
This article examines the contemporary historical context of the 1790 copyright law in relation to whether its provision for retrospective registration of works already printed before 1790 could form a precedent for the kind of retrospective term extension allowed by the 1998 Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act. The article concludes that historical circumstances of 1787-90 were so fundamentally different, that the 1790 law provides little guidance for the modern notion of retrospective extension. Further, the article examines all copyrights registered 17901-1800 to find that only a very small percentage of works (less than .058 percent) constituted retrospective registrations.