

168 FOSTER, JONATHAN

Printer & Publisher Winchester

Publisher of *Republican Constellation* (1810-19) at Winchester, initially in partnership with his son Thomas Foster (169).

Foster came from a large family of Scots-Irish immigrants who arrived in America shortly after the French & Indian War. Born outside of Philadelphia in 1766, his family apparently fled the area with the British invasion of 1777 and settled in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. There, in August 1778, the twelve-year-old Foster enlisted as a fifer in the Pennsylvania regiment of Artillery Artifices (who maintained equipment) under Col. Benjamin Flower, Commissioner of Military Stores for the Continental Army; as such he was a part of the major battles in the mid-Atlantic region through fall 1780, when he was discharged. While his family moved to Shippensburg and Roxbury after the war, Foster apparently remained in Carlisle learning the printing trade; he married there in 1788, and two of his children, at least, were born there. At that time, the only paper published in the town was that of George Kline and George Reynolds, the *Carlisle Gazette*, so that office was likely his training ground and employer.

Foster left Carlisle sometime after 1792 bound for Frederick, Maryland; that move, as well as his association with George Kline, suggests he went there to work in the press complex of Matthias Bartgis (024), that town's publishing entrepreneur. Eventually, Foster moved on, possibly as late as 1804, to Alexandria and the press offices of the capital district. There he also advertised himself as a teacher of music, commencing a three-year stint at the Water Street Academy in August 1804. But in August 1807, Foster announced his departure from Alexandria and the sale of the school. This was the moment he relocated his family to the Shenandoah Valley.

Whether Foster went to Winchester to print or to teach is unclear. A school was very much a part of his initial employments as a late-in-life memoir of a lawyer born in Winchester in 1800 recounts; he attended Foster's school there before the journalist took on the paper; and the school was still regularly advertised until 1829. But his press work is less certain before 1810. A local history reports that Foster bought a press that year which had been first owned by George Trisler (419) and then Joseph A. Lingan (266), indicating Foster was in town without a press. Given his overt Republican sensibilities and his connections to Bartgis, it appears that Foster went to Winchester to help Lingan publish *The Philanthropist*, then issued in a partnership with Bartgis's eldest son, Matthias E. Bartgis (025). Foster likely also helped produce Lingan's ensuing *Democratic Lamp*, issued when he severed ties with the Bartgis family in mid-1809. Six months after that severance, Lingan sold his press to Foster, and on January 2, 1810, Foster's new *Republican Constellation* appeared in the place of Lingan's *Democratic Lamp*. That transition made Foster's paper the most recent in a series of short-lived Jeffersonian papers issued there, and buttresses a suggestion that Foster was working his way into ownership over the preceding thirty months, even as he conducted his school; it also accounts for the local historian's lineage, even as that reporter left out the partnership of Peter Isler (235) and Joseph Harmer (201) in the press's ownership sequence; they had actually bought the press from Trisler in 1804 and then sold it to Lingan in 1805.

With such troubled and forgettable roots, the survival of the *Republican Constellation* is remarkable. The market-town had been dominated by the Federalist-oriented *Winchester Gazette* of Richard Bowen (045); but his June 1808 death altered the journalistic landscape. His successor, William Heiskell (211), was a native German-speaker who was not as adept at voicing his views as agreeably as the erudite Bowen had been. But more importantly, the growth of commerce with those trans-Appalachian areas supporting Jefferson and Madison brought people of similar views into Frederick County; now there was a viable market for a Republican paper in Winchester where there had not been one previously.

Foster's enterprise, though, was not without its problems. He was constantly faced with the challenge of publishing a journal that was continually in financial distress as a result of his cash-poor readers' failure to pay for their subscriptions with any regularity. This difficulty was relieved, in part, by patronage from the Madison administration; in May 1813, the Secretary of State, James Monroe, granted Foster one of the licenses reserved for three Virginia newspapers to print in their pages the laws enacted in each session of Congress, at the paper's established advertising rates, a plum that represented a substantial subsidy for any journal holding such a license; Foster kept his license until late in 1818.

The claim on the limited space in his journal that came with his lucrative license meant that he was obliged to delay publishing or completely disregard items that would have readily found a place previously. In February 1814, he apologized for this neglect, observing that, if those who felt aggrieved by his choices fully understood the extent of the demands on the capacity of his weekly, resulting from the torrent of war news and official notices, "they would not have uttered a solitary complaint." Still, there were complaints, as well as items for which he was never able to find space. Consequently, Foster decided shortly after offering that apology, that he needed to increase the frequency of the publication of his journal to twice-weekly in order to attune the wishes of his patrons with the dictates of his crucial commission; it was a pace that he sustained for the next two years.

That accelerated pace also meant that Foster needed to increase the size of his office and its staff. In 1816, he reported, in passing, that his office employed two journeymen and an apprentice with a clerk managing its accounts. Later that summer, Foster acquired a second press, which allowed him to produce imprints "in a style equal to any printing done in the State of Virginia"; that new tool likely required more staff to operate as well. Nevertheless, the identities of Foster's workers remain largely a mystery, despite their importance to his business. He acknowledged only two of them in print during the years that he owned the *Constellation*. One was his first "assistant" from 1814, John Revell (352), whose death he reported in 1818; the other was John Harris McKennie (293), an apprentice who absconded from his employ in October 1817. There were obviously unstated others, as tradesmen with Winchester connections and Republican perspectives went off to start their own print-trade businesses elsewhere; that list includes the Caldwell brothers, James (071) and Joseph (073), Peter Klipstine (253), and William G. Russell (369).

While recognizing his paper was vital to his economic success, evidently Foster was more interested in publishing religious texts and music books – and outfitting his office with the tools needed for such work put him into considerable debt. In two advertisements that he

published in the mid-1810s, he solicited partners in the business as a way to reduce that indebtedness, offering control of the *Constellation* as the trade-off; in both ads, he spoke of his desire to move into book publishing and away from the demands of his paper; in the later one, Foster even offered trained help to any interested party. That second notice in 1817 included a request to other Republican journalist to insert notices in their newspapers announcing his ability to publish music, having recently acquired "a complete new fount of Music Types." Of the eight imprints we know that published between 1816 and 1819, only one title was political in nature and one a historical narrative; the rest were all religious titles, with one a collection of sacred music (before 1816, he published just one pamphlet, a copy of the federal Constitution). Local histories report that he produced many more small imprints, many of them sermons. Advertising notices in his weekly also show he enlisted two partners in his bookselling efforts, initially John T. Sharrocks (376), and then James M Boyd (549).

Still, the main reason that Foster was able to stave off financial ruin again and again lay in his prized license to publish "the laws of the Union" in his paper. Unfortunately, he lost that subsidy with the second session of the 15th Congress in November 1818, so threatening him with financial ruin. So in December 1818, he began to advertise the sale or lease of his paper, so as to "enable the Editor ... to devote his attention to the settling and collecting his outstanding accounts, and to make sale of the books he has published..." He completed an outright sale of the weekly at the end of March 1819, transferring ownership to George McGlassin (287), a Philadelphia-trained printer who had recently been dismissed from his lengthy service in the U.S. Army.

The now fifty-three year-old Foster pursued other investments after early 1819, using the monies collected from his press office's outstanding debts. What they were are uncertain, but they seem to have been in the exchange and commission trades. An 1820 notice in a nearby Charlestown paper suggests that he negotiated inflexible deals, as one trader then renounced the \$100 note-of-hand he had given Foster, unhappy with his end of the bargain. Meanwhile, Foster continued his school on the corner of Loudoun and Cork streets, despite a growing unpopularity for his pedagogical approach of "threshing learning into scholars." His spirited activity came to an abrupt end in September 1829, when he collapsed and died in Charleston, South Carolina, while on a business trip there. It was an appropriate end to a peripatetic life, reminiscent of a similar passing just four years earlier, that of Mason Locke Weems (435) in nearby Beaufort.

Personal Data

Born:	Nov. 9	1766	Chester County, Pennsylvania.
Married	Nov. 26	1788	Elizabeth Greenwood @ Carlisle, Pennsylvania.
Died:	Sept. 20	1829	Near Charleston, South Carolina.
Children:	Reportedly seven children; only four names yet found are Elizabeth (b. 1789); Thomas (b. 1791); Jonathan (b. ca. 1792) and an "H." who represented the family & heirs in an 1842 newspaper notice.		

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; *Pennsylvania in War of Revolution*; *Artisans & Merchants*; Morton, *Winchester*; Russell, *Winchester*; authority file, Handley Memorial Library, Winchester; advertising notices in *Alexandria Advertiser* (1804-07), *Virginia Argus* (1816), *Charlestown Farmers' Repository* (1817-20), Frederick, Md. *Political Intelligencer* (1818); *National Intelligencer* (1819), and *Alexandria Gazette* (1842); genealogical data from Foster family charts posted on Ancestry.com (October 2012).