

235 ISLER, PETER

Printer & Publisher

Winchester

Printer and publisher of *Independent Register* (1804-05) at Winchester with Joseph Harmer (201); also brother-in-law of William A. Dromgoole (149), later his partner elsewhere.

Isler was a transient figure in the Virginia print trade, landing briefly to Winchester before moving on to Kentucky and then Mississippi. Yet in coming to the lower Shenandoah Valley, he established familial links that served him throughout his career in the trade.

It seems that Isler was a Pennsylvania native, probably trained in Philadelphia, possibly with William Fry, if family lore is accurate. He apparently arrived in Winchester at about the time that George Trisler (419) decided to retire from the print trade, which ended publication of his four-year-old Jeffersonian weekly, the *Triumph of Liberty*. In late 1803 or early 1804, Trisler sold his press to the partnership of Isler and Joseph Harmer, a journeyman who it seems was trained by him. At the end of March 1804, the partners issued a new weekly, the *Independent Register*, from their office at the corner of Loudoun and Cork streets. As with the Republican journals that had preceded the *Register*, their venture was a problematic one in this Federalist bastion, and so they hoped to draw on its Valley hinterlands for its support. But after just one year, Isler & Harmer dissolved their partnership and closed the *Register*, recognizing its fiscal impracticality. The dissolution may also have been triggered by Harmer's desire to find more lucrative opportunities elsewhere after completing a one-year agreement with Isler, as he quickly reappeared in Baltimore publishing another weekly. But Isler remained in Winchester for another year as a job printer, and attempted to restart the *Register* in January 1806, but without success. Isler now determined to move on as well, selling his press to Joseph A. Langan (266), who was likely his shop foreman; he eventually 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.

Isler moved on to Bardstown, Kentucky, just south of Louisville. There he began publishing a new Republican weekly, the *Candid Review*, in February 1807. He was joined there in May 1810 by his brother-in-law, William A. Dromgoole, whom had worked with Isler, and was probably trained by him, in Winchester; Dromgoole had just completed a one-year contract with Robert Engledow (158), another brother-in-law married to his older sister Margaret, in publishing the *Republican Luminary* in Wythe County; now he would join with Isler, who had married his younger sister Elizabeth, in expanding this Bardstown concern. Isler had offered Dromgoole the chance to publish a new literary magazine – *The Garden* – from his press as an alternative to his situation with Engledow. But neither of their periodicals would last very long, with Dromgoole's *Garden* closing before the end of 1810, and Isler's *Candid Review* following suit in August 1811.

The second closing was probably the result of Isler's and Dromgoole's decision to move on from Bardstown to Natchez in the Mississippi Territory. Isler bought the press of a defunct weekly there and began issuing the *Mississippi Republican* in April 1812, while Dromgoole was appointed the territory's public printer, employing Isler's press. The pair continued in business in Natchez until March 1814, when Dromgoole sold his interest. Isler soon added

new partners who conducted the *Republican* while he and Dromgoole joined the Mississippi forces that later fought in the Battle of New Orleans at the end of the War of 1812. The pair served with a friend from Bardstown, one Philip A. Gilbert; he too became a brother-in-law to Dromgoole when the printer married Gilbert's sister Sarah in 1816.

After the war, Dromgoole stayed in Louisiana, eventually becoming an owner of a sizeable cotton plantation. But Isler returned to Natchez and his *Republican*. He was appointed as Dromgoole's successor as Mississippi's public printer and held that office until his death in 1833, some seventeen years later. Yet his duties in that role induced him to retire from journalism in 1818, selling his newspaper to hands that continued it into the 1830s. In the following years, Isler's residence and press moved as the capital moved in the years after Mississippi's admission to the Union in 1817. That year, he built an impressive house in the center of Natchez that remains a historical landmark there today; but he had to vacate that home when the capital was moved to Columbia in 1821, and then on to its current setting in Jackson in 1822. Thus Isler was living and working there when his end came in August 1833. Contemporaries remembered him as a publisher of considerable ability, who labored much of his life with a "diseased physical condition," to which they attributed his death.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1775 In Pennsylvania.
Married: ca. 1809 Elizabeth G. Dromgoole @ Winchester, Virginia.
Died: Aug. 2 1833 Jackson, Mississippi.
Children: Mary Camilla (b. 1810); William Allen Dromgoole (b. 1811); Edwin Ruthven (b. 1812); George Freeman (b. 1813); Margaret Elizabeth (b. 1816); Thomas A. (b. ca. 1825); Mariah Louise (b. ca. 1826).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Kegley, *Wythe County*; Woods, *Delta Plantations*; Patridge, "Press of Mississippi" (1860); genealogical data from Isler & Dromgoole family charts posted on Ancestry.com (October 2012).