

067 BUTLER, GIDEON

Publisher

Clarksburg

Publisher of the *Western Virginian* (1815-17) in Clarksburg with Alexander G. McRae (300) and then the *Republican Compiler* (1818-20) on his own.

The only clear trace of Butler is found in the bibliographic record, though there are a few mentions of him in contemporaneous journals. He first appears in November 1815 when publication to Clarksburg's *Western Virginian* began. This paper issued after the demise of the five-year-old *Bye Stander* of the brothers Forbes (053) and Alexander (052) Britton. They had closed their paper, Clarksburg's first, earlier that year in the face of overwhelming debts and declining revenues, as well as its association with the local Federalist faction headed by James Pindall, brother-in-law to Forbes Britton.

The *Western Virginian* made its appearance within weeks, probably that November. The rapid succession suggests that McRae & Butler were local figures who secured the use of the Brittons' press, probably through a lease, and began publishing their version of Harrison County's journal of record. All that is known of the paper has been derived from a single surviving 1816 issue, now lost, and references to it in other journals. The new weekly was a Republican journal supporting John G. Jackson, a Clarksburg lawyer and mill-owner then representing the First District (Virginia west of the Appalachian ridge) in Congress – and a brother-in-law to Dolley Madison. Yet within a few months of the paper's launch, Jackson had declined to run for reelection in 1816; he was then more interested in an effort by the state's western counties to amend and democratize the 1776 Virginia Constitution (leading to the Staunton Convention that August) and in refitting his war-weakened business; he also recognized the effects of popular anger over the Compensation Act of 1816, which increased the pay of Congressmen. By February 1817, the drive to amend the Constitution had been blunted in the General Assembly by the eastern counties, and Jackson was about to yield his seat in Congress to Federalist James Pindall. McRae evidently decided to retire from the venture at this point, and Butler announced that the *Western Virginian* would be transformed into the *Republican Compiler* on April 1st – possibly the end date of a simple six-month agreement between the proprietors.

The transition did not go as planned, however. On the appointed date, publication of the weekly was suspended while McRae and Butler settled the firm's accounts. But the restyled *Republican Compiler* did not appear until fifteen months later in July 1818. The interruption appears to have been both financial and political. When the *Compiler* finally issued, Butler owned the press that it was printed on, indicating that he had finally bought a press of his own and so no longer depended on the old Britton press; it may be that he had bought that press while it was still part of Forbes Britton's legally-contested assets, but such a purchase would have been complicated and require funding that Butler may not have had then; it could also be that Butler lost access to the Britton press as a result of his paper's support for Jackson and so had to find another. Meanwhile, the regional network behind James Pindall now backed a new Federalist journal in Morgantown – *The Monongalia Spectator* of William McGranahan (288) – one that competed with the *Western Virginian* all through its short life.

These impediments were not relieved for more than a year, and then only after Pindall had been narrowly reelected to Congress in 1818.

The *Republican Compiler* issued for almost exactly two years (105 numbers) from about July 24, 1818 to July 28, 1820. Those dates suggest either two one-year financial agreements or a two-year one that sustained Butler's weekly. As the only surviving run of the *Compiler* is from its last six months, it is difficult to ascertain how the paper was received initially, but in 1819 Butler called into question the practices of the unchartered Saline Bank of Virginia in Clarksburg (i.e. not authorized by the democratically-elected Assembly), where Pindall was a major player. While the bank was vindicated in the end by the U.S. Supreme Court (26 U.S. 100 [1828]: *U.S. v. Saline Bank of Virginia*) via an appeal successfully argued by Pindall, the affair brought an end to his Congressional career in the 1820 elections. By then, Pindall had also brought McGranahan to Clarksburg (after the printer had a falling out with his partners in Morgantown) to publish a new Federalist paper in opposition to Butler's *Complier: The Independent Virginian*. So it seems that a combination of an expiring financial arrangement, his disapproval of an "undemocratic" bank, and competition from McGranahan compelled Butler to cease publishing the *Compiler* with the issue of July 28, 1820. Immediately, Butler advertised the sale of his press office and reported that a Republican paper was still a viable proposition in Clarksburg. So it may be that the closure of the *Compiler* was tied to Forbes Britton's forced bankruptcy that same month – an event that required the sale of all of his property and a collection of all his debts within weeks.

It is unclear whether someone bought Butler's press, but it is clear that he left Clarksburg in short order. He may have taken that press to Weston, the seat of Lewis County, just west of Clarksburg, where he was soon publishing a new weekly: *The Western Star*; that journal may even have begun its life before the end of 1820, so indicating that he kept the press. Yet, he may also have sold it to his old partner, Alexander G. McRae; in early 1822, McRae opened a new Clarksburg journal (*The Clarksburg Gazette*) suggesting he had assumed Butler's job-printing business in the interim. It may also have been that Britton retained control of his old press, even as bankruptcy consumed him in 1820, as he started a competitor to McRae's *Gazette* in 1822, called *The Rattlesnake*.

Whatever the case, Butler would soon disappear from the bibliographic and historic record. His only non-newspaper imprints were the minutes of the annual meetings of the Union Baptist Association, and his editions of that periodical end with their session in 1821. The dearth of surviving issues indicates that his *Western Star* may not have lived into 1822. That evidence seems merely incidental to the root cause of his demise as a printer-publisher – a fire claimed Butler's Weston press office in 1822.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Haymond, *Harrison County*.