

298 McMULLIN, JOHN

Publisher

Lexington

Publisher of the *Rockbridge Repository* at Lexington (1801-05), briefly with the Philadelphia-trained printer John Gano Ustick (421).

McMullin was a dedicated advocate of Thomas Jefferson's administration who struggled for five years to publish a fittingly supportive journal in Lexington. He appears to have been a Rockbridge County native, conceivably a familial relation to a like-named Revolutionary War hero who came from the area. His foray into journalism in 1801 was the first newspaper issued from Lexington, one evincing above average typography for the Valley printers of the time, so indicating that either he had trained in the trade elsewhere or he employed such tradesmen; the latter seems the most likely, as he consistently referred to himself in print as the paper's editor and not its printer, publisher, or proprietor.

McMullin commenced his journalistic career in August 1801 claiming impartiality:

"The editor will strictly adhere to his motto, "Truth, our Guide: The Public Good our Aim." With these declarations he offers the Repository for public patronage, and hopes it may meet the approbation of a generous people. ... [It] will contain official information, public documents, congressional proceedings and debates, a regular account of foreign events & domestic occurrences with occasional essays on literary, agricultural, and commercial subjects. Morals and Religion shall not be neglected, nor modesty wounded."

Even so, it soon became evident that McMullin's *Rockbridge Repository* was an advocate for the new Jefferson administration. As a result, his weekly suffered from a dearth of paying customers, both as subscribers and advertisers; merchants there – largely Federalists – still employed Staunton or Lynchburg papers to promote their businesses, rather than support his paper; meanwhile, readers often lacked the cash necessary to secure the two-dollar-per-annum subscription. As only eighteen issues of the *Repository* survive from its five-year-long life, it seems that such financial constraints led to small print runs each week, which would further limit its exposure. Consequently, McMullin was forced to suspend publication of the *Repository* at the end of its first volume – probably in August 1802, though possibly earlier than that – for want of money; that suspension continued until October 1803.

When the *Repository* finally reappeared, McMullin was far more forthright about both his political perspective and his fiscal difficulties, intimating that the "circumstances which led to the discontinuance of the *Repository* we shall forebear mentioning; the transactions attending it were too *black* to be here noticed; by those who are acquainted with them; they are *most cordially* abhorred." His resurrected *Repository* now carried a new masthead ornament of the winged female figure of "liberty," a symbolic metaphor often associated with the French Revolution that so many Federalist loathed. If that image did not make plain his new course, his new introductory address did:

"Notwithstanding its former embarrassments, and the difficulties in which it was enthralled, the Repository, like the Phenix, has again blushed into existence, and as

the editor has determined to take a decisive part in the existing political contest, he deems it a duty, which he meets with cheerfulness, to declare that he is a decided friend of the constitution and government, under which he lives, and by which he is protected. When he takes into consideration the numerous presses dedicated to the cause of aristocracy, the falsehoods which through the medium thereof are conveyed to the public, and the necessity of a Republican Paper on this side of the Blue Ridge, to rebut their malicious allegations, it is to be hoped the Repository will meet with an able support from the friends of liberty and republicanism."

His weekly was now the sole "Republican Paper on this side of the Blue Ridge," and he saw its re-launch as necessary in countering the "traitorous allegations" of Jefferson's foes. In that role, McMullin made considerable sport – being "a true knight of the quill" according to one local history – of Lexington's new Federalist weekly, *The Virginia Telegraph* of Samuel Walkup (426), scion of a major merchant family there.

Yet it remains uncertain how frequently the *Repository* was published over the ensuing two years. In June 1804, McMullin added a partner to his business, one John Gano Ustick, a Philadelphia-trained journeyman and a son of a well-known Baptist minister there. As the firm of McMullin & Ustick dissolved in November 1804, the arrangement appears to have been a simple six-month contract between the two men that Ustick declined to renew. Yet it also appears that Ustick remained in Lexington, as the press appears to have continued operating until his subsequent removal to Abingdon in 1806.

The latest surviving copy of McMullin's paper issued on August 6, 1805, and is likely the last number he produced. In that issue, McMullin apologized for the erratic publication schedule of recent weeks, revealing that his supply of paper had been interrupted regularly by his provider because of an unpaid account balance with that mill owner. Hence, he now found it imperative to demand payment from his subscribers of all arrearages, or else the periodic suspensions seen recently would become a permanent closing of the *Repository*. That public plea was made on a half-sheet version of his paper, demonstrating the severity of his plight; the absence of subsequent issues indicates that it was also the *Repository's* final number. Its termination was guaranteed, it seems, by a law suit entered in the Rockbridge County court three weeks later by a local physician of Federalist leanings, one James R. Willson, charging McMullin with libel and slander in the pages of his Republican weekly. However, the nature of the offending publication remains unknown, given the dearth of surviving issues and an incomplete court record.

Still, McMullin remained a respected community figure, despite his journalistic failure. In 1807, he was elevated to captain of the town's light-infantry militia-unit – a title that was a part of his public identity from then onward. His unit saw service, when attached to the 4th Regiment Virginia Militia during the War of 1812, with the mobilization attending the 1814 British invasion of the Chesapeake and the burning of Washington.

After the war, McMullin was best known as a schoolmaster, an occupation he apparently followed upon closing his journal. He was a practitioner of the Lancastrian (or Monitorial) Plan, a regimented pedagogical approach employing older students as instructors for their younger peers under a master's supervision; the system provided a practical way for large

numbers of students to receive instruction at minimal cost. It's relatively low-cost made it enormously popular in America following its introduction from Britain in Philadelphia in 1805, where McMullin had significant familial connections. Virginia first saw its application in 1811 when the plan was used in a school in Georgetown, D.C.; that school's founder, Richard Ould, reported to his supervisors in London that demand for similar schools had spread to interior American where "even the natives of the Carolinas, of the Alleghany or Blue Ridge of Mountains show their delight and string desire to have schools established among them." McMullin was clearly one of the masters that then Ould recruited. In 1818, McMullin left Virginia for southwestern Ohio, taking charge of a new Lancastrian school in the town of Hillsboro in Highland County, after having received "high recommendations" for him resulting from his teaching in Lexington. He received a \$600 salary for a 48-week term during which the school grew from its original 65 students to 90. That success brought an invitation for McMullin to conduct another Lancastrian school in nearby Dayton in 1820, where he led his students in martial formation in the Fourth of July Parade there in 1823.

Despite that prominence, that celebration provides the last confirmed sighting we have McMullin. Nearly seventeen years later, a like-names individual was part of the Monroe County, Ohio, Democratic committee that campaigned for Martin Van Buren in 1840; but no evidence has yet been uncovered to show that the 1840 McMullin was also the Lexington publisher turned schoolmaster.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Morton, *Rockbridge County*; Chalkley, *Chronicles*; WPA Guide to Virginia; Steele & Steele, *Early Dayton*; Bradford, *Education in the Ohio Valley*; Maddox, *Free School Idea in Virginia*.