

293 MCKENNIE, J. H. – [COL. JOHN HARRIS MCKENNIE]

Printer, Publisher

Winchester, Charlottesville

Apprentice in the Winchester office of the *Republican Constellation* under Jonathan Foster (168) and James Caldwell (071); later publisher of Charlottesville's *Central Gazette* (1820-21) with brother Clement P. McKennie (292).

In most Virginia histories, whether trade or geographical, John H. McKennie is reported as simply being the fiscal side of a partnership with his printer-brother Clement as publishers of the first newspaper issued in Charlottesville – *The Central Gazette*. But a thorough review of contemporaneous newspapers reveals that he was a well-trained printer who absconded from a long apprenticeship in Winchester three years before that paper appeared.

The two men were the oldest sons of Matthew McKennie, a Fauquier County physician who died in Warrenton in 1812. His widow Mary was left the task of providing for at least three minor children at that time, and so bound out their eldest son, John Harris, to Winchester publisher Jonathan Foster (168); he put the duty for training the adolescent apprentice into the hands of his shop foreman, James Caldwell. Caldwell left Foster's employ early in 1817 to start his own journal in Warrenton, the Fauquier County seat; following Caldwell's departure, McKennie evidently found work in Foster's office increasingly untenable, and so fled Winchester in mid-October 1817. Still, Foster did not advertise for the return of his wayward apprentice until January 1818, after he learned that others had enabled his flight and were then harboring him. The point of dispute between appears to have been one over McKennie's age; he was bound out until his twenty-first birthday, and Foster reported that he was just nineteen when he bolted; however, genealogical records show that McKennie was born in 1796, making him twenty-one at the time he left Winchester. Thus, Foster was clearly trying to enforce an unenforceable contract on the basis of an inaccurate record of McKennie's age – hence the absence of any subsequent reports of the printer's arrest.

In March 1818, a month after Foster's last printed notice, Caldwell took on a partner in his year-old *Palladium of Liberty* identified only as "McKennie." Given their prior association, and the apprentice's known skills, this unnamed partner was most likely John H. McKennie. Still, other family members may have been that partner as well, or the family collectively; his mother may have invested some of his father's extensive assets in Caldwell's paper as a way to provide for still-minor-son Beverley Randolph, perhaps as an apprentice; it may also be that Caldwell's partner was the printer's younger brother Clement, as he has frequently been identified as the tradesman in the McKennie brothers' ensuing Charlottesville venture. Since the partnership with Caldwell lasted just a year, the McKennie involved was almost certainly one of the Charlottesville pair, as the sale of an interest in the *Palladium of Liberty* in March 1819 would have readily provided the means to start a new weekly elsewhere.

It is interesting to note that a newspaper that was financially troubled before this partner's investment then survived his withdrawal. In November 1818, Caldwell was granted one of three licenses given to Virginia newspapers to publish the laws of Congress in their pages at their going advertising rate – a substantial subsidy for any publisher having such a license; moreover, it was the one previously held by Jonathan Foster, and its withdrawal compelled

him to sell his weekly that winter. At the time of the grant, the McKennie brothers owned Albemarle County farms, near the Fauquier County border, neighboring the estate of James Monroe, the president of the United States who approved such licenses at that time. In now holding that license, Caldwell could buy out his unidentified partner in March 1819 when a year-long contract would have expired, and still continue to publish a marginal weekly. Thus it is also unsurprising that the McKennie brothers filed an application for that same license once their Charlottesville paper became a reality.

Monroe was not the only president whose patronage the McKennie brothers sought. Their decision to start publishing their *Central Gazette* in January 1820 was tied to the opening of the University of Virginia, originally termed the Central College at Charlottesville – so their choice of title. The establishment of that institution had long been advocated by Thomas Jefferson, who now lived in retirement on his "little mountain" above the town. Hence the McKennies presented the public with a Jeffersonian newspaper, a weekly supported initially by the "Sage of Monticello" himself, one which conformed to his views rather than to those of the broader Democratic-Republican community.

While conducted by the brothers – as the firm of C. P. McKennie & J. H. McKennie – their office employed four additional hands and circulated about 400 copies per issue at the outset, realizing an annual-gross-revenue of about \$4000. After the journal's first year, John withdrew from the partnership, leaving brother Clement as the *Gazette's* sole proprietor. He continued in that role until July 1827, when he sold his press and paper to Thomas W. Gilmer, his editor, and Gilmer's partner, John A.G. Davis, in anticipation of a brutal political campaign the following year; he then retired to his Albemarle County farm.

J. H. McKennie had done likewise in 1821, but soon sold his Albemarle County property and removed south into Nelson County. About 1824, he relocated again, taking his family to western Tennessee, where he became involved in extensive speculations in lands ceded recently in Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama by the northern groups of the so-called "Five Civilized Tribes," primarily the Choctaw and Chickasaw. In 1826, he was living and speculating in Fayette County, Tennessee, just north of modern-day Mississippi. In 1832 and 1833, he was living on land ceded under Choctaw Treaty of 1830; from there he petitioned Congress and sued the Federal Land Agency for not honoring his "pre-emption rights" to those lands. In 1832, he was agent for the Federal government in negotiating land cessions from the Chickasaw in central Mississippi, and so was a signatory to the 1834 Treaty that forced the Chickasaw's removal to Indian Territory (today Oklahoma). Given his speculative activities, as well as his association with these forced removals of native groups, it is not surprising that McKennie was murdered in 1835 while taking up residence on old Chickasaw lands in Mississippi. The perpetrators were never discovered, probably because state and federal authorities could not determine whether his death came at the hands of displaced natives or of rival speculators. His family was not impoverished by his unexpected death, however; the Supreme Court found for McKennie – and so now his heirs and assignees – in his 1833 suit, giving his legatees a considerable land-holding stake.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1796 Orlean, Fauquier County, Virginia.
Married Dec. 21 1821 Mary "Polly" Garth @ Albemarle County, Virginia.
Died: in 1835 Matheney, Mississippi (in the Chickasaw cession).
Children: No record of children found, though several likely issued.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; *Bicentennial History of Fauquier County*; Moore, *Albemarle*; Woods, *Albemarle County*; .S. House of Representative Private Claims, 23rd Congress; American State Papers: Indian Treaties; US Land Office Records, 1826-36; genealogical data from McKennie family charts posted on Ancestry.com (August 2012).