

126 DAVIS, SAMUEL H. – [SAMUEL HOPKINS DAVIS]

Printer & Publisher

Alexandria, Winchester, Wheeling

Publisher of *Columbian Telescope* (1819-20) at Alexandria and, briefly, of the *Alexandria Gazette* (1819-20) with Samuel Snowden (393); then publisher of the *Winchester Republican* (1820-31); later editor of the *Wheeling Gazette* (1835-37).

Davis was a native of New Jersey who came to the printing trade only after pursuing other ventures. By 1814, the twenty-two-year-old Davis had relocated to Alexandria and was operating a cut-nail factory off King Street, near the Potomac River.

Over the next few years, Davis learned the printing trade and began conducting a small, independent job-printing office as well. By January 1819, he had developed sufficient skills to propose publishing a weekly maritime journal in partnership with Timothy Mountford Jr. (305), curator of Alexandria's Masonic Museum, though that paper never came to fruition. Rather, his first journalistic venture came in issuing a literary weekly in Alexandria that June: *The Columbian Telescope and Literary Compiler*; Davis continued the journal until May 1820, an inordinately long period for such an esoteric weekly in that time.

Yet Davis also engaged in other ventures during the ensuing year which eventually dictated a closing of the *Telescope*. The first diversion came in September 1819 when he became the titular proprietor of the long-lived *Alexandria Gazette*; Samuel Snowden, the newspaper's debt-ridden proprietor, needed to reorganize his business, so he sold the paper to Davis in order to call in the debts of a defunct business and so settle all of its accounts; Davis then sold the journal back to Snowden on the last day of 1819, reporting he had been only the "nominal proprietor" of the *Gazette* and so "merely a nominal editor" in the deal; Snowden had actually conducted the paper in those months as a Davis employee, and now he would continue his paper until his death in 1831, surviving two further crises along the way.

Shortly after Davis concluded business with Snowden, George McGlassin (287) advertised the sale of his *Winchester Republican* in both of Alexandria's daily newspapers; Davis took an immediate interest in the offer, even as he still conducted the *Telescope*. The prospect of directing an established weekly, rather than a marginal literary sheet, was clearly appealing to Davis. Moreover, the sale was apparently being pressed by McGlassin's financial backers as a result of their discontent with his handling of that ten-year-old partisan weekly. All that remained to do was to negotiate the terms and timing of the conveyance. While negotiating a purchase, Davis closed his literary weekly in mid-May 1820; by September, McGlassin had agreed to sell the *Republican* at year's end, as Davis sold his press to the new firm of Henry Pittman (327) and Daniel Thomson (413) at that time; they would resurrect the *Telescope* that November as the similarly short-lived *Alexandrian*. Immediately after the sale of his Alexandria press, Davis moved to Winchester to take control of the *Republican* in advance of the actual transfer of ownership on the last day of 1820.

Davis quickly established himself in Winchester and became a fixture there over the next decade. While his weekly *Republican* ostensibly favored the national administration in this "Era of Good Feelings," it actually became ever more of a Whig journal in his hands, and a

decidedly anti-Jackson paper once he renamed it the *Winchester Virginia Republican* in 1824. He also taught a mixed-gender school there and served on several town committees, including one charged with building a shelter for Winchester's solitary fire engine in 1825. Davis was also a ruling elder in the town's Presbyterian church.

Even as Davis had a considerable civic presence in Winchester, so too he had a similar social one. On a visit to the town in early 1830, the tart-tongued Anne Royall found him to be

"one of the best of men" there, someone of "slender figure, with a thin, fair face ... his countenance serene [which] steadily displays a constant smile."

When she went to an evening reading of student compositions at a local academy, Royall was surprised to find "the amiable and accomplished Mr. Davis" in charge of the readings, reporting that the publisher had "acquitted himself with much honor, being one of the best readers I ever heard."

Davis evidently tired of the incessant grind, however, especially after the rival *Winchester Gazette* was sold to energetic Jacksonians in 1826, who refreshed that long-lived sheet as the *Winchester Virginian*, edited by Frederick attorney James G. Bryce. In the summer of 1831, Davis sold a controlling interest in his *Republican* to James G. Brooks of New York, though retaining a minority interest until about 1834. At that time, Davis sold his remaining assets in the Shenandoah Valley – including a mortgage on the printing office of the *Sentinel of the Valley* published by his old Alexandria friend Benjamin Lewis Bogan (037) in nearby Woodstock – and moved on to Ohio County at the start of 1835 to conduct the fading *Wheeling Gazette*, once owned by Robert I. Curtis (114).

Despite his ensuing success in saving the *Gazette*, particularly while facing ever-increasing competition from Jacksonian papers in that area, Davis's proprietorship relatively short-lived. The Congressional process that led to the admission of Michigan as a state in the Union in 1837 included a restructuring of the residual parts of the Northwest and Louisiana Territories into the Wisconsin Territory in July 1836; with numerous Jacksonian papers then being issued in the areas that later became the states of Wisconsin and Iowa, Whig settlers in the territory determined to enlist an able partisan editor to conduct a new *Wisconsin Territorial Register*, and their choice for that role was Davis. He was apparently given sufficient financial guarantees in this prospective venture to permanently abandon his successful newspaper and adopted state; he sold the *Gazette* to John M. McCreary, his shop foreman, at end of April 1836 and removed to the new territorial capital of Belmont, in modern-day Iowa.

Still, that fall the Jacksonian-dominated territorial legislature declined to patronize his new paper, compelling its closure. Following that misfortune, Davis relocated to Peoria, Illinois, where he started the *Peoria Register* in March 1837. His association with that journal continued until the end of 1844; Davis was its editor and publisher until he sold the press to brothers Samuel & William Butler in 1842; thereafter, he simply edited the sheet until retiring from journalism in late 1848 after the victory of Jacksonian James Knox Polk.

Now past fifty, Davis evidently wanted to live the life of a gentleman in retirement, but he did not long enjoy that role. He died in Peoria in 1849, a victim of a cholera epidemic.

Personal Data

Born: Nov 19 1792 Bloomfield, New Jersey
Married: Oct 25 1819 Mary E.B. Browne @ Fauquier County, Virginia
Died: June 19 1849 Peoria, Illinois
Children: At least one son: James Scott (b. 1828).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Norona & Shetler; Morton, *Winchester*; Russell, *Winchester*; Woodworth, *History of the Presbyterian Church*; Cartmell, *Shenandoah Pioneers*; Mrs. Royall's *Southern Tour*, v.1; Federal Decennial Census, 1820-40; 1850 Census Mortality Schedules; genealogical data from Davis family charts posted on Ancestry.com (August 2012).