

317 O'CONNOR, JAMES

Printer & Publisher

Norfolk

Publisher of *The Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald* (1795-1819), initially with Charles Willett (445), then later with Thomas G. Broughton (055).

O'Connor was an Irish émigré who found considerable success in Norfolk as publisher of the most respected journal then issued there; his death in 1819 brought an armed seizure of his press by his relatives to keep the paper's revenues out of the hands of his partner, legally the heir to the business; the family was penalized subsequently in court for their actions.

The O'Connor name is prominent in histories of the Connacht province of western Ireland, particularly in County Sligo where this O'Connor was born and raised. This substantial clan was among the Catholic clans dispossessed of their lands by Oliver Cromwell in the 1650s, and so forced into urban trades. Born to parents who reared a family of eighteen children, O'Connor was bound out to a printing office in Sligo Town in adolescence. At the end of his training, he set out from Sligo to find work as a journeyman, at first in Dublin, and then in London; there he worked in the office producing documents for Parliament, most notably those relating to the impeachment and trial in 1787 of Warren Hastings, the late governor-general of British India. With monies accrued in London, O'Connor returned to Sligo about 1792 to publish a paper there – title still unknown, as no copies survive. However, he soon ran afoul of the British authorities there. A royal proclamation was issued against seditious writings in 1792, a decree that led to dozens of sedition trials in 1792 and 1793, before a 1794 parliamentary act declared such publications treasonous. The nationalistic views of O'Connor's paper brought accusation of seditious libel and treason, compelling him and other family members to flee Ireland for what was then seen as the sanctuary of freedom and equality, the United States.

O'Connor landed in Norfolk in late 1794. He immediately began seeking work in the town's three printing offices – those of William Davis (127), Daniel Baxter (027) and Thomas Wilson (452), and Charles Willett. The search began badly when the first printer he visited (probably Davis) thought his "appearance and address being that of a gentleman" meant that he was untrained. But his second stop was at Willett's office; the two men recognized each other from having worked together in a London press office. Willett had emigrated in 1792 and found work with Davis in his *American Gazette*. The two had parted company just before O'Connor's arrival, when the Federalist-aligned Davis drove the Republican-leaning Willett from the Gazette office. Willett immediately launched *The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser* as a competitor to Davis. The initial success of that paper induced Willett to consider increasing the *Herald's* pace from twice-weekly to thrice weekly, and now O'Connor gave him a way to achieve that goal. So in July 1795, their original relationship as master and journeyman became a partnership, and a month after that the *Herald* became a thrice-weekly production.

Their press office quickly became the main printing business in town, even though the only non-newspaper imprints that they produced were almanacs. Instead, it was the catalysts for commerce they provided that fueled their successful partnership: a newspaper and blank

forms. As Davis tended to neglect that part of the printing business – thinking his political perspective would keep the port's merchants advertising in his *Gazette* alone – it was not difficult for the *Herald* to press its circulation advantage to sustain a journal that offered partisan views differing from those of their advertisers; consequently, the *Gazette* was obliged to close in late 1797 when the Quasi-War with France caused a precipitous decline in maritime trade in the port, and so the available advertising funds. With the death of the Davis paper, Willett & O'Connor now offered Norfolk's only mercantile advertiser – clearly a case of turnabout being fair play.

The *Norfolk Herald* was, from its start, a publication clearly sympathetic to Jefferson and his Republican supporters. It openly opposed the election of John Adams as president in 1796, the Jay Treaty with Great Britain in 1797, and the Alien & Sedition Acts of 1798; they also reported regularly on British interference with maritime trade in the Atlantic, Norfolk's vital life-blood, particularly boardings of American-flagged vessels that ended in impressments. In doing so, Willett and O'Connor often drew the ire of the primary Federalist journalists in Philadelphia, the national capital: John Fenno (1751-98) of the *Gazette of the United States* and William Cobbett (1763-1835) of *Porcupine's Gazette*. At the root of their censures was the fact that neither Willett nor O'Connor were native-born Americans; they were both radical free-thinkers – "two kneaded clods" in Cobbett's words – who were fugitives from lawful authorities in England and Ireland; their immigrant status made them suspect, as were all foreign-born Republican journalists, seen as seditious threats to good order in the United States. In the end, however, the *Norfolk Herald* proved to be more mildly Republican in its outlook than were two competing papers that emerged after the death of the *Gazette*: the *Epitome of the Times* of Augustus C. Jordan (244) in 1798, and *The Commercial Register* of William W. Worsley (462) and Meriwether Jones (242) in 1802. Consequently, the *Herald* became a trusted source nationally over its first decade for news about maritime activity in the Caribbean and South Atlantic, regions where the port's foreign commerce was then concentrated.

Yet 1804 brought the joint enterprise to an end. Over the course of that year, Willett slowly withdrew from the day-to-day operation of the office as his health began to fail; the wasting illness that set in then was not defined with any detail, but his level of activity in the *Herald* declined steadily over that year. So at the end of 1804, Willett decided to retire, selling his interest in the office to O'Connor, who became sole proprietor. By the end of 1806, he was confined to bed, possibly not even in the town; in late 1806, repeated legal notices for him to answer as a defendant in a suit against a Norfolk bank and its directors went unheeded, with the court declaring in March 1807 Willett was not a resident of the state anymore. But he was, and such was recorded in the notices of his death published in late August and early September. The brevity of those notices reflected the crush of information then pressing into Virginia's newspaper offices in the wake of the Chesapeake/Leopard affair and the Burr conspiracy trial, so depriving posterity of a fuller account of Willett's life.

O'Connor continued as proprietor of the *Herald* until his own death in 1819. The newspaper remained mildly Republican in its outlook, and so continued to be a profitable enterprise. His greatest challenge was conducting the paper through the disruptions of the War of 1812. Those were also years when he had to learn to live life without the wife who came to

Norfolk with him, following her death in 1811. By early 1813, recurring supply problems became acute, compelling O'Connor to reduce his paper's publication schedule to twice-weekly; then in August 1813, he was obliged to reduce the size of the *Herald's* sheet, complete with a smaller masthead carrying the simple title of *Norfolk Herald* in place of the lengthier ones seen in the years before the war. It was not until late March 1815 that the *Herald* returned to its former pace and scale.

As O'Connor navigated these dangerous waters, he was also faced by a new challenge from Federalist William Davis. In July 1805, Davis emerged from his enforced retirement to conduct the new *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger* for proprietor John Cowper (110). The publisher was a maritime merchant trader whose business had been ravaged by French predations on his vessels off Haiti in 1798; with the bankruptcy of Cowper family's trading company imminent in 1804, he decided to start an anti-administration paper that he hoped would turn public opinion in his favor and so reap funds for the bankrupt business; his first partner, George Lewis Gray (188), left Norfolk after just a year seeking larger opportunities elsewhere, inducing Cowper to bring Davis out of retirement to take his place. Cowper and Davis would produce an anti-Republican, anti-French newspaper together until September 1816. Over those years, Davis made frequent sport of articles in O'Connor's *Herald* without mentioning the rival paper's name; one of the few exceptions to that rule came in February 1812, when Davis objected vehemently to publication of a letter to the *Herald* charging that he and the *Publick Ledger* were fomenting insurrection against the Republican-dominated state government in anticipation of a war with Great Britain, and so provide an enemy aid and comfort with the port's facilities. Whether true or not, Davis's editorial perspective went against the popular grain during the war, ensuring the demise of the *Ledger* shortly after its end, and forcing Davis into retirement for a second time.

Despite O'Connor's success in navigating these hazards, age could not be so minimized. A lingering illness "of several years" length compelled him to take on a younger partner to oversee his business in early 1817 – the Virginia-born Thomas Greene Broughton, then about twenty-five, after apparently working for him since before Willett's departure. But when O'Connor died in July 1819, at age sixty, that pragmatic decision led to a war between his surviving partner and his bereft family in Norfolk's Hustings Court.

The administrator of his estate, his nephew Patrick Corrigan, announced a suspension of the *Herald's* publication until he could sell the office and the paper; to that end Corrigan used armed men to seize the printing press and its supplies to keep them from Broughton's use. Unfortunately for Corrigan, Broughton had the firm's business records and the *Herald's* subscriber list. He also had the law on his side. As surviving partner, he had a right to buy out his partner's heirs and continue the business alone. The family refused to return the press – a company asset and not Willett's personal one – so Broughton filed suit against them. The young printer won a judgment against Corrigan the following January, with the nephew ordered to pay substantial fines for his illegal actions. But in the short term, it took Broughton a month to find the tools that he needed to resume publication of the *Herald*.

This turn of events was something that O'Connor would have loathed. From the obituary that Broughton wrote and published in their paper, he had been aware of the need to

provide for a succession in his business, and that Broughton was his means to that end: "the writer of this article shared his friendship and his confidence for many years," and that he had found his late partner:

"Generous almost to a fault, yet discriminating in his acts of friendship and benevolence, the worthy and deserving however low their station, always found him a friend and advocate, while those of mean and sordid cast of character instinctively shunned his paths. Accustomed to speak his mind freely on all occasions, he held the character of a sycophant in the utmost detestation, and never shrank from an exposure of vice or infamy, though his interest might be promoted by his silence."

Broughton went on to publish the *Herald* for most of the rest of his life. But it is in his early days as a sole proprietor that Willett's legacy truly lays. The function of his journal and the stability of its ownership, protected by law, were now more important than the familial successions that were a hallmark of colonial-era printing, so dooming many early papers.

Personal Data

Born: in 1759 County Sligo, Ireland
Married ca. 1789 Eliza (1774-1811) @ London, England [?]
Died: July 3 1819 Norfolk, Virginia.

No record of offspring found.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 6; O'Rorke, *History of Sligo*; notices in Norfolk newspapers (1794-1820); battle for control of *Norfolk Herald* reported in *American Beacon* (Norfolk), July 1819 to January 1820; obituary in *American Beacon*, July 6, 1819.