

## 2.6

# News Pictures in the Early Years of Mass Visual Culture in New York: Lithographs and the Penny Press

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The construction and picturing of “news” was a key component in the development of a mass visual culture in the United States. The crucial formative years were the quarter century before the Civil War, when new print technologies and new divisions of labor allowed pictures to be circulated within days of an event; when industrialized production of prints began to provide numbers sufficient for a mass market; and when expanded transportation and mail networks enabled these images to reach across the nation and beyond. In these changed circumstances, events construed as news helped to shape a mass audience, and that inchoate mass audience helped determine what sorts of recent events could viably be marketed as news.<sup>1</sup> Some of the most successful early news images resulted from collaborations between print publishers and newspapers. This essay highlights some landmark examples demonstrating the different forms that collaboration could take. The process of aligning press accounts of news events with their pictorial counterparts calls attention to the surprising amount of incongruity between them that evidently was tolerable at this early moment in mass visual culture.

### **The great New York fire of 1835**

In mid-December of 1835, a massive fire burned much of lower Manhattan, destroying thirteen acres in the city’s growing commercial district. There were few deaths, but nearly 700 buildings were destroyed. Firefighters were hampered by freezing cold: when they managed to break through the ice on the frozen river, the water only froze in their hoses.

The fire’s catastrophic destruction had far-reaching ramifications for city politics and infrastructure, but also for the circulation of information. It galvanized the new penny press—the aggressive, inexpensive newspapers seeking to profit from democratizing newspaper readership—and it provided a compelling subject for printers working with new image technologies capable of producing large editions.

Newspaper reports and extra editions dedicated to the fire led to new circulation records—more than 50,000 copies for the *New York Sun*.<sup>2</sup> The *Sun*'s leading rival, the *New York Herald*, took the occasion of the fire to introduce illustrations for the first time. Just a few days after the fire, it published a crude wood-engraving showing the shell of the Merchant's Exchange, a recently built marble structure that had been thought to be fireproof. The paper signaled to readers the importance of the picture by advising them "to preserve this paper among the archives of their family. Fifty thousand copies only are printed."<sup>3</sup>

Several print publishers also capitalized on the opportunity to get quickly to press scenes of the conflagration and the ruins it left. Henry R. Robinson, a publisher of lithographic political cartoons and caricatures, collaborated with the artist Alfred Hoffy and the printer John Bowen to bring out in mid-January a picture of the Merchant's Exchange and the buildings adjacent to it engulfed in flames (Fig. 2.6a).



**Figure 2.6a** Henry R. Robinson, Alfred M. Hoffy, and John T. Bowen, *The Great Fire of the City of New York*, 16 December 1835, lithograph, 45 × 57 cm. From Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, LC-DIG-pga-01587.

Although flames stream from windows and roofs, none of the buildings seem to be damaged yet, and fire hoses shoot water evidently without difficulty. The block of burning buildings serves as a backdrop for foreground activity: massed in the street, which recedes toward a vanishing point near the left edge of the picture, are fire-fighting companies, including various individuals facing outward—that is, looking away from the fire—as if posing for a group portrait. Numbers inscribed along the bottom edge of the picture correspond to a key identifying by name these figures “who rendered themselves conspicuous through their exertions in quelling the awful conflagration” and affirming that likenesses of all were taken from life. The foreground portraits make clear that acknowledging key individuals is as important here as recreating the sublime thrill of the spectacular flames, and both objectives overshadow conformity with the details of the story as told in the accompanying texts.

At least one job printer in lithographic publishing also saw the fire as an opportunity to add some original news images to his standard fare of commercial paperwork printed on commission. Nathaniel Currier had been operating his own printing shop for less than a year when he entered into a partnership in New York in 1834 and took over the business himself the next year. Of the eight original pictures he published in his first two years of business, three represented the 1835 fire. The first reportedly appeared for sale only four days after the fire—an astonishingly short time—and, like the *Herald's* illustration, which appeared simultaneously, it represented the shell of the Merchant's Exchange as the emblematic image of the devastation. The smoldering façade of the building, its side walls and cupola collapsed, was rendered by J. H. Bufford, printed by Currier, and published by John Disturnell. Undocumented legend holds that it sold thousands of copies and marked Currier as a rising force in the print world.<sup>4</sup>

By far the most dramatic scenes of the fire were two images done in a more traditional medium (aquatint), at larger scale, and more elaborately colored, and for these reasons likely more expensive, more limited in numbers, and slower to appear. Lewis P. Clover, a print publisher and owner of a framing and art supply shop in lower Manhattan, collaborated with painter Nicolino Calyo and engraver William James Bennett, a specialist in urban views, to produce a spectacular view of the fiery precinct as seen from the top of the Bank of America building and a dramatic view of the ruins receding into a great distance from Exchange Place. Hand-colored, like the lithographs produced by Currier and Robinson, these more lavish productions pose questions about the market appeal of these pictures. Would the audience for these more elegant prints of the devastating fire have framed and hung them as sublime spectacles of natural fury, akin to paintings such as J. M. W. Turner's recent *Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons* (1834–5)? Would the cheaper, quicker, cruder prints that served primarily as visualizations of news have been considered disposable once the interest of the news had waned?

In mid-March a moving diorama of the fire opened at the American Museum and provided a spectacular visual narration of the fire from start to finish. The *Herald* published daily for a month an advertisement containing an illustration and a full description of the attraction.<sup>5</sup> It was already becoming clear that the symbiotic relationship between the penny press and most of the forms of mass visual culture was essential to the success of all parties.

The fire of 1835 was pictured in the full array of media that would form the first wave of mass-produced pictures in the period before mass reproducible photographs. The striking differences in materials, processes, physical textures, and overall impression of these early images—to say nothing of differences in quality of drawing and composition—may be obscured by the homogenizing classification “mass visual culture.” While this classification is essential for marking the simultaneous emergence of diverse images and media seeking to appeal to a mass market, the differences among them reveal significantly varied pictorial strategies and different target audiences (i.e. different sectors of the population assumed to be central to the formation of a mass audience).

## Picturing a sex murder

Just four months after the great fire, the murder in New York of a twenty-three-year-old courtesan named Helen Jewett filled the pages of the penny press. The coverage of this story is widely recognized as introducing the era of tabloid journalism in the United States, and the *Herald* in particular, under owner James Gordon Bennett, can claim much of the credit. It aggressively reported on the crime and the subsequent trial as part of a calculated strategy for selling papers.<sup>6</sup>

Jewett worked in an upscale brothel in the area now known as Tribeca. In the early morning hours of Sunday, 10 April, the proprietor of the brothel summoned some nearby watchmen to help her put out a fire in one of the rooms. When the smoke cleared, the body of Jewett was discovered in her bed, severely burned, and with her head bloody and battered. One of Jewett's preferred clients, Richard P. Robinson, was charged with the crime.

The *Herald* led the press coverage, describing the crime scene in lurid detail and eroticizing the grisly murder. It did not print illustrations, but once again publisher Henry R. Robinson (no relation to the murderer) teamed up with the artist Hoffy to seize the opportunity. For this event Robinson speeded up his production time to five days, publishing the first of three lithographs related to the crime on 15 April. All three lithographs by Robinson and two others by A. E. Baker (portraits of Jewett and Richard Robinson) were widely circulated—"put up at the windows of the print shops and hawked about the country by vagabond boys," in the angry words of the alleged murderer, who was interviewed following his acquittal. Asked if he had seen the lithographs, Robinson affirmed he had and volunteered that he resented the depictions of himself and Jewett. He was made to look idiotic and foolish, he said, and Jewett was unfairly portrayed as brazen.<sup>7</sup>

Henry Robinson's first and most important lithograph followed the *Herald*'s coverage in eroticizing the victim (Fig. 2.6b). The print's caption claimed veracity: "a correct likeness and representation of this unfortunate female, taken on the spot very shortly after she had become the victim of a foul and barbarous murder and her bed clothes had been set fire to on the night of the 9th of April 1836, in New York." Although the bedclothes are decoratively tattered in what must be an attempt to reference the fire, they are not discolored, and Jewett's body, with legs and breasts exposed, is unmarred save for what may be a schematic linear gash in the hair above her ear. She appears to be peacefully sleeping, which may be what prompted the *Herald* to compare the print to the famous painting of *Ariadne Asleep on the Isle of Naxos* (1809–12, Pennsylvan Academy of Fine Arts [PAFA]) by John Vanderlyn. "An artist has taken a sketch of the beautiful form of Ellen Jewett, reposing in the embrace of death, like another Ariadne."<sup>8</sup> The salacious quality of the print was being tempered by comparison with an infamously risqué but categorically "fine art" nude. The *Sun* took a different view of the print: "It is sufficiently indecent to render it attractive to persons of depraved tastes, but as to being a likeness of Ellen Jewett, those who have seen her say that H. R. Robinson has murdered her far more barbarously than Richard P. Robinson did."<sup>9</sup>

The *Herald* demonstrated that mixing violence and salaciousness could be a potent strategy for marketing news, especially news pictures. But as the *Sun*'s judgment suggests, this was a risky business. Robinson's lithograph of the dead Jewett tested the limits of what was acceptable at the time: it has been described as "one of the most suggestive popular prints of the early nineteenth century."<sup>10</sup> An influential early chronicler of American lithography, Harry T. Peters, described the Jewett print as pioneering—"the very first tabloid picture that I know of"—and he credited Robinson with revealing to Nathaniel Currier the great potential of lithography as a medium for popular art.<sup>11</sup>



**Figure 2.6b** Henry R. Robinson and Alfred M. Hoffy, *Ellen Jewett*, hand-colored lithograph, 27 × 35 cm, 1836. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

## Currier's awful conflagration

When another spectacular catastrophe occurred in New York in 1840, a lithographer and a penny press newspaper developed a new kind of collaboration to market pictures of it.

The paddlewheel steamship *Lexington* caught fire and sank in Long Island Sound on 13 January 1840. It had been built in 1835 by Cornelius Vanderbilt to be the finest and fastest vessel transporting passengers and cargo between New York and Boston. On 13 January it was en route from New York to Stonington, Connecticut, at night and in bad weather, carrying passengers and a load of cotton bales. When a fire broke out near the smokestack, the flammable cotton was quickly engulfed in flames. Lifeboats were launched prematurely and sank immediately in the wake of the ship. Many passengers were faced with the choice of burning to death on deck or jumping into the icy water. Of the roughly 150 people on board, only four survived, and they did so by clinging to flotsam or bales of cotton for hours until they were rescued or washed ashore.

The *New York Sun* broke the story with an extra edition published on 15 January. The next day it announced that it had commissioned an artist to produce “an accurate and elegantly executed

lithographic representation of the destruction of the steamer *Lexington*” that would be available by three o’clock that afternoon at the *Sun*’s sales counter. Historians have long believed that the print produced so immediately was Nathaniel Currier’s famous *Awful Conflagration of the Steam Boat Lexington*, but scrupulous research by James Brust and Wendy Shadwell has revealed a much more complicated story.<sup>12</sup> Although no copies of that first supplement to the extra edition have been located, a second state of that print survives in the collection of the New York Historical Society, and it differs considerably from the familiar Currier image. The composition is similar, but the scene is shown in daylight, is less dramatically presented, and is cruder. Authorship is not indicated, but captions state that the print is a *Sun* “extra” and that it was published at the *Sun* offices. This version was revised and republished three more times within a week, so we can infer it was selling briskly; the *Herald*, by contrast, published no pictures of the flaming, sinking ship. Nonetheless, on 23 January, the *Sun* offered an improved illustration: it announced that a new lithograph was being published that day “which will far surpass any thing of the kind yet presented. The plate represents the calamity as a night scene . . . and is executed with much more accuracy and finish than any others.” This version added a map of Long Island Sound marking precisely the place where the tragedy occurred; and while it too bore the heading “The Extra Sun,” the draftsman and printer, W. K. Hewitt and N. Currier, were credited explicitly. This version too was republished with revisions frequently over the next few days (Fig. 2.6c).

Five days after this second version’s appearance, the *Sun* announced that between 12,000 and 13,000 copies of its lithographs had been sold and that the paper would be suspending sales in a few days. At that point, Currier’s own shop evidently took over the distribution and marketing; he issued at least three more states of the print, indicating that its commercial success continued well after the *Sun*’s involvement.

Whether Currier was responsible for the crude first version of the print is impossible to know, but he had collaborated with the *Sun* on another shipwreck image three years earlier.<sup>13</sup> The careful chronology assembled by Brust and Shadwell verifies the commercial success of the *Sun*’s direct involvement in lithographic production, which represented a significant departure from its prior practice of merely criticizing, promoting, and commenting on the work of independent lithographers. At least eleven other lithographic portrayals of the *Lexington* disaster were published, but none achieved anything like the success of the collaboration between Currier and the *Sun*.

This collaboration did not point the way toward the future. Newspapers and lithographers would go separate ways when picturing news, even as the appetite for spectacle and sensation in news reporting grew. The *Herald*’s strategy of including a wood engraving in the front page of its coverage of the 1835 New York fire forecast the coming of the illustrated newspaper, although the *Herald* itself never published enough images to be so classified. The revolutionary publication in this regard was English—the *Illustrated London News*, which included a wood-engraving of the city of Hamburg in flames on the cover of its first issue. Although the picture was copied from a print of Hamburg borrowed from the British Museum and overlaid with signs of a fire—smoke, flames, and onlookers—it initiated a form that would become dominant in illustrated news for decades.<sup>14</sup>

This brief survey of early picturings of news events for the mass market raises questions about their functions, their relations to textual accounts of the event, and the features that made them successful. The Merchant’s Exchange as a burned-out shell was a salient visual fact of the 1835 fire, while the disfunction of firehoses in the cold apparently was not. A schematic rendering of a burned bedspread stood in for the violence suffered by a murdered prostitute, whose death was primarily an occasion for



desirable imaginary visualizations. In so doing, they helped order the disorderly stream of information generated in urban experience.

## Notes

- 1 For earlier news images, see Peter Marzio, "Illustrated News in Early American Prints," in *American Printmaking Before 1876: Fact, Fiction, and Fantasy* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1975): 53–60.
- 2 Frank M. O'Brien, *The Story of the Sun, New York, 1833–1928* (New York: Appleton, 1928): 60.
- 3 "The Merchant's Exchange," *New York Herald*, 21 December 1835: 1.
- 4 Russel Crouse, *Mr. Currier and Mr. Ives, A Note on Their Lives and Times* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1936): 5.
- 5 "New Grand Moving Diorama," *New York Herald*, 18 March 1836: 4.
- 6 Oliver Carlson, *The Man Who Made News: James Gordon Bennett* (New York: Duell, Sloan, Pearce, 1942): 143–67. John D. Stevens, *Sensationalism in the New York Press* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1991): 42–53.
- 7 The pamphlet containing the interview is quoted in Patricia Cine Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998): 273.
- 8 "A View of the Scene of Murder," *New York Herald*, 14 April 1836: 1; quoted in Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*: 269. The *Herald's* review of Robinson's other prints pertinent to the Jewett case, portraits of Jewett and R. Robinson, criticized them as "colored and lithographed with a good deal of impudence and pretension." See *Herald*, 1 June 1836: 1.
- 9 *New York Sun*, 21 April 1836: 1; quoted in Cohen, *The Murder of Helen Jewett*: 272.
- 10 Nancy R. Davison, "E. W. Clay: American Political Caricaturist of the Jacksonian Era," (Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1980): 168–9.
- 11 Harry T. Peters, *America On Stone* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1931): 341.
- 12 James Brust and Wendy Shadwell, "The Many Versions and States of *The Awful Conflagration of the Steam Boat Lexington*," *Imprint* 15.2 (1990): 2–13.
- 13 Currier's *Dreadful Wreck of the Mexico* (1837) was not designated a news extra, but it was published by the *Sun* office under the paper's previous owner, Benjamin Day.
- 14 Leonard de Vries, *Panorama 1842–1865* (London: Murray, 1967): 9.