

045 BOWEN, RICHARD**Printer & Publisher****Winchester, Staunton**

Printer and first publisher (1788-1808) of the *Virginia Centinel* – later known as *Winchester Gazette*; also proprietor of the *Staunton Gazette* (1790) with Matthias Bartgis (024).

Bowen was an English immigrant, purportedly once a schoolmaster. One memorialist wrote that he was a "fine-looking gentleman about six feet in height, dressed in short breeches, blue stockings and knee and shoe buckles." Such a conservative nature was not indicated by Bowen's first venture into journalism, however. In conjunction with one Maurice Murphy, he issued the first daily paper produced in Baltimore: the *Palladium of Freedom* in August 1787. Their effort was obviously short-lived; very few copies survive, all from that month. According to William Goddard, the eminent Maryland printer, their paper was "continued a few weeks ... [then the] Publishers abdicated under Cover of Night." Some accounts have Bowen then working in Alexandria as a journeyman, but evidence of that is wanting.

What is known is that Bowen reappeared in Winchester in April 1788, issuing *The Virginia Centinel or The Winchester Mercury* as the firm of Richard Bowen & Co. His "& Co." was the Pennsylvania-trained printer Henry Willcocks (444). Willcocks had arrived in Winchester the summer before as the resident proprietor for Matthias Bartgis, the Frederick, Maryland, publishing entrepreneur, in his *Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser*. His arrangement with Bartgis expired in January 1788, though it appears that Willcocks continued in Bartgis's office on Winchester until March. That was the moment that Bowen arrived and joined Willcocks to issue his new journal, challenging Bartgis's year-old weekly; he even lived with Bowen, according to that year's titheable list. But in December 1788, Willcocks left Bowen to his own devices, relocating to York, Pennsylvania, to produce yet another journal in competition with Bartgis there, *The Pennsylvania Herald*. His defection did not seriously effect Bowen's *Centinel*, or so it seems; indeed, Bartgis's *Gazette* expired three years later as a result, in part, of Bowen's willingness to provide for the increased pace of commerce there. In 1790, he increased the rate of his publication from weekly to thrice-weekly; within a year Bartgis had retired to his base in Hagerstown. Bowen's journal proved to be more attuned to mercantile community in Winchester and so prospered. That also meant that his paper became a Federalist organ, reflecting the political sensibilities of his patrons, unlike the Jeffersonian bent of Bartgis.

Remarkably, in the midst of this competition, Bartgis and Bowen combined in 1790 to offer a new weekly in the Valley, *The Staunton Gazette, or, Weekly Western Star*, that town's first newspaper. But their journal was actually produced in Winchester and was packed with advertising from northern valley merchants and not from mid-valley ones. After three months of frustrating effort, the firm of Bartgis & Bowen dissolved and the paper died.

In summer 1800, when the Jeffersonian ascendancy was all but complete, Bowen proposed another newspaper, a daily Federalist journal in Washington to be called *The City Register*. He assured his Winchester subscribers that his original paper would continue apace "with the aid of assistants." But his plan ran afoul of another ambitious printer, Charles Cist of Philadelphia. That July, Cist published a prospectus issue of his planned *Washington City*

Gazette, targeting the first of October for its commencement. The two efforts apparently cancelled each other out, especially in light of the relocation of the *Virginia Federalist* of William Alexander Rind (359) from its Richmond cradle to a Georgetown nest that August, so becoming the *Washington Federalist*. Hence, neither proposed journal ever issued.

Bowen did not again attempt newspapers elsewhere, apparently happy to serve Frederick County as a book and job printer, producing a popular annual almanac, as well as the area's journalistic voice. His situation in Winchester remained profitable, despite ever growing competition in nearby Martinsburg, Hagerstown, and Charlestown. This was the state of his business when he finally died in June 1808. His journal was produced by his shop foreman, William Heiskell, for the next six months, for the equal benefit of himself and Bowen's sole heir. In January 1809, Heiskell bought the office and its paper outright from Bowen's estate, drawing on the fiscal resources of his large mercantile family. That sale apparently enriched Bowen's son, John L. Bowen, to the point where he became a land owner and speculator, and so declined the profession that had made his father's fortune.

Personal Data

Born: --- --- England
Married: --- --- Anonymous wife died in 1807 @ Winchester
Died: June 1 1808 Winchester, Frederick County, Virginia
Children: One son, John L. Bowen.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Morton, *Winchester*; Russell, *Winchester*; advertisements in *Winchester Centinel*, 1788-1808, and *Columbian Mirror* (Alexandria), 1800.