URING the night of April 6, 1830, Captain Joseph White of Salem, an elderly and wealthy retired merchant, was viciously stabbed and bludgeoned to death in his home. The crime and ensuing investigation and trials captivated Salem and much of New England in the months that followed, in part because two brothers from a very well-respected family, John Francis and Joseph Jenkins Knapp, were ultimately found guilty and hanged for the murder. In the days following the discovery of White’s body, before any suspects had emerged, a group of Salem men organized a “committee of vigilance” to solve the mystery. The committee claimed an almost unmitigated authority, “with full power to search every house, and to interrogate every person.” Eventually the committee became a controversial subject in neighboring towns, and even as far as New York City, where James Gordon Bennett (the future editor of the New York Herald, who traveled to Salem in August of 1830 to report on the first trial) was publishing regular stories about the case in the New York Courier.

Adding to the drama and controversy of the “Salem Murder” (as it quickly became known) was the fact that the local man allegedly responsible for the actual killing, Richard Crowninshield, committed suicide in jail after Joseph Knapp confessed to plotting the crime and hiring Crowninshield to carry it out. In the cases against the Knapps, Senator Daniel Webster argued for the prosecution. Crowds gathered in the courthouse, even on treetops outside the courtroom windows, to catch a glimpse of
the proceedings. As was often the case at such trials, pamphlets began appearing in town and around Boston promising authentic details of the crime—including maps of White’s property, biographical sketches of the criminals, and drawings of the murder weapon. In addition to the significant concerns raised over the unchecked authority of the committee of vigilance, rumors spread about the “bloodthirsty” Salemites celebrating and drinking at the executions of the Knapps. Furthermore, many outside of Salem believed that Frank Knapp (as John Francis was known) was executed not because of his role in the killings but merely to satisfy the town’s wrath. It is not difficult, in reading the extant newspaper editorials that raise such objections, to see Salem’s notorious reputation as the town of the witch trials lurking beneath every word.

The Salem Murder survives as a compelling episode in New England history because of the complicated role played by newspapers in the events of the investigation and trials. The judge barred reporters from transcribing any of the court proceedings, and lawyers on both sides made repeated references to the “innuendo” and “gossip” that had slipped into the public consciousness through the newspaper coverage of the case. In addition, as the editors of Salem’s papers fought back and forth in print with editors from neighboring areas to clear the town’s name, they denounced the “profit-seeking” city publishers whose cheap trial pamphlets had arrived on the scene. What was at stake in the local papers was not merely the town’s image as either “peace-loving” or “bloodthirsty”; with New England information culture teetering on the very precipice of a market revolution, local writers were grappling with the threat that an increasingly national and commercial journalistic culture posed to Salem’s control over its own identity. As Bennett published his sensational stories in New York, as Boston publishers quickly manufactured their pamphlets for local circulation, as rival towns accused Salem of unprincipled vengeance, what was the real story of the murder, and whose public account of the town still haunted by witches would carry the day?

While Benjamin Day would not establish the New York Sun (the country’s first penny paper) for another three years, Bennett’s controversial presence in Salem in August of 1830 highlights many of the cultural tensions that would mark the penny press revolution: the conflict between local and national print cultures; the dual status of authenticity as marketplace commodity and informational ideal; the ways in which journalistic storytelling quietly imposed its narrative logic on the popular understanding of reality in antebellum America. Bennett’s sensationalistic, story-driven mode of reporting placed the entire city of Salem on display for readers throughout the region. As nearby and not-so-nearby newspapers
attacked Salemites not only for the murder and the committee of vigilance but also for the rapacity with which they devoured the latest facts of the investigation and trials, local commentators and editors fought desperately to correct the image of Salem that circulated around New England and beyond. Editorials defending the “natural” human appetite for sensationalism appeared in local papers. And to combat the widely circulating story of Salem as a morally depraved community, local writers argued that an emergent culture of sensationalism was distorting the typical reader’s understanding of Salem by portraying the present day in the language of drama and intrigue. As we shall see, the journalistic frenzy that overtook Salem for much of 1830 transformed the way in which the city talked about the nature of reality.

Of course, if readers in Boston and New York considered themselves outside the culture of sensationalism that plagued Salem, they were themselves consuming a broader but no less sensational story about a town scandalized and stirred by the violent murder of one of its most prominent citizens. The newspaper coverage of the Salem Murder thus helps us understand the far-reaching implications of the antebellum journalistic revolution. Readers across the Northeast participated in the events in Salem by consuming the latest stories written by the dozen different journalists who had traveled to the town. The presence of this larger journalistic culture meant that the real story of the murder—and the real nature of Salem’s people—was being debated far beyond the city’s borders. While Salemites whispered among themselves about who might be arrested next, Boston and New York readers devoured the vivid narratives promising the “real story” left out of the formal legal proceedings. The question of authenticity was both a powerful engine for selling newspapers and a mode of consumption that helped characterize a developing mass audience.

As the penny press revolution fueled the emergence of this mass reading public, it also, much more quietly, shaped the literary imagination of Nathaniel Hawthorne. For Hawthorne, whose appetite for newspapers lasted his entire life, and whose letters from these years reveal an intense curiosity about the case, was among the countless Salemites following the story of the murder and the ensuing investigation and trials. In the young author’s reactions to the murder and its aftermath, Hawthorne distanced himself from the popular obsession with the real story of the crime. But, as these letters reveal, he was as preoccupied with the scandal as the rest of Salem. As chapter 2 will show, Hawthorne eventually fictionalized the murder of Joseph White in a way that told a multilayered story about the changing nature of reality in the earliest days of the penny press era. If
debating what the real world looked like was a practice of both local and national spectatorship, Hawthorne’s early fiction relied on the newspaper to carve out an imaginary space from which the romantic author could look down upon the writerly and readerly practices of early mass culture. Ultimately, two decades after the Salem Murder, Hawthorne’s view of reality as an economic, social, and narrative construct consumed by the masses would flower into the romance, a fictional form that claimed for its author a privileged understanding of American culture unmarred by the delusions of mass subjectivity. As a first step toward understanding how the romance’s manner of representing reality came to represent, in Hawthorne’s romantic consciousness, an autonomy from American culture, let us investigate the Salem Murder—not as an actual crime but as a window into the journalistic revolution that was transforming the popular conception of reality at the very moment when Hawthorne was embarking on his literary career.

From the moment Joseph White’s body was discovered by his housekeeper on the morning of April 7, local newspapers invited the town to participate in the investigation of the crime. As one early story put it, “we deem . . . it our duty to lay before our readers every particle of authentic information we can obtain, respecting the horrible crime which has so shocked and alarmed our community”—a duty that included, for example, a careful and gruesome description of the coroner’s report. Soon after White’s body was put on display for the reading public (“upon removing the breastbone [ . . . one sees] the cellular membrane beneath it”), the local editors challenged the town to solve the mystery, linking the very reputation of Salem to the resolution of the crime. Two weeks after the murder, before any suspects had been apprehended, the Gazette reminded its readers that “the Murder remains shrouded in mystery,” before going on to lay out precisely what was at stake: “A principal cause of the immunity we have hitherto enjoyed from gross crime has been the well-founded impression that escape was impossible, from the vigilance of our sharp sighted citizens. This safeguard is now, in a degree, removed,—its power has diminished in a ratio corresponding with the time that has elapsed since the bloody deed was done; and nothing can restore it but the detection and punishment of the offender.” The paper employs a logic here that clearly aligns the resolution of the “mystery” with the town’s ability to reclaim its reputation as vigilant and respectable. Even more significantly, the Gazette links the future safety of Salem to the
reestablishment of such a reputation—in other words, by solving the mystery the town essentially could protect their “Salem” from an alternative, externally imposed narrative. What is at stake in the above passage is not simply the town’s understanding of what happened two weeks before but also its ability to determine the meaning of this past event within a narrative of their own construction. Unsolved, the murder signifies Salem’s vulnerability; resolved, it rescues the town’s upright reputation. And by June 1, after the Knapps had been apprehended and Joseph had confessed, the Gazette announced which story had prevailed: “The mysterious and horrid Murder, that has so long perplexed and agitated the public mind, is at last brought to light. The circumstances, that at first seemed inexplicable, are at length made clear and plain.”

To make sense of Salem’s obsession with the crime, one must keep in mind the symbolic significance of a small city jointly following the story of a murder. The popular appetite for true stories in a murder case such as this was more than simply a question of public entertainment. As Karen Halttunen has convincingly argued, by the early nineteenth century public accounts of murders were increasingly presented within the framework of narrative mystery—so that the story told would be one each reader could participate in by attempting to put all of the pieces together. Understanding the Salem Murder as both a real event and a journalistic narrative gradually being unfurled before the eyes of readers across New England and the Northeast suggests that this journalistic print culture quietly determined how Salemites conceptualized the shape of reality: after all, the very project of searching for “the real story,” while implying that the truth has yet to be found, defines reality according to a narrative logic. In such a context, the ongoing attempt by the Salem papers to make concessions to the “human” desire for stories appears as a means of naturalizing journalism’s version of reality: the truth is a story, and people have always loved a good story. And yet, as the town demanded the next chapter in the story, they were essentially calling for more arrests—demanding more blood, as it were. In other words, the same popular sentiment that lent its weight to the committee of vigilance—allowing its members to stop people on the street and question them, even to search houses without a warrant—implicitly sanctioned the journalistic storytelling that appeared with each new issue of the local papers. If nineteenth-century print culture framed murder as a mystery tale (which the local newspaper coverage of the Salem Murder undoubtedly did), it was the cultural force of storytelling as a method of interpreting the world that was partly responsible for blurring the line between local realities and the murder’s status as a media event.
As the Knapp trialsdragged on for most of the year, and as it becameincreasingly apparent that at least the people most immediately responsiblefor the murder were either dead or awaiting trial, the Salem papers foundanew justification for the town’s intense curiosity with every detail ofthe case. In August, by which time the piecing together of the conspiracyand the murder itself was the responsibility of Webster and the rest ofthe prosecution team (and thus the papers could no longer frame the town’sobsession with the case as a matter of moral necessity), the Gazette tookgreat pains to explain that such a curiosity was not unique to Salem: “Thevery great number of respectable strangers and professional gentlemen,who have continually attended from distant places, proves that the circum-stances and incidents of this tragedy intrinsically possess a deep interest,not engrossing the attention or affecting the feelings of us who reside inthis vicinity, more than those who dwell at a great distance. . . . The sameeager curiosity to learn the details of this sad narrative, that is manifestedhere, extends to the remote regions of our country, and with nearly thesame degree of intenseness.”6 Carefully pointing to the respectability ofthe visitors who have frequented the court proceedings, the paper uses the“professional” status of these “gentlemen” to ease the town’s anxietiesabout following such a sensational story. One can easily see in such anargument the editor’s need to identify the trial as a respectable mode ofbehavior suitable not to those on the margins of society but to what wemight call an emerging middle class. As the above editorial continues,it becomes clear that one key to the carving out of such middle-classrespectability is the idea of a normalized human appetite for stories:

And that all should feel this eager curiosity and deep interest, or as some denominate it, “excitement,” is perfectly natural as well as innocent. The same principles of our nature that give interest to scenes of fictitious distress and horrors in dreams and romances, operate to chain attention to the history of this murder, the atrocity of which is not equal to its strange-ness. It furnishes another example to illustrate the force of Lord Byron’s remark that “Fiction is not so strange as Truth.” The circumstances that led to the crime were so unnatural and improbable, that without confession it could never have been detected. . . . That a trial in which so much of the strange and the marvellous is developed should excite deep interest in the public mind, is natural, and is independent of prepossessions against, or in favor of the persons implicated.

To follow the story for its interest in no way compromises the impartiality or respectability of the Salem public. In fact, the “public” being shaped in the above excerpt is one that is defined precisely by the ability to balance
a republican disinterest with the natural appetite for narrativity. The paper, of course, rather than describing some preexistent group of respectable curiosity-seekers, participates in the carving out of the image of a middle-class readership that would fuel the penny press revolution.

As the *Gazette* and other papers continued to legitimize the public’s curiosity about the trial, the town’s editors gradually lost their grip on the very identity of “Salem.” Rumors began swirling in nearby (and not-so-nearby) cities that Salem was exhibiting an uncomely vengeance in tracking down and punishing those responsible for the White murder. The *Herald* of Newburyport, Massachusetts, published a letter claiming (among other allegations) that many Salemites were drunk at the September execution of Frank Knapp. In answer to such a charge, the *Gazette* reported that “[a] more orderly, a more solemn assemblage, was never seen anywhere on any occasion, even those expressly dedicated to devotional excesses.”

When Joseph Knapp was executed at the end of the year, the paper, to forestall such charges the second time around, pointed to “the deportment of the assembled multitude, as on the former occasion, being that of a people conscious that they had character at stake, and determined to preserve that of good citizens.”

A letter published in the *Essex Register* in June, as the facts were still being sorted out in the case, provides an early glimpse into the struggle among local editors to define the relationship between the public appetite for more information and the difficulty of locating the line between fact and fiction. In attacking other local papers (including the *Gazette*) the letter’s author bemoans that fact that “every late paper has been more or less filled with *en partie* statements, calculated to prejudice the public against the accused.” After excerpting a number of newspaper stories, the writer concludes the following: “Now, it appears to me it would be as well to let ‘particulars’ alone till *after the trial*, for the old adage is sometimes true, that ‘one story is good till another is told; and that there *may* possibly be two sides to the question.’” Indeed, the *Register* took an impartial-sounding approach in presenting the latest details from the murder and its aftermath. In attempting to resolve the question of the behavior of Salemites at the first execution, the *Register* published testimonials from a variety of people claiming to be eyewitnesses—some claiming to have witnessed public drunkenness, and others agreeing with the writer who claims, without irony, “I have attended many Executions, and say, that I never attended any one where it was conducted with more propriety than the one referred to.”

While Warwick Palfray’s *Register* staked its journalistic authority on a model of reporting that juxtaposed competing claims about their town, the paper advanced such a claim of impartiality by attacking the cheap
pamphlets that appeared during the trials of the Knapp brothers. These pamphlets preyed upon the popular appetite for authentic details having any relation at all to the crime by including features such as a floor plan of White’s home, a map of the local streets (“accompanied with a key”), and a sketch of the bludgeon used in the murder that was found under the steps of a local church (see figure 1). Seeking to exonerate the town itself from any role in the success of such publishing ventures, the Register reported, “Great numbers of these trashy and spurious publications were sold to the strangers in town, and even to our own inhabitants, who were ignorant of their contents.”

Using explicitly economic language, the papers condemned the “pamphlet pedlars parading through all our streets, and amidst the spectators at the place of execution, vending a pamphlet consisting of a farrago of monstrous lies and absurdities.” While the political rivalry between Caleb Foote’s Gazette and Palfray’s Register is everywhere evident in each of these papers, the publications seem to have agreed on the necessity of protecting Salem from charges of a disreputable fascination with the more lurid details of the crime. On the one hand the Gazette formulated its theory of the universal appetite for storytelling; on the other, the Register pointed to the scandalous lies of the Boston publishers looking to capitalize on innocent Salemites as the real source of the sensationalism.

Between the pamphlets that circulated across the region and the newspaper interest in the crime itself, Salemites were undoubtedly aware of how their town was being transformed into a spectacle. The local Gazette, for example, reprinted a piece in August from the Boston Courier that described the “melancholy interest excited by viewing the mansion of the murdered Joseph White” and carefully detailed the victim’s yard, house, and possessions. In fact, by August of 1830, as the first Knapp trial began, a story about the town itself had already begun to take shape outside of Salem. The Register of Marblehead, Massachusetts, was one of the first papers to publicly attack the committee of vigilance, a hostility that emerged in response to the arrest and imprisonment of two Marblehead citizens early in the investigation. In writing of the first of these two arrests in early May, the Register states the following: “With infinite regret, we perceived the indictment of a citizen of this town, and one too, from whose general character and amiability, we could not, and do not for an instant allow ourselves to suspect.” While the paper initially asked its readers “to suspend their opinion in this matter, until its final adjudication,” the release of both people, nearly three months later, was met with a harsh critique of the Salem committee: “Thus have two innocent individuals suffered all the ignominy and deprivation of three months imprison-
ment and, through the unwarrantable organization and officiousness of a self-constituted body, called ‘Committee of Vigilance.’ We protest against all such associations of individuals; they are incompatible with personal security and civil freedom.”¹⁴ The editors go on to reveal that “we prepared an article some months since, on the inexpediency and dangerous tendency of raising ‘Committees of Vigilance,’ but forbore its publication, through fear of adding to the public excitement, which was then too great to yield to the control of sober reason.” One week later, in responding to a piece in the Newburyport Herald (the same paper that would accuse Salem less than two months later of reveling at the first Knapp execution) questioning the above article, the editors clarified the nature of their pro-
test. Contrasting the “personal responsibility” of an individual magistrate to the committee of vigilance, in which individuals lose such responsibility “by acting in the mass,” the editors used the authority of the Salem committee to give a shape to anxieties about the dangers of mob rule. Furthermore, in contrasting their own forbearance with the rashness of their neighboring town, the Marblehead paper initiated a public narrative that portrayed Salem as an unruly town driven by vengeance.

Once the Knapp trials began, much of the journalistic coverage of the cases made Salem itself an actor in the drama that was being played out in the courtroom. In describing the scene of Frank Knapp’s first trial, a writer from the Boston Courier makes the crowd in the courtroom as important as the proceedings themselves:

> It is always painful to enter a court of justice where a fellow creature is on trial, and observe, as one not particularly interested cannot help observing, the indifference of the gaping crowd swayed hither and thither by the anxiety of those without to learn something, they know not, and care not what, of that which is passing within; the silent dignity of the Court whose province it is to mete out “even-handed justice,” and the parade of authority in the minor officers of the law, who keep uncovered the heads of hydra the crowd. But when the crime for which the prisoner is on trial is one of such peculiar atrocity, exciting terror and a loud cry for justice by its enormity, and commiseration for the respectable connections of those implicated, when the amount of the connection of the prisoner with the crime becomes a delicate point, not to be found except by evenly balancing the cry for blood, between the law on the one side, and testimony on the other, it becomes doubly painful to watch the progress of the proceedings, and the alternations of the case, as perceptible in the faces of the Jury, as in those of the most indifferent persons in the Court. The effect of this trial, whatever may be its result, will, for years to come, be perceived and felt in Salem.

In order to understand the implications of this description, one must remember that Frank Knapp’s relationship to the murder was murky at best. Only after Crowninshield killed himself did the prosecution draw up new charges for the brothers in which each was charged for the murder itself. In fact, the first trial (the one described here) ended in a hung jury, as jurors were not able to agree that Frank was directly involved in the killing. Thus the Courier writer implies that the “delicate point” of the “connection of the prisoner with the crime” is a product of the “cry for blood” on the part of “hydra the crowd.” By adopting a perspective on the
courtroom that depicts the crowd within the courtroom as part of the spectacle, the author of the above piece implicates Salem in the trumped-up charge against Frank Knapp. The concluding sentence above suggests that the piece’s real subject is not the defendant, nor even the trial itself, but the town of Salem, who sat on a public stage for Boston’s reader-spectators. When the coverage of the case is read in such a way, the Salem papers seem to be fighting for the right to define their own town against (what they call) the profit-seeking city publishers.

By far the most dominant presence of all the city writers attending the trials was Bennett’s. In his own accounts of the investigation and trials that were being published back in New York, Bennett was far more willing than the Salem editors to challenge the story being constructed by Webster and the prosecution inside the courtroom. Reading his stories, one sees ample evidence of his interest and skill in bringing out the full dramatic force of events: “Joe Knapp, as he is called, was not exactly counted on as one of the confederacy headed by Crowninshield. He was jealous of the popularity of Dick among such men as Palmer, Hatch, &c. &c. He managed his criminal concerns on his own hook, and it was merely the case that made him apply to the leader of the execution of a plan, from which through his connections, he expected to reap the full benefit. Knapp possesses, it is said, much vanity and superciliousness. His wife is considered one of the handsomest females in Essex county.”

By using the nicknames of those accused in the crime, by sprinkling in local gossip, by relying on colloquial phrases like “on his own hook,” Bennett provided an aura of authenticity that was defined against the accounts that appeared both in the legal proceedings and in competing newspapers. Little of Bennett’s reporting appeared in the Salem papers (though his stories were often quoted in the Boston papers), presumably because his accounts of the conspiracy repeatedly sought to open up more and more narrative threads, instead of merely sanctioning the story being pieced together in court. Indeed, Bennett was repeatedly reprimanded by the judge who presided over the case. As one Boston paper covering the first trial reported, “The New York reports of this trial were to-day brought up, and severely censured, as characterised with incorrectness and stupidity.” The judge’s hostility toward “the New York Press” even led him to warn that “if any one person was detected . . . taking notes of the evidence in the Court House, for the purpose of sending them without the state for publication, previous to the conclusion of the trial, he would be proceeded against by the Court, as for a contempt.” Such threats led Bennett to respond that “it is an old, worm-eaten, and Gothic dogma of the Courts, to consider the publicity given to every event by the Press, as destructive to the interests
of law and justice.” In defending the importance of his brand of journalism, he concludes, “The honesty—the purity—the integrity of legal practice throughout this country, are more indebted to the American Press, than to the whole tribe of lawyers and judges who issue their decrees. The Press is the living jury of the nation.”

In such a role, Bennett repeatedly gave voice to the concerns about the abuses of power by the committee of vigilance. In addition, his paper was apparently the only paper covering the Joseph Knapp trial to report that one potential juror was disqualified because he expressed significant doubts that Frank Knapp (who had already been executed by the start of his brother’s trial) was treated fairly by the courts. Like the Boston piece excerpted above, Bennett’s coverage of the trials put Salem and its citizens on display for the New York audience, transforming the “quiet town” into a media-manufactured spectacle. After the first jury returned without a verdict against Frank Knapp, for example, Bennett wrote the following: “The result of this trial has produced a great excitement in Salem. No one who has not been present during these trials, and observed the tone and current of conversation in that town, can imagine the feelings with which the people of Salem have viewed every event connected with the singularly atrocious murder of Captain White. Before any discovery was made tending to fix the murder upon its perpetrators, such was the excitability of the public mind in Salem, that many individuals of standing in society talked of emigrating from the place altogether—of removing from a community containing characters so dangerous and fearful.” Such a description reveals how the public identity of Salem was being shaped by competing print media. As the local Gazette used the murder and subsequent investigations to uphold the town’s reputation before its own citizens, writers such as Bennett defined Salem as potentially “dangerous and fearful” by placing it within their own sensational narratives. When a Boston-published pamphlet called “A Biographical Sketch of the Celebrated Salem Murderer” described a secret meeting place in the forest outside of Salem where the conspirators would assemble, Salem editors fought back by attacking the piece as “lies and plagiarisms,” even taking the time to deny the existence of such a spot.

In the days leading up to the execution of the second Knapp brother, as the drama seemed to be coming to an end, the local opinion that White’s housekeeper (whose daughter was married to Joseph Knapp) knew about the murder plot made its way into the Gazette, though the editors stopped short of naming any names. Editors at the Rhode Island American responded by republishing the piece, along with the following commentary:
One would suppose that the Salem people were glutted with blood, and yet their editors are crying for more. Three lives for one would not satisfy them, and they really seem to long for a female subject to harrow up the public feeling with. The Salem Gazette, in an article which we publish today, has let slip the dogs of suspicion against some one bearing the form of woman. . . . The fact is that an attempt is making to damn the house keeper of Mr. White in public opinion, and drag her before the gaping multitude; and all because Joe Knapp wishes to save his own life by taking that of a woman. In God’s name let us be spared this horror in the Salem tragedy. Even if the woman be guilty, let her go and sin no more. We do not believe it, we will never believe it, even of the vilest population of Salem, where they seem to have acquired an extraordinarily high relish for public executions. . . . Must we on opening their papers forever find them stained with blood, blood, blood.

The editors of the American, in describing the accused woman “[dragged] before the gaping multitude” by a town “forever . . . stained with blood, blood, blood,” link the Salem Murder with the town’s infamous witch trials. Such a move by the paper’s editors reveals that from the first discovery of White’s body to the above attack on Salem’s native thirst for blood, the story of the Salem Murder changed dramatically—from a murder mystery whose resolution would vouchsafe Salem’s solid reputation to a larger narrative about the town in which the committee of vigilance served merely as the latest chapter in the ongoing story of a cursed and depraved community.

While the Gazette initially sought to counteract this story of Salem by attempting to legitimize the public’s intense preoccupation with the case, the paper gradually came to recognize that the definition of “Salem” was no longer simply a product of the town’s own self-authored history. An article that appeared in November of 1830, about a month before the execution of the second Knapp brother, betrays the paper’s anxiety regarding such a development. In a piece titled “The Times We Live In,” the anonymous writer addresses “the general, but very erroneous notion, that there must have been a great deterioration of the public morals.” While the writer cites the White murder as the cause of this public opinion, the deeper implication is that nostalgia has effaced the unseemly realities of Revolution-era Salem, where “more riot, debauchery, and vice, obtruded themselves upon the sight in a week than could now be discovered by diligent search in a month.” Most importantly, the author argues that the “dreadful tragedy” of White’s murder kept “the thoughts and conversations of the community continually directed to
that enormity,” and thus fueled the false impression of the town’s moral decline.

Of course, what kept the town’s focus continually directed on the case was a months-long journalistic narrative that unfurled before readers the latest news on the murder, investigation, and trials. The Gazette implies that the open-ended story that began in April, whose resolution promised to save Salem’s reputation, has in fact reconfigured the town’s own understanding of themselves. The paper seeks to remind its audience that what has changed more than their neighbors’ behavior is the way in which they have become accustomed to reading about their world—and thus the article undercuts the story that has been concocted about Salem’s moral decline by highlighting the enormous and delusive power of storytelling. While the popular opinion cited in the article held to a story about the town’s fall from innocence, and while accounts of the murder such as that of the Rhode Island American privileged one that depicted Salem’s innate and unchanging depravity, local editors formulated a story of their own, one in which the popular appetite for news had given rise to a false sense of an idyllic past. Ultimately, the Gazette seeks to combat the transformation of their town by pulling the rug out from under all the stories that circulated about Salem, in Marblehead and Providence, Boston and New York. Facing a network of stories about Salem that they could no longer control, the Gazette claimed, paradoxically, that the ultimate story about Salem could only be understood by recognizing how a new journalistic culture had transformed the city’s very sense of what was real.

In biographies of Bennett, and in historical accounts of the penny press era, the Salem Murder warrants at most a passing mention. And yet in many ways the months-long spectacle anticipated the journalistic revolution that would take place throughout the 1830s and 1840s. In the urban centers of the North, daily newspapers would quickly become commonplace, and readers would grow accustomed to following sensational stories on a daily basis. Patricia Cline Cohen has examined the newspaper coverage of the 1836 murder of Helen Jewett, for example, to illustrate how New York’s penny papers manufactured the crime into an ongoing narrative that fed a new kind of reading public. Similarly, scholars have revealed how the penny press revolution facilitated the spectacular showmanship of P. T. Barnum, who famously manipulated local papers to drum up business for his museum exhibits and hoaxes.

On a much smaller scale, this realization would also shape the career of Edgar Allan Poe. Poe’s “Balloon Hoax,” which appeared in the New York Sun on April 13, 1844, was published as an actual news article describing the crossing of the Atlantic by eight men in a large “steering
“balloon” inflated with coal gas. In ways that we have only recently come to appreciate, Poe was an attentive, if not often successful, businessman whose fiction, nonfiction, and poetry reveal the author’s career-long quest for a model of cultural authority indebted to the marketplace. Hoaxes like the balloon story thus capitalized, à la Barnum, on the instability of authenticity as a valuable commodity in a newspaper climate that privileged a great story over anything else. Terence Whalen has shown that Poe’s writing was profoundly shaped by the economic conditions of antebellum America, especially after the financial panic of 1837. In the wake of the panic, Whalen suggests, Poe became “painfully aware of the need to satisfy both elite and common readers with a single text.” His response was to merge his literary ambitions with the terms of the marketplace—thrust into the furnace of entrepreneurial capitalism.” Connected to the market revolution, of course, was the information revolution; and so for Poe, “[t]he rise of information as a dominant form of meaning induced him to reject the old profundities, first by redefining literary creation as the combination of already existing ideas, and then by relocating literary meaning to the surfaces of culture.” In Whalen’s reading, C. Auguste Dupin’s mastery of these surfaces in the detective tales reflects Poe’s own capitulation to the ways in which meaning is produced in capitalist culture.

Barnum’s, Bennett’s, and Poe’s varied though related attempts at mastering the antebellum culture of authenticity are easily seen as a new mode of cultural production made possible by the market revolution. By returning to Salem in 1830 with the above discussion in mind, we can also elucidate Hawthorne’s relationship to the material conditions of antebellum life. The Salem Murder is a small, mostly forgotten moment in local New England history, but one that brings into focus Hawthorne’s preoccupation with the unreality of American culture as a by-product of the complex developments that gave rise to Barnum’s and Bennett’s careers. Indeed, one readily sees the young author’s desire to fashion his own identity against the popular obsession with the real story of the crime in his recorded reactions to the murder. While I would not suggest that this event somehow gave rise to Hawthorne’s preoccupation with a public deluded by false realities, interrogating his relationship to this most sensational example of popular storytelling unveils the author’s preoccupation with the meaning-making power of stories as a way of defining himself against the gossip-hungry mob.

In a long letter to his cousin’s new husband, John S. Dike (who had recently moved from Salem to Steubenville, Ohio), Hawthorne describes
the circulating gossip about the murder and the ensuing trials. What is perhaps most significant about the young author’s account of the sensational events is the relationship he carves out to his fellow townspeople. I quote the entire portion of the letter that pertains to the murder in part to illustrate how intensely Hawthorne was following the story:

The town now begins to grow rather more quiet than it has been since the murder of Mr. White, but I suppose the excitement will revive at the execution of Frank Knapp, and at the next November term of the Court. Frank Knapp’s situation seems to make little or no impression on his mind. The night after his sentence, he joked and laughed with the men who watched him, with as much apparent gaiety as if he had been acquitted, instead of condemned. He says, however, that he would rather be hung than remain a year in prison. It is reported, also, that he declares that he will not go to the gallows, unless two women go with him. Who those women are, must be left to conjecture. Perhaps you have not heard that many people suspect Mrs. Bickford and her daughter, Joe Knapp’s wife, of being privy to the whole affair before the murder was committed. I cannot say whether there are good grounds for these suspicions; but I know that it was daily expected, during the trial, that one or both of them would be arrested; and it is said that they were actually examined at the house of Mr. Brown the jailer. It is certain that Joseph Knapp’s wife has twice attempted to hang herself. The first time was soon after her husband’s arrest, and the second immediately after Frank was found guilty. Old Captain Knapp also made a similar attempt, a little while ago, and was cut down by his son Phippen. The poor old man is entirely broken in mind and almost crazy; and it is no wonder that he should be so, when all sorts of trouble have come upon him at once. He and his son Phippen have injured their reputation for truth, by the testimony they gave at their trial; but I have little doubt that they believed what they said; and if not, they had as much excuse as there can possibly be for perjury. There seems to be an universal prejudice at present against the whole family;—I am afraid Captain Knapp himself meets with but little real pity, and I believe every body is eager for the death of his two sons. For my part, I wish Joe to be punished, but I should not be very sorry if Frank were to escape. It is the general opinion, however, that Joe will not live to be brought to trial. He contrives to obtain spirituous liquors in his cell, and is in a state of intoxication almost all the time. He is utterly desperate, and will not even wash and dress himself, and at one time he made a resolution to starve himself to death. I do not wonder that he feels unpleasantly, for he can have no hope of mercy, and
it is absolutely certain that he will not be alive at the end of six months from this time.\textsuperscript{28}

Hawthorne writes here from the perspective of one who is fully apprised of the latest gossip and yet can still refer to a “universal” opinion with which he disagrees. As a resident of “the town” he describes, the authorial persona of the above letter resides somewhere outside the town’s “prejudice,” even as he shares in their knowledge of recent events and innuendo. Such a narrative perspective should be familiar to any reader of Hawthorne, as it appears in works as obscure as “Sights from a Steeple” (an early sketch in which the nameless narrator has climbed up a church steeple and looks down at his village) and as well known as The Scarlet Letter, in which Hawthorne’s romantic narrator first describes for us Hester walking out of the prison-house from the perspective of the Puritan crowd gathered outside, only to then turn the narrative lens on the crowd itself—as if our narrator were hovering somewhere above the scene.

Scholars have long noted how Hawthorne often distances himself from an imagined public that serves as the antithesis of romantic identity, but we seem far less curious about his reliance on the language of reality as a strategy for making such a distinction. In a sense, Hawthorne’s response to the Salem Murder brings together these two preoccupations that would in many ways define his career. His account of the Knapp trials addresses the public skepticism regarding the completeness of the official story authorized by the legal proceedings. In fact, while the guilt of both Crowninshield and Joseph Knapp was beyond public doubt, a great number of suspicions toward other Salemites remained even after the last trial. Margaret Moore explains that after the execution of the Knapp brothers, many locals believed that the true story of the White murder never appeared anywhere in the newspaper version of events. Despite the conviction and execution of the Knapps in the case, she writes, “the end of the trial left unanswered questions.” While the editorial that drew the ire of the Rhode Island American argued that “the facts had not been fully ascertained,” the editor of the Gazette, “fearful of libel . . . did not give names to his suspicions.”\textsuperscript{29} The story of the Salem Murder was thus unfinished in the journalistic coverage that captivated readers for the better part of a year. When the mystery tale sanctioned by the legal proceedings and the Salem papers ended with the execution of the second Knapp brother, popular opinion in town was defined in large part by the sense that the full truth was absent from the official story. As Hawthorne wrote to his cousin, “it was daily expected” that further arrests would occur, and yet they never
did—presumably because a murder, a suicide, and two executions made the town both weary from the four deaths and wary of perpetuating their reputation as bloodthirsty. In Hawthorne’s town, the public narrative of events was recognized, even by those who paid to consume it, as a fabrication. As it would throughout his career, here the claim that reality existed somewhere outside of print allowed the author to undercut the modes of truth-telling consumed by an imagined public that Hawthorne sought to keep at a distance.

Instead of participating in the public debates over the real story, then, Hawthorne carves out an imagined autonomy from public opinion by pointing to a “universal” sentiment that he finds inadequate, at once invoking and eluding the question of authenticity. Unlike the editors of the Gazette and the Register, Hawthorne’s own account does not involve replacing one narrative with another—he does not, for example, refute the story of Mrs. Bickford’s guilt by suggesting a more accurate account of the crime. In a sense, his narrative is something of a counternarrative; in lieu of engaging directly in a debate about the reliability of the rumor (“I cannot say whether there are good grounds for these suspicions”), he will comment only on the very narrative about which he has no opinion (“I know that it was daily expected . . . that one or both of them would be arrested”) by addressing its very status as a narrative. Furthermore, his letter’s use of passive voice in phrasings such as “it is reported” or “it is said” shapes an idiom that both communicates a story and foregrounds its story as the product of popular opinion. Hawthorne’s interest in exposing the narrative logic that determines the popular conception of reality provides the author with a rhetorical space outside of the simple act of telling stories—a space that would soon find a literary form in the narrative innovations of his early fiction: carving an authorial space outside the stories he recounts, Hawthorne’s letter anticipates the authorial persona of The Story Teller by looking down on a “public” that produces, consumes, and debates stories.

As Hawthorne would write to Sophia more than a decade later: “Every day of my life makes me feel more and more how seldom a fact is accurately stated; how, almost invariably, when a story has passed through the mind of a third person, it becomes, so far as regards the impression that it makes in further repetitions, little better than a falsehood, and this, too, though the narrator be the most truth-seeking person in existence. How marvellous the tendency is! . . . Is truth a fantasy which we are to pursue forever and never grasp?” The distance between story and fact is what fascinates him, he tells Sophia; both unavoidable (even to “the most truth-seeking person in existence”) and marvellous, this distance allows
Hawthorne to formulate a conception of truth as fantasy, as something that can only be imagined through the rejection of perfect fidelity as a linguistic and narrative possibility. If the 1830 letter seeks a distance from the particular story being constructed by his fellow townspeople, the Brook Farm letter portrays the fictionality of all stories. In fact, the letter relies on the failure of storytelling to advance a definition of romantic truth—as that which storytelling can never contain. This, in turn, defines the romantic artist as the intellect who recognizes the delusions of those (at Brook Farm, presumably, but also in the world more generally) who seek reality in narrative form.

The value of digging into the journalistic origins of romance, as my next chapter will seek to do, is that it exposes the romance as one half of a dialogue with competing accounts of the real. As critics such as Michael Gilmore and Walter Benn Michaels have revealed, much of Hawthorne’s corpus is marked by a sense of the marketplace as a looming menace threatening to transform local realities into capitalist spectacles. The case of the Salem Murder reminds us that Hawthorne’s view of commerce as an invading and fictionalizing force reflected his own geographical location vis-à-vis the market revolution. The debates about the murder and its aftermath reveal that an urban-centered commercialization arrived in Salem in the form of a new mode of journalistic writing, and thus carried with it a new discourse about the capacity of language to represent the real world. In 1830 Salem was at the very nexus of a commercializing city journalism and a less urban newspaper culture that was still primarily localized and party-run. As the next chapter will suggest, the continual presence of the newspaper throughout his early fiction reminds us that Hawthorne’s obsession with the problem of reality was shaped by the local print conditions amid which he wrote his first significant works of fiction.