

024 BARTGIS, MATTHIAS – [MATTHIAS ECHTERNACH BARTGIS, SR.]

Printer & Publisher

Winchester, Staunton

Newspaper publisher, job-printer, paper-mill owner, and post-stage operator based out of Frederick, Maryland, who issued weekly papers in partnerships with resident proprietors in Winchester and Staunton between 1787 and 1809.

Matthias Bartgis was an early-Republic era entrepreneur, establishing newspapers along the stretch of the Great Appalachian Valley from York, Pennsylvania, to Staunton, Virginia, and then launching businesses to support those dispersed presses. A first-generation German-American, a son of immigrants from the Palatinate, his journals served German and English constituencies alike. Bartgis trained in the Philadelphia office of William Bradford, leaving his master just as the Revolution dawned in 1776. Thus he was also a member of the fugitive printing trade that settled in Lancaster, his home county, when that city's press operators fled in advance of Philadelphia's occupation by British forces in September 1777.

Bartgis's initial appearance as an independent publisher came in 1785 when he issued the first weekly produced in Frederick, Maryland (then Frederick-town), the German-language *Marylandische Zeitung*. This was the first in a series of journals that he issued there through 1821. Within a year, Bartgis commenced publishing an English-language counterpart to the *Zeitung* in Frederick, his *Maryland Chronicle*; later commonly known as *Bartgis's Gazette*, this newspaper was one that long survived him.

The immediate success of both journals led to an expansion of his business to the east and west in 1787. That July, in concert with Henry Willcocks (444), he began the first newspaper in Winchester: *The Virginia Gazette, and Winchester Advertiser*. Then in October, he opened the first post-war newspaper in York, Pennsylvania, *The Pennsylvania Chronicle*, purportedly with one Thomas Roberts, an office for which Willcocks also built the press. Between the three locales, Bartgis wove an advertising and correspondence network stretching for more than 100 miles along the Great Wagon Road west from Philadelphia.

In both undertakings, Bartgis financed another tradesman to work at that distant locale as their resident proprietor, while he remained in Frederick, making infrequent trips to those places. And in both cases, it appears that he chose to align with a printer that he knew from Lancaster County or Philadelphia, with each sharing in the proceeds. Yet both of these new papers saw abrupt changes in their circumstances after just six months in print, ones where Bartgis apparently asserted precedence over his supposedly equally-invested partners. The journal that he started in York actually ceased publication in early 1788, when his partner, printer Stewart Herbert (1754-95) of Lancaster County, filed a lawsuit charging that Bartgis had defrauded him by altering their partnership papers and then using those documents to commandeer both their press and their paper for his individual benefit.

Such a bitter parting may have been the case with that of Bartgis and Willcocks as well; their alliance ceased with their Winchester *Gazette's* issue for January 4, 1788, seemingly at end of a conventional six-month agreement between the two; yet Willcocks immediately joined with the former Baltimore publisher Richard Bowen (045) to publish a second paper in that

market-town – *The Virginia Centinel or Winchester Mercury* – thereby engaging in close competition with Bartgis; then after six months with Bowen, Willcocks relocated to York to start yet another paper with brothers James and John Edie, one that effectively prevented Bartgis from restarting his antecedent weekly there.

The establishment of a second weekly in Winchester in April 1788 has generally been seen as evidence of the cultural divisions between German-speakers and English-speakers in this part of the Great Appalachian Valley. Bartgis was a German-speaker from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, while Bowen and Willcocks were both native English-speakers. Bartgis's paper addressed issues of concern to ethnic Germans in the area, while his rivals' became the favored advertising vehicle for the English-speaking merchants who dominated the carrying and forwarding trade on the Great Wagon Road that region. Thus Bartgis was torn as to whether he should devote his energies to serving the German communities of the northern Shenandoah Valley neglected by Bowen and Willcocks, or to challenge his new competitors for the advertising custom of the neighborhood's English merchants. His solution to this conundrum was to try to do both at the same time.

Bartgis was fortunate in finding a potential partner that could bring a nationalist identity to his journal, rather than the parochial one it manifested, at just the moment that tensions with Willcocks grew in late 1787. At that time, Nathaniel Willis (449) of Boston was seeking suitable employment in the "unsettled West" of the southern interior after running afoul of official sanctions in Massachusetts that attended Shay's Rebellion and its suppression; well-known as the youngest participant in the Boston Tea Party in 1773, Willis had developed a reputation as a radical journalist during the Revolutionary War, and was a thorn in the side of the state's socioeconomic elite thereafter; in July 1787, he disposed of his half-interest in Boston's semi-weekly *American Herald* rather than submit to a new tax on its paid content and left his hometown to find a situation away from the authoritarian constraints of New England. In view of that history, the pairing of Willis and Bartgis, while clearly one of mutual convenience, was a strange one politically, with the ethnic-German conservatism of Bartgis diverging from the "enlightened" progressivism of Willis.

Once Willis was in place, Bartgis turned to the problem of issuing a German-language paper from their Winchester press. The first paper issued from his Frederick press in October 1785 had been the German-language *Marylandische Zeitung*, followed three months later by the English-language *Maryland Chronicle*; each was an independent entity, though printed on the same press. It appears that such was the course that Bartgis now charted in Virginia, as it took him more than eighteen months to organize his new *Virginische Zeitung*. That journal apparently first appeared in June 1789, after a prolonged search for compositors capable of working in both languages; George Trisler (419), yet another Lancaster County printer, was that trained hand. Still, it is unclear whether the *Zeitung* was simply a German-language edition of the *Gazette*, or an entirely distinct publication, as no copies of that weekly have survived. But it is clear that using the *Gazette* office's limited resources to produce a second paper for a shrinking audience created tension between the Willis and Bartgis.

The well-versed Willis came to recognize that Bartgis's *Gazette* was not a viable venture in the face of the ongoing and strengthening challenge of Bowen's *Centinel*. So like Willcocks

before him, Willis left his partnership with Bartgis when their initial contract expired at the end of 1789, and set out to start publishing a third paper there. Accordingly, the first number of *Willis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* issued on March 20, 1790, just ten weeks after his parting from Bartgis. That event caused Bartgis to alter the title of his weekly to *Bartgis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* so as to avoid the confusion between the two; it also put Trisler in charge of his Winchester office.

Bartgis's *Gazette* survived Willis' departure by 22 months. During that time, the journal's recorded publisher was the firm of M. & C.B. Bartgis. The names suggest that he brought in either a son or nephew as a partner in his Virginia business; however, his only relatives with those initials were his mother and daughter, each named Catherine. From the timing of this association, it seems most likely that Bartgis now made his mother his absentee partner as a means of financially supporting her as his tavern-keeper father slowly succumbed to illness back in Lancaster. Michael Bartgis died in 1791, shortly before the publisher finally closed his four-year-old *Gazette* in Winchester. Unfortunately, he also created a determined foe in Trisler, who was temporarily driven from the print trade by the closing of that press.

As 1792 dawned, the business he had started just five years earlier had become a complex mix of journals and ancillary enterprises; he had built and opened a paper mill outside of Frederick to ease his paper supply problems, and he had started a stage-coach company that would contract to carry the mails as well as his papers. So, in the face of determined journalistic competition, a retrenchment seems to have been in order.

Yet Bartgis remained interested in expanding the reach of his journalistic empire. While several biographies of the man report that he was a devoted Republican, Bartgis appears to have been something of a political chameleon before the War of 1812. In November 1798, at the height of the Alien & Sedition Acts controversy, he formed a partnership with Wyllys Silliman (541), a young Federalist lawyer from Connecticut, to publish the first newspaper issued in Leesburg: *The True American*. Silliman remained a part of the Federalist organ until after the 1800 election was settled, but Bartgis withdrew from the project well before that pivotal event, perhaps as early as May 1799, when an initial six-month contract between the two would have expired; such a course would certainly have been consistent with his past experience with Willcocks and Hebert. His place was filled by Patrick McIntyre (289), a native son of Loudoun County who had been trained as a printer by Bartgis; he continued that weekly until at least the spring of 1801.

Bartgis did not return to publishing in Virginia until 1806; rather his journalistic focus now returned to Frederick and his *Maryland Gazette*, adding a new German-language edition to that paper, the *General Staats-Bothe*, in 1793. And when he did finally reappear, he was a silent partner in the Winchester firm of Bartgis & Lingan; he now bankrolled his fifteen-year-old son, Matthias E. Bartgis (025), in publishing *The Philanthropist* with printer Joseph A. Lingan (266), who like McIntyre may have had a prior relationship with the elder Bartgis; the tradesmen continued together until early 1807, when the father supplanted his adolescent scion as Lingan's partner, and continued as such until March 1809. *The Philanthropist* then suspended for three months, as Lingan's accounts with Bartgis were settled, before the printer issued a new paper alone under a new title of the *Democratic Lamp or Winchester*

Aurora. The dissolution of this partnership brought an end to the elder Bartgis's activities in Virginia settings.

Despite his lengthy presence in the Valley, Bartgis did not publish anything there other than his newspapers. Rather his press offices were job-printing shops and distribution points for the many imprints produced at his Frederick headquarters; central among them were the almanacs he produced annually in both German and English. This all suggests that such ancillary functions were vital motivations in starting those offices; they were not simply newspaper operations, they were part of an organic whole.

Even as the now fifty-four-year-old Bartgis withdrew from Winchester, he did not retire, as so many tradesmen his age did; he remained an active presence in Frederick until 1821. In August of that year, he finally gave in to age and retired to his farm outside Frederick; he died there on April, 6, 1825, at the age of sixty-nine. Published obituaries noted his devotion to the country, having ably weathered "the political storms which agitated our country" by steering a middle course. Exemplifying such a moderate hand are the titles he employed for his flagship journal in Frederick over the years: before the 1800 election, the newspaper was styled *Bartgis's Federal Gazette*, afterward, it was titled *Bartgis's Republican Gazette*, and so remained until 1821.

Personal Data

Born:	---	1756	Lancaster, Pennsylvania.
Married [1]:	?	1786	Susanna Shriener @ Lancaster, Pennsylvania.
Married [2]:	April	1811	Unnamed @ Frederick, Maryland.
Died:	April 6	1825	Pleasantdale, Frederick County, Maryland.
Children:	Anna; Margaret; Polly; Mathias E. Jr. (b. 1791); Benjamin Franklin (b. 1793).		

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Wust, "Matthias Bartgis"; Dolmetsch, *German Press of Valley*; Prowell *York County*; Scharf, *Western Maryland*; Thomas, *History of Printing*; genealogical data from Bartgis family charts posted on USGenWeb (august 2012).