

392 SNIDER, JOHN N. — [JOHN NELSON SNIDER]

Printer, Publisher

Shepherdstown, Lexington

Publisher of the *American Eagle* (1816-17) at Shepherdstown, and of the *Lexington News-Letter and Western Virginia Telegraph* (1819-20).

Snider was a trained printer who, after the War of 1812, returned journalism to two Valley locales that had lost their newspapers many years before. In both cases, however, the effort of restoration proved short-lived, though for differing reasons.

Where Snider was born is unknown, but it is clear that he was trained as a printer in the press office of George Kenton Harper (1778-1858) in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. Later events suggest that Snider came from the area, as does the prevalence of his surname then in that neighborhood. It also seems likely that Snider worked for a time in nearby Frederick, Maryland, as he married a woman of that town in August 1816. That fall, the ethnic German Snider found himself in conflict with the Irish-born proprietor of the *Democratic Republican* in Chambersburg, one John McFarland (1797-1827); only McFarland's end of the contest survives, but the two editors evidently clashed over a poem that Snider had published in announcing the marriage of a woman from Chambersburg; McFarland took exception to Snider's attempt at satiric rhyme in that notice, offering his own in response, denigrating the literary skills of his opponent, as well as his unchivalrous choice of target; the tit-for-tat between the two nineteen-year-old journalists continued for two months, suggesting a prior association and ongoing animus.

In pursuing that exchange, Snider employed the pages of his first newspaper, *The American Eagle and Shepherd's-town Weekly Advertiser*. When the *American Eagle* first issued in early 1816, the Potomac River port had been without a local paper since late 1797 when the brief life of the *Impartial Observer* of Philip Rootes (362) and Charles Blagrove (036) ended.

Shepherdstown was a difficult locale. In the early 1790s, many expected the town would become a major river port, but it soon fell behind Martinsburg, fifteen miles to the west, as the principal northern Valley market town through its links to the carrying trade passing along the Great Wagon Road to and from Philadelphia. The port town fell further into the shadows when Charlestown, ten miles to the south, became the seat of a new county when the eastern end of Berkeley County was separated and organized as Jefferson County in 1801. Both Martinsburg and Charlestown hosted newspapers that were the journal-of-record in each county, so limiting any potential paper in Shepherdstown to mercantile advertising alone, which proved insufficient before 1816.

Snider apparently believed that the growing post-war economy made a weekly paper there a viable prospect, and so set up a press office in early 1816. He issued his first number of his *American Eagle* on February 29, 1816, promoting his paper as a "democratic" one. Yet his most frequent editorial targets were other "democratic" editors, such as McFarland, and his mentor conducted a Federalist paper. Moreover, he made sport of the candidacy of James Monroe for the presidency with comic anecdotes that were widely reprinted in Federalist papers.

In early 1817, Snider traded words with Samuel B.T. Caldwell (074), the editor of the newly-established *Genius of Liberty* in nearby Leesburg; a New England native, Caldwell became a journalist out of a concern for the limited suffrage he found among the citizenry of Virginia. Again, only Caldwell's side of the dispute has survived, but it seems clear that Snider objected to the deviation from Southern principles in essays he published previously in the *Republican Constellation* of Jonathan Foster (168) in Winchester, asserting that the same apostasy was the intended focus of his new Leesburg weekly; Snider then evidently continued his assault by casting aspersions on his loyalty to his Massachusetts associations, citing them as the cause of Caldwell's deviance. Caldwell's two-column response took Snider to task for his "fountain of sophistry" which emitted "false premises" to arrive at "false conclusions" and so delude his readers; suggesting that the "incapable" Snider was simply a front for "secret masters," Caldwell closed with the Biblical injunction that he should "go and sin no more." Caldwell hoped he would never have to address the content of Snider's *Eagle* again, but a new exchange of blows came in March, followed by silence.

That silence was aided by Snider's ensuing exit as proprietor of the *Eagle*. Advertisements he placed in Alexandria newspapers in the spring of 1817 soliciting advertisers for his paper suggests that he had badly misjudged the ability of merchants closer to Shepherdstown to support the *Eagle*. By July, he had sold his interest in the weekly and left the town. The new owners, the firm of Maxwell & Harper, was likely one between a local financier named Maxwell (283) and the Chambersburg printer Kenton Harper (203), so reinforcing the idea that this Virginia business had ties to that Pennsylvania town. Where Snider went in the short term is unknown, but the advertising support he received for his next venture from Matthias Bartgis (024) suggests he worked for Bartgis in Frederick, his wife's hometown.

That next venture was further south in the Valley at Lexington. The Rockbridge County seat had been without a local paper since the cessation of Samuel Walkup's *Virginia Telegraphe* in 1810. Snider's new *Lexington News-Letter* issued in mid-February 1819, some eighteen months after his departure from Shepherdstown. In his new journal, Snider seems to have avoided overt conflict with other editors, relying on satiric attacks on distant legislators that fit his readers' politics instead. Surviving reprints of articles from the *News-Letter* indicate that he was particularly incensed by Pennsylvania's extension to suffrage to free blacks and to Northern objections to the admission of Missouri as a slave state. But the dearth of readily accessible copies of the paper itself limits any finer analysis of its content.

Still, the *News-Letter* seems to have been a difficult financial proposition, as had been the *American Eagle*. In June 1819, he was compelled to issue a small sheet to his subscribers "apologizing for the non-appearance of the News Letter today ... owing to a disappointment at the paper mill," a problem apparently plagued him for the duration of his proprietorship. So at the end of the paper's first volume in February 1820, Snider added the appellation *Western Virginia Telegraphe* to his weekly's title in a conspicuous effort to broaden his revenue sources beyond the immediate neighborhood. Whether the alteration had any effect on circulation or advertising will remain pure conjecture because Snider did not live long enough to act on any assessment of its value. Publication ceased with the issue of May 20, 1820, apparently as a result of his sudden illness, with his unexpected death following

ten days later; his *News-Letter* died with him.

It would be another three years before a successor newspaper arose in Lexington to fill the void left by Snider's untimely passing. But the arrival of that *Rockbridge Intelligencer* in 1823 opened an era in which the town never again lacked for a local paper.

NB: Some sources spell his surname as Snyder; usage here reflects the spelling he used.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1797 Pennsylvania?
Married: Aug. 1 1816 Susanna Hickson @ Frederick, Maryland.
Died: May 30 1820 Lexington, Virginia.
Children: 1820 census indicates he had one infant daughter at his death.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; Cappon; Musser, *Shepherdstown*; notices in the [Charlestown] *Farmers' Repository* (1816-20), the [Chambersburg PA] *Democratic Republican* (1816), the [Leesburg] *Genius of Liberty* (1817), the *Alexandria Gazette* (1817), [Frederick MD] *Bartgis's Republican Gazette* (1819), *Carlisle [PA] Republican* (1820), and the [Hartford CT] *Times* (1820); birth & death dates established by obituary in [Georgetown DC] *National Messenger*, June 19, 1820.