

201 HARMER, JOSEPH

Printer & Publisher

Winchester

Printer and publisher of the *Independent Register* (1804-05) at Winchester as partner to Peter Isler (235).

Harmer was a transient figure in the Virginia printing trade, though he evidently received his training in the Commonwealth. His father, Jacob Harmer, had served with General Daniel Morgan during the Revolution and was apparently persuaded by Morgan to relocate to Frederick County from Philadelphia in the mid-1790s; the Harmers there were descendants of early Quaker settlers, and Jacob had returned there at war's end; in Winchester, Jacob became a notable figure, designing and constructing several of the town's most admired buildings; in 1801, Jacob witnessed Morgan's will and testified at its proving in probate. Another of his sons was also an early settler of Morgantown in Harrison County.

Around 1800, Harmer was apprenticed to the printing trade, probably in the Winchester office of George Trisler (419), as his first independent publishing venture was as Trisler's successor. It also seems that Harmer met Peter Isler there, another Trisler tradesman. Their master had begun publishing his Republican-oriented weekly, the *Triumph of Liberty*, in the summer of 1799; but as the end of 1803 approached, Trisler evidently wanted out of the business; in either November or December, he closed his journal to conduct a job-printing office alone. In early 1804, he sold the business to his journeymen, Harmer and Isler, who immediately planned a resurrection of the weekly. On March 20th, the first number of their *Independent Register* issued from their office at the corner of Loudoun and Cork streets. As with the series of Jeffersonian newspapers that had preceded theirs, the *Register* was a problematic venture in this Federalist locale, hoping to draw on its Valley hinterlands for support. After a year, Isler & Harmer dissolved their partnership and closed the *Register*, recognizing its financial difficulties. Isler remained in Winchester for another year as a job printer before selling his press to Joseph A. Lingan (266), who found backing from Matthias Bartgis (024) – in the person of the publishing entrepreneur's eldest son, Matthias E. Bartgis (025) – to start Winchester's next Republican paper in 1806.

Harmer, however, left Winchester in 1805 in search of more profitable opportunities as a journeyman, possibly in Philadelphia, but more likely in Baltimore, for his next venture emerged there. In May 1807, Harmer commenced publishing a literary weekly, *Spectacles*. His new journal marked a turn away from the brutal partisanship then rife in American journalism for Harmer; he was now more interested in improving the lives of artisans like himself than he was in partaking in the intense bickering between the country's political elites; but with the intensifying divisions developing in Baltimore over Jefferson's handling of the war on the Atlantic between Britain and France, his *Spectacles* was the wrong paper at the wrong time in the wrong place; it lasted just eleven weeks.

In fairly short order, Harmer moved on to New York City, taking up work in the press-room of the influential *American Citizen*, the primary voice of the Republican faction in New York led by DeWitt Clinton. Nineteenth century histories of Winchester all report that Harmer became the editor of that newspaper, but that role was always the purview of its vociferous

owner, James Cheetham; as he later reported in 1811, Harmer was still a journeyman while at the *Citizen*, and appears to have remained so for about three years. During that time, he began to be involved in the city's budding trade-union movement, seeking to advance both tradecraft and the lives of working artisans; by 1810, Harmer was Senior Warden in a lodge of the city's Masonic tradesmen, Morton Lodge No. 50, which met at Tammany Hall. That commitment led him to publish a new non-partisan weekly in early 1811, one that would educate and advocate for New York City's artisans and mechanics. In doing so, Harmer had to make clear his severing of ties to Cheetham, noting that he did not "intend to take any political discussion, as has been falsely stated and promulgated to the injury of" him. Rather he would produce a newspaper aiming to steel workers against the "nurseries of vice and receptacles of the abandoned," meaning the city's taverns, brothels, and gambling houses; Harmer wanted to promote Christian virtues that would "improve the mind and strengthen the heart." In conjunction with another journeyman printer so motivated, one George Asbridge, he issued his first *Independent Mechanic* on April 6, 1811; their journal continued weekly until September 1812, when it was terminated as a result of Harmer's insolvency; in spring 1812, he had filed for bankruptcy and his assets had been seized for a sale to satisfy his creditors. He would try journalism again in February 1813 with *Harmer's New-York Register*, a weekly "free from all PARTY POLITICS, or personal abuse." In an attempt to widen his readership beyond the city's tradesmen and to downplay his prior moralism, Harmer reverted to the style and content of his Baltimore *Spectacles*, with similarly unhappy results; his *Register* lasted perhaps two months.

The end of Harmer's *Register* also marks the end of his trail in both the bibliographic and historic record. He is no longer seen in the accounts of the city's trade-union movement or in the pages of the public record. Despite an absence of any obituaries for him, such an abrupt disappearance suggests that Harmer died shortly after his last weekly did. Still, his two New York City journals left behind enough evidence of his thought and approach that several histories of early trade-unionism in New York feature his published words.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1784 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Died: after 1813 ---

No record yet found of a wife or offspring.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cartmell, *Shenandoah Pioneers*, Callahan, *Upper Monongahela Valley*; Rock, *New York City Artisans*; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*; Lause, *Some Degree of Power*; New York City directories, 1811-12; notices in New York City newspapers, 1811-14.