

288 McGRANAHAN, WILLIAM

Printer & Publisher

Morgantown, Clarksburg

Publisher of the *Monongalia Spectator* (1816-19) at Morgantown with Ralph Berkshire (032) and Nicholas B. Madera (276), and of the *Independent Virginian* (1819-24) at Clarksburg.

McGranahan was a son of Scots-Irish immigrants who settled in western Pennsylvania after the Revolutionary War. He was working as a journeyman printer in Philadelphia in 1815 when offered the opportunity to become a newspaper proprietor in western Virginia. The suggested venue was Morgantown, where a prior effort – *The Monongalia Gazette* – had struggled before closing in 1810. That effort was doomed by the dominance of Pittsburgh papers, published just 70 miles to the north, and carried by the mail stage that passed through the neighborhood. But after five years without a weekly paper, local merchants had come to believe that, if the Morgantown area were to grow and thrive in the future, it needed a county paper; only such a local mercantile journal could break a dependence on those distant advertising sheets to promote its various businesses and services.

McGranahan was approached by two of the town's larger merchants to undertake this new venture: Ralph Berkshire and Nicholas B. Madera. Berkshire was a dry-goods merchant and pottery manufacturer who was also a justice of the Harrison County court, while Madera was a builder and tavern-keeper who served on the town's Common Council. Their search for a printer in the summer of 1815 put them in contact with McGranahan, who agreed to come to Morgantown to operate a press office financed by the two merchants as the firm of "Wm. McGranahan & Co." But no one in town could have thought that the printer was the central figure in this arrangement; the "Co." ruled here, and the press was set up in a shop adjacent to Berkshire's store.

The trio's new *Monongalia Spectator* began publication in September 1815, emblazoned with the motto "Willing to Praise—But not afraid to Blame." But the *Spectator* apparently fared no better than had the preceding *Gazette*. The scarcity of specie in rural America was always the bane of a newspaper's existence in these years, and Morgantown's early papers were no exception. After two years of effort, Madera and Berkshire began looking for a way to enhance the *Spectator's* revenues. They had an ally in this effort: James Pindall, the county's representative in Congress. He lobbied U.S. Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, to grant one of Virginia's three licenses to publish the laws of Congress to Clarksburg's solitary paper. Any journal receiving such a license received a substantial subsidy for their publication, as those laws were printed at established rates for advertising in the designated journal. Madera and Berkshire wanted one for their paper and Pindall was the required means to that end. So they were no doubt happy when Adams awarded the *Spectator* such a plum in late 1818.

Prospects for a long continuation of their weekly journal now seemed assured. The federal subsidy restored the firm's fiscal stability, just as job-printing apparently began to increase. But in spring 1819, the merchants had a falling out with their printer. Legend reports that:

"Regularly, once a week, on the day that the paper was struck off, McGranahan called

on 'Uncle Nick' [Madera] for money to buy whiskey to thin the printing ink. For a long time it was cheerfully furnished, until one day 'Uncle Nick' concluded to visit the office, and see how things were getting on, when his righteous soul was greatly vexed within him, to find his working partner lying under the printing press dead drunk."

As a result, Madera and Berkshire terminated their partnership with McGranahan almost immediately. Whether the story is true or not, the printer did leave Morgantown abruptly in May 1819, landing in Clarksburg, some thirty-five miles up the Monongahela valley, where he started a new journal that August, the ironically-titled *Independent Virginian*.

From his new setting, McGranahan wrote to Adams informing him of the firm's dissolution, his relocation, and his readiness to continue serving Congress; Adams evidently agreed to McGranahan's plan, as when the next session of Congress met, its laws were published in Clarksburg and not in Morgantown; it was McGranahan who held the license to publish the laws, as the titular head of the company, not Madera or Berkshire, the true owners. Still, the merchants did not go down without a fight; they enlisted the help of John G. Jackson, Clarksburg's U.S. District Court judge (and Pindall's predecessor in the Congress) to dispute McGranahan's continuation as the law publisher in Virginia's western region; Jackson relied on character assassination in his letter, openly attacking the printer's virtue, suggesting that the oft-repeated legend was true; but Jackson's appeal fell on deaf ears, as the later events demonstrate. Without a practical printer, and with the major economic crisis of 1819 then setting in, Madera and Berkshire faced a *fait accompli* – their *Spectator* was dead.

Once in Clarksburg, McGranahan was more fortunate than were his old partners. His new *Independent Virginian* issued its first number on August 4, 1819, less than three full months after his dismissal in Morgantown. While McGranahan still faced competition from the *Republican Compiler* of Gideon Butler (067), that weekly was plagued by its own problems, not the least of which was its criticism of Clarksburg's unchartered Saline Bank of Virginia, one of Pindall's business interests, at about the same time that the *Virginian* launched; that critique apparently cut heavily into Butler's advertising revenues, so forcing the closure of his *Compiler* the following July. With the contemporaneous journalistic void in Morgantown, McGranahan found his paper the journal-of-record for Monongalia and Harrison counties alike, as well as the region's sole advertising outlet; when combined with his federal license, the financial stability of the *Independent Virginian* was assured.

McGranahan maintained that stability for the next five years. But by 1824, political events began to undermine his finances. The *Virginian* had assumed an unmistakably anti-Jackson tone during the contentious presidential campaign that year; a result was that his federal license was reassigned for the second (1824-25) session of Eighteenth Congress to the new *Clarksburg Intelligencer* of Alexander G. McRae, an original owner of the *Western Virginian*. Now lacking that key subsidy, and with several Jacksonian competitors being published in nearby locales, McGranahan chose this moment to close his *Independent Virginian*; its last number issued on December 13, 1824, one week after the Congress had convened.

Yet once removed from the partisan wars, his business apparently thrived, as he conducted a job-printing office in Clarksburg well into the 1840s. He is a conspicuous figure in several nineteenth-century histories of the town and county, which report McGranahan's frequent

involvement in promoting locally-based manufacturing concerns. So it is not surprising that he when he returned to journalism in 1841, he published a Whig-oriented journal there: *The Harrison County Whig and Western Virginia Advertiser*. In doing so, McGranahan built on the Whig victories of 1840, taking on the larger *Scion of Democracy* of Benjamin Dolbeare (142), the latest incarnation in a series of Democratic organs that the Clarksburg physician edited, owned, or financed between 1838 and 1854. However, the *Harrison County Whig* proves to our last view of the aging printer. In 1843, he transferred ownership of the paper to his son, William H. McGranahan, and then disappears from the historic and bibliographic record alike.

Personal Data

Born:	ca.	1792	Pennsylvania, probably Crawford County.
Married	Aug. 1	1822	Nancy Chemborlin @ Harrison County, VA/WV
Died:	after	1843	Clarksburg, Harrison County, VA/WV

Only record found is William H. McGranahan; more offspring likely.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; Callahan, *Morgantown*; Haymond, *Harrison County*; genealogical data from McGranahan family manuscript on Linesville Historical Society (Crawford County, Penn.) website (January 2013).