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Gannett Co.

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Introduction

The story of Gannett Co., Inc. is a chronicle of American media itself: a journey featuring visionaries, risks, innovation, challenges, and relentless transformation. Founded in the early twentieth century in upstate New York, Gannett began as a modest local newspaper venture and, over more than a century, grew into the largest U.S. newspaper publisher by daily circulation. The company's trajectory parallels the wider evolution of American journalism—from the days of print dominance and local presses to a complex, fast-moving landscape defined by digital technology and shifting reader habits.

Gannett's remarkable growth has been fueled by an unwavering commitment to journalistic integrity, a sharp eye for business opportunity, and a willingness to embrace new technologies. Under the leadership of founder Frank Gannett, the company's strategy of acquiring independent local papers and turning them into profitable chain outlets was a blueprint adopted by others in the industry. Throughout its history, Gannett frequently found itself at the vanguard of innovation, from pioneering early newsroom technologies to introducing bold new formats, such as the launch of *USA Today*, America's first truly national newspaper.

However, Gannett's ascent was not without controversy or challenge. The company's aggressive expansion tactics drew criticism and legal scrutiny, especially from independent competitors and small-town publishers concerned about predatory practices. Navigating these storms required both corporate resolve and adaptability. As the decades passed, Gannett diversified into multimedia holdings, entered international markets, and faced the existential threats posed by the digital revolution and the decline of traditional print media.

The 21st century ushered in momentous changes not only for Gannett but for the entire news industry. The rise of digital platforms, social media, and mobile technology forced a fundamental rethinking of the business model that had served Gannett so well for decades. The company responded with a digital-first approach, substantial investments in new revenue streams, and major strategic shifts—including the 2015 split into Tegna and the "new" Gannett, and the landmark 2019 merger with GateHouse Media which redefined the scale and ambition of the enterprise.

This book presents a comprehensive history of Gannett Co., charting its origins, growth, milestones, setbacks, and strategic reorientations. It explores the internal and external forces that shaped the company's decisions, the personalities who steered its path, and the broader industrial and technological context in which Gannett has operated. Today, as Gannett races toward a future defined by digital subscriptions,

artificial intelligence, and new content delivery paradigms, the company's resilience, inventive spirit, and commitment to community engagement are more vital than ever.

By tracing Gannett's journey from its earliest days to the present moment—and looking ahead to future prospects—this book aims to illuminate not just the story of one company, but the ongoing transformation of the American media landscape. In understanding Gannett, we gain valuable insights into the enduring power and purpose of journalism, the business realities of news, and the critical role media plays in informing, connecting, and empowering communities across America and beyond.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Origins of Gannett: Frank Gannett's Vision

Every sprawling enterprise has a beginning, often a humble one, rooted in the ambition and foresight of a single individual. For Gannett Co., Inc., that individual was Frank Gannett, a man whose early life provided little indication of the media empire he would eventually forge. Born in Bristol, New York, on September 15, 1876, Frank Ernest Gannett was one of four children raised by Charles and Maria Gannett. His parents, initially farmers and later hotel owners, faced the common struggles of making ends meet in rural upstate New York.

Gannett's interest in the news business began at an early age, fueled by a paper route delivering the *Democrat and Chronicle*. This early job instilled in him a sense of independence and provided the means to purchase his own clothes and enjoy a bit of pocket money. After graduating from Bolivar High School in 1893, Gannett took a year off to save money for further education, a testament to his determination.

His diligence paid off when he earned a scholarship to Cornell University, where he enrolled in 1894. While Cornell did not have a dedicated journalism school at the time, Gannett pieced together a practical education, taking courses in literature, history, civil and criminal law, government, Greek, and Latin. He was a true self-starter, balancing five jobs to support himself through his studies, including working on the university newspaper and serving as a campus correspondent for the *Ithaca Journal* and the *Syracuse Herald*.

Upon graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1898, Gannett's career path took an unexpected turn. After a brief stint with the *Syracuse Herald*, he returned to Cornell, not to pursue a master's degree as initially planned, but to respond to an overwhelming demand for his news dispatches about the university. His entrepreneurial spirit was already evident as he became so engrossed in this venture that he never formally registered for graduate courses that fall.

In 1899, a unique opportunity presented itself: Gannett was offered a secretarial position with William McKinley's Commission to the Philippines. He spent a year in Manila, gaining invaluable exposure to foreign politics and culture, a far cry from the small-town newspapers that would soon become his focus. Upon his return to the United States, Gannett accepted a position as city editor for the *Ithaca News* and briefly served as editor of the *Pittsburg Index* in 1905.

The pivotal moment arrived in 1906 when Frank Gannett, at the age of 30, invested in

and became a half-owner of the *Elmira Gazette* in Elmira, New York. This initial purchase, reportedly acquired for a surprisingly modest sum, laid the cornerstone for what would become Gannett Company, Inc. The *Elmira Gazette*, originally established in 1828 as a weekly, had become an evening daily by 1856.

Within a year of acquiring the *Elmira Gazette*, Gannett merged it with its competitor, the *Elmira Star*, to form the *Star-Gazette*. This strategic move of eliminating competition by merging existing publications became a hallmark of Gannett's early business model. He recognized that by consolidating newspapers in a given city, he could create a more profitable enterprise, often with a near-monopoly on local news and advertising.

Gannett's approach was characterized by a distinct philosophy: grant editorial autonomy to local papers while centralizing and standardizing business operations and purchases. He held strong personal views, disliking sensationalism and even prohibiting liquor advertisements in his papers. This combination of local editorial control and centralized business efficiency would prove to be a powerful engine for growth.

In 1912, six years after his initial Elmira venture, Gannett further expanded his nascent empire by purchasing the *Ithaca Journal*. He continued to consolidate, merging the *Ithaca Journal* with the *Ithaca News* in 1919. The groundwork was being laid for a significant expansion.

By 1918, Gannett and his partners, including Erwin Davenport, shifted their headquarters to Rochester, New York, a city that would become central to Gannett's operations. They set their sights on acquiring the *Union and Advertiser* and the *Evening Times*, two of Rochester's three evening newspapers, which were embroiled in a fierce "politico-journalistic dog fight." The acquisition required a substantial \$250,000 in cash, a sum that Gannett and his partner successfully raised through a combination of friends and bank loans. Once acquired, these papers were merged to form the *Rochester Times-Union*.

The formal establishment of Gannett Company, Inc. occurred in 1923, after Frank Gannett bought out his partners. This pivotal moment solidified his ownership of six newspapers across five upstate New York cities. Gannett's vision was clear: to build a robust chain of newspapers, strategically acquiring and merging existing publications to ensure their financial viability and maximize profitability. This model, focusing on advertising revenue, circulation growth, and rigorous cost control, became the blueprint for his burgeoning media conglomerate.

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