Introduction

In 1849, America’s first advertising agent, Volney B. Palmer, sponsored an essay contest on the “subject of advertising”. The winning entry, penned by Horace Greeley, editor of New York’s largest newspaper, presented a “philosophy of advertising” for the new age of enterprise. “Man, they say, is a trading animal—the only one. The wants of each individual are more numerous and varied than his faculties and capacities devoted to supplying them”. According to Greeley’s economic history of the world, trade arose to meet these wants. To succeed, the trading merchant must not only be able to satisfy demand but also to insure that “everybody within the proper scope of his business is made aware of his ability and confident of his disposition to do so”. Failure to advertise, Greeley warned, signals one’s “gross incompetency and ruinous prodigality [. . .] [and] bestows the spoils on his wiser rivals”. To neglect advertising, “is like resolving never to travel by steam nor communicate by telegraph. It is to close one’s eyes to the light, and insist on living in perpetual darkness”.

Palmer’s and Greeley’s campaign, historians of American advertising have suggested, signaled the emergence, in the 1840s, of a new discourse and practice of advertising in American print culture. Before that, advertising could appear unseemly, as if the advertiser were a quack, pretender or huckster, overly anxious for business or seeking unscrupulous profits. In an era of the
political press, many colonial and early national newspapers defended partisan causes. Paid advertising, viewed as patronage for these political publishers, could seem antidemocratic, especially after 1776. And the mercantile press, generally marked by the term “advertiser” in its titles, often provoked moral censure for “soliciting” advertisements from all manner of disreputable individuals or enterprises.²

The goal of this essay is not to explore the moral valence of advertising in early American culture. Rather it seeks to examine how one particular American craft, the makers and retailers of mathematical instruments, sought to sell their products in the eighteenth century. Did they advertise? How did they advertise, and to whom? Did they define the ‘proper scope’ of their business, to quote Greeley, as the local town, region, colony, or after 1776, the nation? How do these marketing efforts elucidate the development of what by the 1830s would be called ‘scientific instrument making’ on the American continent? And what do the advertising strategies tell us about the cultural significance of numeracy, precision, and ‘science’ in a frontier far from European centers of instrument making such as London or Paris? Can we discover any differences between American advertising strategies and those pursued by the far better studied British instrument makers in the eighteenth century?

To explore these questions, we shall first survey the makers of mathematical, optical and philosophical instruments in America during the colonial and early national periods (constraints of length require me to halt the analysis in 1800). I will then review several previous studies of British instrument makers’ advertising strategies before analyzing a sample of about 200 newspaper advertisements and considerably fewer printed trade cards and broadsides prepared by American makers between 1707 and 1800. We will conclude that most eighteenth-century American makers did not advertise consistently over their careers; that makers in the larger towns and cities advertised more than those in rural areas; and that, judging by the content of their advertisements, American makers expected to sell primarily to local customers. In conclusion, we shall examine several makers’ account books to see whether their sales