyllis W. Bennett, publisher

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I'm pleased to be here this evening to represent the talented, and some might even say a bit eccentric, staff who created *Publick Occurrences* newspaper in 1973. We came from Maryland with the dream of publishing a weekly newspaper—not a traditional paper—that would primarily report on the public affairs of the 22 towns from Seabrook to Rochester that line New Hampshire's 18 mile seacoast but not a region that had a history of collectively addressing problems. In the course of our two-year history the *Boston Globe* wrote that we were the most enterprising paper in New England and we were nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

In a letter to our readers on the front page of our first issue we said that our allegiance was to the public. We believed the press was an arm of the public and that it was our responsibility to report the truth as best we could find it.

It is this responsibility that forces the press to be aggressive and persistent in hammering at the door of government and other centers of power.

This is not a radical philosophy, it is as old as the history of the press and we were committed to that history even to the point of borrowing the name of the first paper in the colonies. In 1690 a publication appeared in Boston with the name *Publick Occurrences both Foreign and Domestic*. After only 4 days, the Governor of Massachusetts suppressed the paper and jailed the publisher. It is considered to be the first newspaper published in what became the US. Not until 14 long years later was there another paper in the colonies.

We adopted the name and began with issue No. 2 because it was as far back as we could draw on an American journalistic tradition. We came to NH without a name and did our research in the UNH Library with the help of the research librarian. In the process we learned more about the history of journalism.

Freedom of the press and free speech were not guaranteed rights in the colonies. In fact, in 1671, the Governor of Virginia wrote "I thank God , we have not free schools nor

printing and I hope we shall not have for these 100 years for learning has brought disobedience and heresy and sects into the world and printing has divulged them and libels the government. God keep us from both.”

The original *Publick Occurrences* consisted of 4 pages, three text pages and one blank page for items to be added by hand when readers forwarded copies to friends. In his first issue, Benjamin Harris, formerly a book seller in London, got into trouble for his account of an English Captain who butchered two Indians in the sight of the French which resulted in retaliation by the Indians and the death of 40 English captives. That story and a reference to a report that King William “used to lie with his sons’ wife” sent him swiftly to jail and the paper was suppressed.

We made a promise to ourselves to keep strictly to “public occurrences” and thus keep the publisher out of jail.

There was no war in 1973 when we started, but the country was in a recession. There was widespread unemployment and a very serious energy crisis. There were long lines at the gas stations and people began to burn wood in unusual numbers due to a fuel shortage. New England was at the end of the pipeline and government officials and large American oil companies began to talk about the need for an oil refinery in the region.

Governor Meldrim Thompson, however, was the only Governor on the East Coast to publicly and enthusiastically welcome an oil refinery to his state. Almost from the time we arrived, we began to hear all manner of rumors about unusual land dealings in the Durham Point section of Durham. In New England people don’t tend to share personal business with their neighbors. Just like Texans don’t talk about the number of cattle in their herd. But in this case a mysterious man was knocking on their door as many as four times, even looking in their windows.

Then late one night, we received a call from a local attorney reporting that someone was repeatedly trying to option land from a number of his clients and the daily papers he contacted expressed no interest, so he called us. We were prepared to follow his tip because in

an early issue of *Publick Occurrences* we had encouraged our readers with writing experience and those who would like to write to contact us.

The response was heartening: the local math teacher, Bob Nilson, offered to submit cartoons and was later nominated for a Pulitzer Prize; a young man who came to the office late one night in black leather and chains claimed to be a Canadian rock star was later awarded a MacDowell Colony fellowship; and the blacksmith down the street in Newmarket wrote early stories which forced Governor Thomson to reveal his plans for a refinery before he was ready.

Ron Lewis went on to be an environmental lawyer. He was the first reporter to contact families living on Durham Point and learned that a real estate broker from Nashua, George Pappademas, was offering from \$1,000 to \$1,400 per acre. A large sum in those days. To some folks the man claimed he was going to create a game preserve, to others he said he would create a retirement community or simply he wanted to find an older home for his family. When asked about a possible oil refinery, he replied “Completely Unfounded.” Deception was well underway.

In the first week of October, about 6 weeks after we started, we had a careful but startling headline “An Oil Refinery on Durham Point? An attempted land grab causes a week of rumors. Story on page 3.” Four weeks later, our bold headline confirmed that 11 landowners had optioned 1,000 acres to the mysterious real estate broker from Nashua creating a large square of land on Durham Point. Before the town meeting in March 1974, they optioned 3,000 acres. But not all landowners optioned their land. The Beaudet family, Norman and his 85-year-old mother, who owned a dairy farm on Rt. 108, turned down an offer of \$310,000. A huge sum in the recession. When asked why they said NO, Norman queried “Where would we live? We’d be out on the street.”

At this point there were still more questions than answers . At the end of November—15 weeks after the first story—we had a front page story “Refinery: Heedless of Facts. What’s Going on Governor?” We even ran our own To Go List of the information we needed to uncover. Meanwhile SOS turned to University experts to help them identify key questions and answers.

In the absence of a plan by Olympic Refineries and state agencies, Governor Thomson directed the University to submit an unfunded planning document in just 90 days. Faced with a request from SOS, the University president said that professors could provide information as individuals but as not as University spokesmen.

In quick order almost 20 professors generated valuable research to us at no cost. History must not overlook the role their work played in the ultimate decision of the voters to reject the oil refinery proposal from the Governor and Olympic Refineries.

Now armed with the facts about every aspect of oil refineries and the impact they have on community services, employment opportunities, fuel availability, the environment, and relevant town, state and federal laws. We printed each of their research reports, and despite being dry reading, our readers let us know that they read every report which refuted the claims that more than 15,000 jobs would be created, fuel would be cheap and plentiful, taxes would be reduced by as much as 90% and the air and water would be cleaner.

Not until the last week in November did the Governor and Olympic executives announce their plans. Despite a 'fly over' Durham Point, Aristotle Onassis still decided to locate the world's largest oil refinery—400,000 barrels a day—in this small town. His decision was not based on facts or an understanding of the community he selected. He wanted to keep his fleet of rusty tankers active during the oil embargo. Folks were told that Onassis could skirt the embargo because he had a deal with Saudi Arabia and the Shah of Iran.

The citizens of Durham asked, How could they plan to use salt water from Great Bay to cool the refinery? How could they show local fishermen a video revealing how they would blow up the ocean floor to run a pipeline from the Isle of Shoals to the beaches of Rye.

All during this Battle for Durham you could say there was a so-called battle among newspapers. The *Union Leader* trumpeted their support for a refinery even to suggesting it was our patriotic duty despite their reliance on foreign oil. Another bold headline read: "Welcome the Two Big O's: Onassis and the Oil Refinery." The Governor and his supporters of a refinery wanted a statewide referendum and distributed an 8 page insert promoting an oil refinery in all

the state dailies. The *Union Leader* was relentless with larger-than-life headlines and stinging quotes. But to be truthful there were times when we had to laugh. For example, they accused the “Women of Durham of Beating Their Little Breasts,” and in response to a question of refinery visibility they said “when it is lit up at night, it will look like a Christmas tree.” And to one landowner, they told her they “would buy the wide pine boards right from under her feet.”

Faced with money and power the citizens of Durham voted NO —9 to 1—at their town meeting.

They kicked the Egg Out of Their Nest. (see cartoon).

