

004 ALBURTIS, JOHN

Printer, Publisher, Bookseller

Martinsburg, Shepherdstown

Founder of the *Martinsburg Gazette* in 1799 and its proprietor until late 1822; previously journeyman in the Martinsburg office of Nathaniel Willis (449).

Alburtis conducted the primary printing concern in Martinsburg for nearly a quarter of a century. Although born in Baltimore, Alburtis came to Berkeley County to apprentice in the office of Nathaniel Willis, the town's first journalist, who represented a connection to the extensive printer-network of the Green family. But the two parted company acrimoniously during the political conflicts attending the Alien & Sedition Acts and their exercise. At that time, the young printer was enticed by local Federalists to leave the employ of his openly Jeffersonian master after they had failed to physically coerce Willis into altering his journal's outlook. With their considerable financial backing, Alburtis began issuing a fiercely-partisan alternative to the existing *Potomac Guardian*. His new office and journal drove Willis into financial collapse, so forcing his relocation to Ohio in 1800.

This episode left Alburtis as Martinsburg's principal printer and sole newspaper publisher for the next two decades. His journal reflected the commercial character of his community, and served its mercantile needs faithfully throughout his proprietorship. From all accounts, excepting those of Willis, Alburtis was beneficent and humble, always recognizing the gifts bestowed on him in his youth and repaying those favors generously as an adult, perhaps out of remorse for the events of 1799. John S. Gallaher (177) – the most eminent of his former apprentices, who went on to a long career in publishing and politics himself – said that his old master was "the most even-tempered gentlemen I ever knew" and that he never forgot Alburtis's contributions to his later success.

At the end of 1822, he sold his entire operation to Washington Evans and retired to nearby Shepherdstown. But he returned to journalism in that Potomac River port in 1824, following the demise of the *Virginia Monitor* of Edward Bell (029) the preceding summer. By April 1827, Alburtis had decided to move his new *Shepherdstown Journal* (the *Shepherdstown Gazette* previously) to Martinsburg as the *Farmers' Museum* in order to draw a larger circulation; but before he could complete the transition, he died unexpectedly, although it came after a long illness that may have been behind his 1822 retirement.

Washington Evans, who had bought the *Martinsburg Gazette* from Alburtis, reported that he "was much the oldest Printer and Publisher of a Newspaper in this Valley" at the time of his death. Just forty-eight, he was survived by a second wife and six minor children; his first wife (name unknown) died before his 1809 marriage to fifteen-year-old Nancy Van Meter, daughter of a prominent Federalist family of the northern Valley. The only child of that first marriage was born in 1807 (and died in 1812), suggesting that her mother died in childbirth or shortly thereafter, so compelling a prompt remarriage for Alburtis to provide care for an infant daughter. All but one of the children of his second marriage survived into adulthood; his wife Nancy died in 1852, at age fifty-eight.

Alburtis was followed into the newspaper business by his eldest son William. In 1832, the

twenty-one-year-old scion began the *Virginia Republican* as an alternative to his father's old *Martinsburg Gazette*, now in the hands of Edmund P. Hunter, that paper's third proprietor.

Personal Data

Born: May 14 1779 Baltimore, Maryland
Married: c. Feb. 1809 Martinsburg, Berkeley County, VA/WV
Died: May 6 1827 Martinsburg, Berkeley County, VA/WV
Children: William (b. 1811), Ann (b. 1814), Ephraim (b. 1817), Samuel (b. 1820), Ezra (b. 1823), Jeremiah (b. 1825); two died in infancy.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; *Aler's Martinsburg*; Cartmell, *Shenandoah Pioneers*; obituary in *Martinsburg Gazette*, 10 May 1827.