

203 HARPER, KENTON

Publisher

Shepherdstown, Staunton

Presumed publisher of the *American Eagle* (1817-19) at Shepherdstown with a partner named Maxwell (283), and its continuation, the *Potomack Register* (1819), with a partner named Robinson (361); later the well-known publisher of the *Staunton Spectator* (1823-49).

Harper was publisher of Staunton's principal newspaper for more than two decades. But his first appearance in the Virginia print trade seems to have been in Shepherdstown in 1817.

He was the son of the Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, printer and publisher George Kenton Harper (1778-1858) and was raised to the printing trade in his father's Chambersburg office. That office also produced John Nelson Snider (392), who established his first newspaper, *The American Eagle and Shepherd's-town Weekly Advertiser* in Shepherdstown in early 1816. But after a just year, Snider sold his interest in the weekly and left the town. The new owner, the firm of Maxwell & Harper, was likely an alliance between a local financier named Maxwell and Kenton Harper, though that identification is more circumstantial than proven. The *Eagle's* few surviving numbers suggest Harper traded Maxwell for a financier named Robinson as his backer in the summer of 1818; by the spring of 1819, the pair had decided to relaunch their weekly as the *Potomack Register*, doing so on April 15th, probably after a suspension of the *Eagle*; both journals were apparently opposed to Republican policies generally and the Monroe administration specifically. Still, their paper could not compete with Jefferson County's journal-of-record, the successful *Farmers' Repository* of Jeffersonian Richard Williams (447), or similarly successful papers in Martinsburg and Winchester, who also opposed the Republicans; thus the *Register* lived a short life.

Harper is unrecorded in the American printing for the following four years, suggesting that he returned to Chambersburg until a new opportunity presented itself. But it is also possible that he worked for other presses in the Valley, such as the new Lexington press of Snider or the established Staunton one of Isaac Collett (100). Indeed, an ongoing association with Collett seems likely given the smooth transfer of the ownership of that office from Collett to Harper in 1823. With Collett's office came his *Republican Farmer*, a paper started in 1808 by William G. Lyford (272), a New-Hampshire-born Federalist. Harper reinvigorated the weekly and recast it as the *Staunton Spectator*, which he then continued to publish it until at least 1848. During that time, Harper turned the *Spectator* into the primary journal of the central Shenandoah Valley, espousing a mix of Republican and Whig views. His obituaries report that he owned the paper for thirteen years (1824-1837), but some sources suggest that Harper continued to edit the newspaper only until his election to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1836, or until his later commissioning in 1846 as a Virginia militia captain in advance of his unit's service in the Mexican War; whatever the case, his connection to the *Spectator*, whether as owner or editor, had ended by war's end when he was appointed military governor of Parras in Coahuila, Mexico. At that time, the *Spectator* was sold to the Waddell brothers, one of whom was the later Augusta County historian Joseph Waddell.

Throughout his Virginia residence, Harper was also a gentlemen farmer, establishing a large estate just outside Staunton at Glen Allen. That occupation was the source of his political

legitimacy in Augusta County, where he served not only as an Assembly delegate, but as a county-court justice and as mayor of Staunton; Harper was also master of the city's Masonic lodge for many years, as well as an elder in Staunton's First Presbyterian Church. But his military service also drew him away from Virginia. When Alexander H. H. Stuart, a Staunton native, was named the Secretary of the Interior by Millard Fillmore in 1850, Harper was appointed as his assistant; he also served for a time as an Indian Agent for the Chickasaw people at Fort Washita in the Indian Territory, probably the reason for his choice as Stuart's assistant. But with the end of the Whig administrations, so too ended his Federal service; he returned to Staunton to become president of the Augusta County Savings Bank.

Despite this lengthy record, the details of Harper's life have been largely overshadowed by his military service during the Civil War. Though a Unionist during the 1860 election, he accepted a commission as Major General in the Virginia Militia that same year. So when the ordinance of secession was adopted the following spring, Harper stayed with his command. His chief contributions came in defending the Valley, particularly during the campaigns of Gen. Philip Sheridan in 1864-65. Thus it was in this military role that most of his published obituaries memorialized him when he died on Christmas Day 1867 at his Glen Allen farm. Harper's long career as a printer and publisher was barely mentioned.

Personal Data

Born: in 1801 Chambersburg, Pennsylvania
Married: Sept. 30 1824 Eleanor Calhoun @ Chambersburg, Pennsylvania.
Died: Dec. 25 1867 Glen Allen, Augusta County, Virginia
Children: Two sons, George Kenton Harper (b. 1829) and Samuel C. (1831), and
 two daughters Nancy and Mary.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler. Cappon; McCauley, *Franklin County, Penn.*; Waddell, *Annals of Augusta*; Brown, *Freemasonry in Staunton*; Wilson, *Lexington Presbytery*.