

058 BROWN, WILLIAM

Printer & Publisher

Martinsburg, Charlestown

Publisher at Martinsburg of the *Republican Atlas* (1800-01) with Armstrong Charlton (088), and at Charlestown, the *Patriot* (1803-04), the *Farmers' Register* (1804+), and the *Farmers' Repository* (1808-09) with Richard Williams (447); also brother of Matthew Brown (057).

William Brown was a practical printer of Federalist proclivities who conducted much of his journalistic life in Jeffersonian situations. He was evidently trained in Philadelphia, like his brother Matthew, Baltimore's zealous Federalist editor, suggesting both were originally from that area. But unlike Matthew, William did not find a similar platform until 1809.

William's first independent opportunity arose in 1800 in Martinsburg; there he joined with Armstrong Charlton in publishing the Jeffersonian-oriented *Republican Atlas*. Charlton has acquired the *Potomac Guardian* there from its founder Nathaniel Willis (449); Willis had decided to leave Martinsburg following assaults on his person and property by local Federalists, and sold his paper to someone who was in "every way qualified for the arduous undertaking." Charlton had apparently witnessed the beating that Willis took in his press office in March 1799 and was not intimidated by the prospect; however, the loss of subscribers and advertising to the newly-founded Federalist journal of John Alburdis (004) quickly put Charlton in financial difficulty. In April 1800, he confronted his opponents by renaming his paper the *Republican Atlas*. Yet at the same time, he took on William Brown as a partner; however the arrangement was likely doomed from the start by the partners' conflicting political views. Sometime that summer, Charlton sold his interest to Brown and departed Martinsburg, never to return. Brown's subsequent attempt to turn the paper into a Federalist one was stymied by the presence of the new Alburdis journal; he removed to nearby Charlestown in early 1802 after closing the *Atlas* in November 1801.

That ending may also have been dictated by the division of Berkeley County in 1801, when Jefferson County was carved out of the eastern third of Berkeley. Thus, the closing of the Martinsburg paper seems to anticipate the need for a new journal-of-record in the new county, and Brown took his press to the new county seat at Charlestown. Over the next three years Brown made two attempts at providing a journal for Jefferson County, but both attempts were extremely short-lived, indicating their problematic nature. First came the *Charlestown Patriot* in 1803; while no copies of that paper have survived, contemporaneous references in other papers indicate its life extended from March 1803 through November 1804. The next effort came in late 1804 with the *Farmers' Register*; the sole surviving number of this paper has been lost after it was catalogued in 1939, leaving further details unknowable; but its production location readily indicates Brown's participation.

These setbacks were most likely the result of the dominant regional paper at Martinsburg, Alburdis's *Berkeley Intelligencer*. They may also have been the result of Brown's Federalist sensibilities, as the journal that finally did set down roots in Charlestown had Jeffersonian credentials. In the winter of 1807-08, Ferdinando Fairfax, the county's most prominent Democratic-Republican leader, solicited subscriptions for a weekly paper that he would edit. By April 1808, his list had been sold to Richard Williams, also a Jeffersonian editor; Williams

formed a partnership with Brown to produce the *Farmers' Repository* at Charlestown. This paper, unlike its predecessors, was an immediate success, issuing from April 1808 until late in 1827 when it merged with the *Virginia Free Press* of Harper's Ferry.

Brown, however, remained in Charlestown only for the *Repository's* first year. He withdrew from the venture at the end of March 1809 and moved to nearby Hagerstown, Maryland. There he began an avowedly Federalist journal in May 1809: *The Hagers-Town Gazette*. Clearly, his plan was to take on both Williams in Charlestown and Matthias Bartgis (O24), who published two Jeffersonian papers in Frederick, Maryland: the *Republican Gazette* and *The Hornet*. He probably had support from his brother; Matthew Brown had retired from the Baltimore *Federal Gazette* at the start of 1807 to follow other business prospects. After engaging in real-estate speculation in Baltimore, Matthew moved to Hagerstown to start a fleece manufactory in 1809 – just as William arrived there to publish his newspaper.

The Hagers-Town Gazette issued for almost five years before its demise. Brown ended his connection to it in December 1813, moving on to Cumberland, Maryland, to undertake his next project. But he was ruined financially by that time. He sold the paper to one William McPherrin, who had to close the paper shortly thereafter and liquidate the press office to settle the *Gazette's* outstanding debts; obviously, Brown's Hagerstown days were fraught with fiscal uncertainty. They were also filled with controversy, especially at the outset; his Federalist editorial perspective – perhaps sharpened by his brother's presence – found little sympathy there. A competitor noted that:

"Billy Brown is certainly a poor thing. He neither knows how to write, spell, print, or talk. Although a friend of order, good government, and religion, it appears from his last paper that he does not look at his catechism even on the Sabbath."

In September 1809, Brown was physically attacked on a Hagerstown street for what he had recently published; the Jeffersonian *Frederick-Town Herald* chided his behavior the next day, asking: "Halloo, Billy! how do you feel after the caning you got last evening!!"

Undaunted, Brown began his fifth and final newspaper– the *Cumberland Gazette* – in 1814, once again a Federalist weekly in competition with a Jeffersonian one. The only surviving copy of this journal indicates that Brown started the paper in January that year and closed it sometime that summer. He never again published a newspaper, though Brown may have returned to job printing in the northern Shenandoah Valley. The last notice of him comes in a matrimonial announcement for his daughter, Sarah, in September 1830; Brown was dead by then, but she continued in the family trade, by marrying one "John W. Hollis, printer" in Winchester – as Richard Williams' successor dutifully noted.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham, Norona & Shetler; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Scharf, *Western Maryland*; advertisements in *Hagerstown Gazette* (1809-13) .