

032 BERKSHIRE, RALPH, COL.

Publisher

Morgantown

Publisher of *The Monongalia Spectator* (1815-19) at Morgantown, as a partner to William McGranahan (288) and Nicholas B. Madera (276).

Ralph Berkshire was one of Morgantown's earliest business and civic leaders. He had arrived in this small town in about 1800 from Bedford County, Pennsylvania, opening a mercantile establishment, evidently a dry-goods store, and investing in the town's pottery factory. He quickly became a respected presence, which brought him an appointment as a justice on the county court (1803-11). This was the first of several public posts that he held over the next thirty years, including flour inspector (1806), overseer of the poor (1816), commanding colonel of Morgantown's militia regiment (1820-34), county sheriff (1825-27), and county assessor (1831-33), as well as serving four terms as a delegate to the state's annual General Assembly (1809, 1816, 1822, 1824). Berkshire also served as a trustee of the town's public school, the Monongalia Academy (1814-34), master of the local Masonic Lodge (1812-19), and as a trustee in the building of the town's Union Church (1819). His success in Virginia drew the rest of his Pennsylvania family to Monongalia County between 1806 and 1817, including his father, John Adamson Berkshire, and brothers William and Cornelius.

By the summer of 1815, Berkshire had come to believe that, if Morgantown was to thrive in the future, it needed a county newspaper. A previous attempt, *The Monongalia Gazette*, had struggled through a six-year existence before closing in September 1810. It had faced the dominance of Pittsburgh's papers, published just 70 miles to the north and carried by the mail stage that passed through the neighborhood. Only a local mercantile journal could break the town's dependence on those distant advertisers to promote its various businesses and services. So he joined with Nicholas Bierly Madera, a builder and tavern-keeper serving as a trustee of the town corporation, to bring a new weekly advertiser to Morgantown. Their search for a practical printer to produce such a paper for them put them in contact with a Scots-Irish immigrant working in Philadelphia as a journeyman, William McGranahan. He agreed to come to Morgantown to operate an office financed by the two businessmen; the firm that they formed was "Wm. McGranahan & Co." But no one in town could have thought that the printer was the central figure in this arrangement; the "Co." ruled here, and the press was set up in a shop adjacent to Berkshire's store. The trio's new *Monongalia Spectator* began publication that September.

The *Spectator* apparently fared no better than had the preceding *Gazette*. The scarcity of specie in rural America was always the bane of a newspaper's existence in these years, and Morgantown's early papers were no exception. After two years of effort, looking for a way to enhance its revenues with new paying customers. Madera and Berkshire asked James Pindall, the county's new Federalist representative in Congress, for help; he now began to lobby the U.S Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, to assign to their *Spectator* one of Virginia's three licenses to print the laws passed by Congress in the designated newspaper's pages – at the established rate for advertising. Any journal receiving such a contract received a substantial subsidy for its publication. Madera and Berkshire wanted it for their

paper and Pindall was the means to that end. They were no doubt happy when Adams awarded their *Spectator* such a plum in late 1818.

Prospects for a long continuation of their weekly journal now seemed assured. The federal subsidy restored the firm's fiscal stability, just as job-printing apparently began to increase. But in spring 1819, the two merchants had a falling out with their printer. Local legend has it that Madera found McGranahan passed out, dead drunk, under their press on a day when he was supposed to be printing their paper; the natives terminated their agreement with the immigrant almost immediately. Whether the story is true or not, McGranahan left Morgantown abruptly in May for Clarksburg, where he started a new journal that August, the ironically-titled *Independent Virginian*. Berkshire and Madera soon found that the split had doomed the *Spectator*. After he left town, the printer wrote to Adams informing him of the firm's dissolution, of his relocation, and of his readiness to continue serving Congress; Adams evidently assented to his plan, as when the next session of Congress met, its laws were published in Clarksburg, not in Morgantown; it was McGranahan that held the license to publish the laws, as the titular head of the company, not Berkshire or Madera. However, the two men did not go down without a fight; they enlisted John G. Jackson, the U.S. District Court judge in Clarksburg (and Pindall's predecessor in Congress) to dispute McGranahan's continuation as law publisher in Virginia's western reaches; Jackson relied on character assassination in his letter, openly attacking the printer's virtue, suggesting that the legend is true; but Jackson's tardy appeal fell on deaf ears, as later events show. Without a printer, and with the major economic crisis of 1819 setting in, Berkshire and Madera faced a *fait accompli* – their *Spectator* was dead.

It took more than a year for a new advertiser to arise in Morgantown, but Berkshire was not a part of that venture. He now turned to other pursuits, as militia colonel, as sheriff, and as assessor. Still, as he reached his fifties, he began looking for new opportunities beyond this Monongahela Valley town. In 1834, Berkshire moved his family to Henry County, Indiana; there he was elected to the state legislature and served as a probate judge, continuing his long record of public service. He died in New Castle, Indiana, in 1854, and was mourned as a political exemplar, not as a failed publisher.

Yet he left a noteworthy legacy in Morgantown. His brother William's son was named after him: Ralph L. Berkshire. A Unionist in 1861, he was among the first to advocate splitting off West Virginia from the secessionist east; he then sat on the new state's Supreme Court.

Personal Data

Born: --- 1781 Bedford County, Pennsylvania
Married: Feb. 7 1803 Sarah Kyger @ Morgantown, Virginia (WV)
Died: --- 1854 New Castle, Henry County, Indiana
Children: At least one daughter (unnamed), who married William G. Henry;
 both removed to Indiana with her parents in 1834.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; Callahan, *Morgantown*; Wiley, *Monongalia County*; Hazzard's *Henry County*; Papers of Dept. of Sec. of State (National Archive RG 59.2); genealogical data from Berkshire family charts posted on Ancestry.com (August 2012).

