

393 SNOWDEN, SAMUEL

Printer, Publisher

Alexandria

Publisher of the long-lived *Alexandria Gazette* (1800-31), usually independently, though at times with Matthew Brown (057), John D. Simms (387), and Samuel H. Davis (126), as well as other unnamed proprietors.

Snowden was a well-trained printer who produced and often edited the primary Federalist-Whig journal in northern Virginia for more than thirty years. As a result, his chief biographer has styled him as a "Founding Father of Printing in Alexandria." Nonetheless, his career was one filled with recurring financial problems and frequent political disputes that continued even after his death.

Knowledge of Snowden's early life is scant, largely because of his evident reluctance to impart such to his descendants or to record his history in manuscript or print. All that is certain is that he was born in the township of Piscataway in central New Jersey in 1776, but the names of his parents remain unknown. The printer reported the passing of two older siblings – Rachel in 1822 and William in 1824 – indicating that some of his immediate family remained linked to his Middlesex County roots; but then he also reported frequently on marriages and deaths among the Snowdens who resided in the area between Philadelphia and Baltimore, suggesting that some of his family migrated there. Indeed, Snowden himself first appears as a tradesman in Baltimore in 1799, at the age of twenty-three, so raising the possibility that he learned his craft in that Maryland port in the 1790s.

Establishing Independence

That first appearance was as an employee of the firm of Yundt & Brown, publishers of the provocative *Federal Gazette*. Their office was formed in 1794 to acquire and publish the *Federal Intelligencer*, renamed the *Federal Gazette* in 1796. Matthew Brown (1774-1831) was a Philadelphia-trained printer who found trade independence when he joined the far-older and more experienced Swiss-immigrant Leonard Yundt (1755-1825) in Baltimore. Their association lasted twelve turbulent years; Jeffersonian competitors, particularly the Baltimore *American* of William Pechin (1773-1849), made Brown a frequent target of their ire. Pechin's addition of Thomas Burling (066) as his "junior editor" in 1802 led to a very foul exchange which focused on Brown's continuing "hypocrisy." Still, the firm of Yundt & Brown was a profitable one, serving, as they did, the mercantile interests in the port city.

With Congress scheduled to sit in Washington for the first time in the winter of 1800-01, a series of ventures were launched to establish new journals in the new capitol, and Brown was determined to open the principal Federalist one there with the monies he had made in Baltimore. So in the summer of 1800, he formed a partnership with Snowden – at the time a journeyman printer in the Yundt & Brown office and their collection agent in Alexandria – to produce the *Washington Advertiser*, a paper to be published daily during the Congressional sessions and thrice-weekly during adjournments. But they soon found that they were not the only publishing entrepreneurs with such journalistic plans. Indeed, shortly after they

announced their intentions in July, William Alexander Rind (359) moved his existing *Virginia Federalist* from Richmond to Georgetown, launching it anew as the *Washington Federalist* in September 1800, with controversial New England Federalist writer Charles Prentiss (341) prominently reported as its editor. Still, Brown and Snowden pressed forward, issuing a prospectus issue of their *Washington Advertiser* on November 20th.

In the ensuing three weeks, the partners' plans underwent a dramatic transformation – an alteration that was "if not of necessity, at least of prudence." They were clearly aware that William Fowler (173), then the proprietor of the *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette*, was interested in selling his financially-troubled thrice-weekly after having owned it for just two months. So Brown and Snowden decided to move into his position as Alexandria's sole Federalist publisher rather than compete with Rind and others on the opposite shore of the Potomac. They moved their press office to Alexandria on November 24th and then bought Fowler's subscriber list on November 29th. The *Columbian Mirror* ceased publication that same day, with the new *Alexandria Advertiser and Commercial Intelligencer* appearing in its stead on December 8th. Although the modern successor to the *Alexandria Advertiser* – the *Alexandria Gazette Packet* – claims a continuous line back to the *Columbian Mirror's* origin in 1792, the two papers were not truly successive; rather, Brown and Snowden absorbed Fowler's older paper into their new journal, a point that they made clear themselves. In announcing their relocation to Alexandria, the partners reported that they had found that interest in their project was "much less than we could have anticipated, and inadequate in any degree to defraying the expenses of the business." The shortfall was corrected by their acquisition of the *Columbian Mirror's* subscriber list. In their introductory address in the first *Advertiser*, the pair said that they would send their paper to Fowler's subscribers but that the favor was not obliged by their prior subscriptions; the *Advertiser* was a new journal that now needed to be paid for as well. The modern confusion seems to have originated in the nearly simultaneous purchase of Fowler's printing tools on December 9th, an acquisition that made the infant printing office into a two-press operation.

As their business proceeded, Brown was the senior partner in the firm, with Snowden being "only remotely concerned" with its finances; that distinction can be seen in the daily's colophon, which noted that the *Advertiser* was "printed by Samuel Snowden & Co." but not published by him; its content and conduct were within Brown's purview, while Snowden conducted the technical end of the business. But eventually Brown found that he could not serve two masters, as he was intimately involved in editing both the *Alexandria Advertiser* and the Baltimore *Federal Gazette*. So in early June 1802, just over nineteen months from their journal's start, Brown sold his interest in the *Advertiser* to Snowden in order to focus on his Baltimore commitments, as well as to assist in the new journalistic venture of his brother, William Brown (058), in Jefferson County: the *Charlestown Patriot*.

Publisher and Proprietor

While now an independent tradesman. Snowden was also heavily in debt, a condition that proved a recurring problem for him throughout his career. With Brown's departure, he signed a promissory note guaranteed by his father-in-law, John Longden; a major merchant-planter in Alexandria and adjacent Fairfax County, Longden was also an influential figure in

the port, a Revolutionary War veteran who was then a leader among the Federalists who dominated the city's politics and government. The support of that faction was crucial to Snowden's survival in business, particularly during times of economic difficulty when his advertising revenues shrank. Almost from the start, he was also patronized by the national Federalist leaders who had been sidelined by the Republican victories of 1800; of particular note was Bushrod Washington, nephew of the late president, an associate justice of the Supreme Court, and inheritor of nearby Mount Vernon; Washington also convinced Chief Justice John Marshall to patronize Snowden's journal on occasion, splitting that desirable assistance with Rind in Georgetown. Still, it took several years for Snowden to retire the note he gave to Brown, likely well after his old partner retired from journalism in 1806.

Snowden's links to these local leaders, however, gave him a civic standing that he probably could not have attained so rapidly on his own. In September 1803, he was appointed to a committee of "respectable citizens" who were charged with managing the city's response to a yellow-fever epidemic; Snowden served as the committee's secretary and published their edicts and reports in his *Advertiser* on a nearly daily basis until early November, when the threat had passed. Remarkably, production of his paper continued uninterrupted for the duration of the epidemic, unlike journal's elsewhere, which relocated or closed during such events; he also increased the size of his page-sheet during the outbreak, simplifying his paper's title in the process; it would be called the *Alexandria Daily Advertiser* until 1808.

Still, Snowden experienced difficulties in this period, generally as a result of the fluctuations in maritime commerce attending the Napoleonic Wars, and especially with the embargo on trade with European belligerents instituted in 1807. His fiscal troubles were exacerbated at times by supply problems, specifically a lack of paper, which seem to have been the only reason for gaps in the *Advertiser's* publication schedule; three such interruptions between 1806 and 1809 were tied directly to failed deliveries of paper from Baltimore. The larger financial issues, though, brought Snowden three particular crises: in 1806, in 1819, and in 1824. And each of his solutions raises the question of who actually managed to content of his paper – Snowden or his backers?

The *Alexandria Advertiser* was well known for its avowed and vociferous opposition to the administrations of Jefferson and Madison and its frequent criticisms of local Republicans. The daily often reprinted articles from Rind's *Washington Federalist*, the *Federal Gazette* of Yundt & Brown, and the *Virginia Patriot* of Augustine Davis (119) in Richmond, so placing culpability for many biting commentaries beyond the city's limits. But the *Advertiser* found one particular journalistic target in its cross-town Republican rival, the *Alexandria Expositor* of James Lyon (274) and Richard Dinmore (139). Prior to Lyon's departure from that paper in August 1804, the commentaries seen in Snowden's paper were aimed directly at Lyon, with Dinmore considered only a "tool of Lyon." After that, Dinmore was depicted as the unthinking "Doctor" (he was a physician) duped by anonymous partisans.

Yet such could also be said of Snowden as well. It remains unclear who provided the original editorial content in the paper at any one time. Between September 1807 and September 1808, for example, the journal was "printed daily by Samuel Snowden (For the Proprietor)" as a result of Snowden having to sell an interest in his paper to pay his outstanding debts.

The phrasing indicates that he had sold control of its editorial content as well, returning to the mode of operation seen in his days with Matthew Brown. But when that encumbrance was lost in September 1808, the journal was "printed and published by Samuel Snowden" once again, indicating that he controlled its content.

It seems that Snowden's readers understood the separation of functions in his press office, as subscription cancellations appear less of a problem for him than were his subscribers' arrearages. One noteworthy withdrawal in late 1802 indicates that Snowden's daily was given a broad berth by locals, regardless of political stripe, out of its considerable mercantile utility, but that unrestrained calumny was sufficient cause for cancellation:

"I do not blame Federal Editors of disagreeing in Politicks with myself, but when they make their papers a receptacle for abuse of private characters I should think myself wrong in giving them my individual support."

Snowden also seems to have been a fairly benevolent employer and master. In the more than thirty-year-long run of his journal – of which nearly all issues survive – he advertised just twice for runaway hands: first for a rented slave named James Butler (068) in December 1810, and then for an absconded apprentice named Gustavus Porter (328) in 1813. Porter is one of the few readily identifiable trainees in his office; the only others so discerned are his nephews David (489) and James Fitz Randolph (490), the two sons of his sister Rachel who went on to found the weekly *Fredonian* at New Brunswick, New Jersey, in April 1811.

Wartime Crisis

In the midst of his 1807-08 restructuring, Snowden altered the title of his journal to the form most regularly associated with him and his successors today: the *Alexandria Gazette*.

The choice of the term "Gazette" is suggestive, as such publications were considered the official record, being both authoritative and truthful in their content; the usage here reflects an ongoing sense among Federalists that the Republicans then in power were not being forthcoming or honest in their published statements. Once Madison became president, and tensions with Great Britain rose, the *Alexandria Gazette* took the view that the scale of the impressment of American seamen was being exaggerated by his administration so as to gain favor with the urban masses, and that the level of French predation on American maritime commerce was being ignored out of support for the usurping Napoleon. The divergence in perspective mirrors the concurrent divergence of interest between urban merchants and rural farmers, the core constituencies of each political party. Impressment of sailors was an issue for those in trade with France, which Alexandria's merchants were not, while seizures of vessels by the French was an issue for those in trade with the British Caribbean, which Alexandria's merchants certainly were. Hence the *Gazette* took a political stance consistent with local commercial interests, which were proclaimed to be national ones as well.

When the political debate in Congress resulted in a declaration of war with Great Britain in June 1812, Snowden quickly found both his office and person threatened with violence for the "treasonous" comments found in his paper; on June 22nd, he warned those reading his *Gazette* that force would be met with force should an attack be attempted; the threat was likely a real one, as that same day the office of the Baltimore *Federal Republican* was

destroyed by a mob, initiating a two-month-long war between editor Alexander Contee Hanson (and his merchant supporters) and the Republican working class there, a conflict that resulted in at least two deaths in second attack in July and his journal's ensuing relocation to Georgetown for the duration of the war.

This episode led to Snowden taking on an editorial partner, both as a way to secure financial stability for his journal's revenues in anticipation of the declines in advertising that the war would engender, and to deflect the fire of the *Gazette's* Republican opponents from him to a more nimble controversialist. In early September, Snowden announced "that a gentleman of this town, whose abilities eminently qualify him for the superintendence of the press, has become jointly interested with him" in producing the *Gazette*, effective October 1st. That person was attorney John Douglass Simms, son of Alexandria's mayor, Col, Charles Simms, and himself a key figure among city's Federalist leaders; shortly afterward, he announced an increase in the price of his *Gazette*, the result of his increasing the sheet size of the paper by about one-fifth so as to carry more "important intelligence" as the war and its discontents advanced. The new partners intended to continue the paper's published assaults on the policies of James Madison and his government, but on a larger scale than before. Moreover, the pairing assured the *Gazette's* subscribers that its content would be consistent with the tempered views of the city's elected leaders, an approach that ultimately allowed them to avoid the violence that had beset Hanson and his supporters in Baltimore.

The arrangement between Simms and Snowden apparently continued smoothly, even if not all Alexandrians accepted their paper's perspective; indeed, such dissenters had a partisan alternative in the *Alexandria Herald* of John Corse (106) and Nathaniel Rounsavell (367) to meet their needs. But their *Gazette's* reporting eventually led to Simms being forced to resign as the clerk and auditor for the Common Council in September 1813, though he was retained as city attorney, a non-decision-making role, until 1818. The change in the public's attitude toward the *Gazette* accelerated in 1814; in January, the proprietors reported an attempt to burn his press office by persons unknown, drawing skeptical responses from competitors. But the British invasion of the capital region and the burning of Washington proper that August presented the largest challenge. Local Federalist merchants pressed the city's government to negotiate a surrender of the port to the British and so avoid the devastation witnessed across the river; led by their Federalist mayor, a group of merchants, including Snowden, met with the British naval commander and obtained an agreement that the city would be spared; but the five-day occupation that followed resulted in the pillaging of the port's warehouses and merchant vessels that left Alexandria essentially unable to conduct any commerce for several months; Mayor Simms was reprimanded by the Common Council and denied reelection in March 1815. With the war at an end by then, and with his family's reputation in tatters, the younger Simms sold his majority interest in the *Alexandria Gazette* shortly after his father's defeat, and never again pursued journalism.

Post-war Challenges

The end of the war in early 1815 did not end Snowden's problems; rather they ceased being political issues and became largely financial ones. With Simms's departure, Snowden was once again burdened with a substantial debt. Advertising revenues were increasingly

crucial, given that merchants were normally more regular in their payments to him than were his many subscribers. The title of Snowden's paper came to reflect that importance; in May 1817, his *Alexandria Daily Gazette, Commercial & Political*, as it was known throughout the war years, became the *Alexandria Gazette & Daily Advertiser*; at the same time, the daily's front page was now devoted almost entirely to advertising, where political and public notices had been featured on that page during the war.

Unfortunately, Snowden's alterations had come to naught by the fall of 1819. The economic panic of that year reduced both advertising and payments for such, on top of the lagging subscription revenues; simultaneously, his creditors pressed the publisher for payments to them, Simms apparently among them, as he was then trying to settle the estates of his father and father-in-law as well. So Snowden opted for a dramatic solution to his growing dilemma – he sold his daily and retired from journalism, albeit temporarily. In September 1819, Snowden sold the *Gazette* to Samuel H. Davis, then a proprietor of a small Alexandria job-press office; Davis later said that he was only the "nominal proprietor" of the *Gazette* and so "merely a nominal editor" in the transaction; Snowden retained control of a paper owned by another while actively closing out the accounts of his former concern; it was a maneuver that legally severed the newspaper from its debts. At the end of December, Snowden established a new business, bought the journal back from Davis on the last day of 1819, and began issuing the *Gazette* once again on January 5, 1820, without any change in title or numbering.

This was not the last financial crisis that Snowden faced. A similar situation arose in 1824 and the publisher pursued a similar solution, though evidently involuntarily this time. In August that year, Snowden was forced into a bankruptcy filing by his creditors; the Orphan's Court appointed a trustee to administer his affairs as "an insolvent debtor" according to law; that trustee then compelled the closing of his business accounts at year end. So on December 30th, Snowden issued the last number of the *Alexandria Gazette* and closed his business once again. Two days later, Snowden issued a new thrice-weekly paper in the place of his old daily, called the *Phenix Gazette*, in partnership with William Fitzhugh Thornton, who both financed the paper and edited its content. In its inaugural issue, Snowden made it clear that his fiscal woes had instigated the change, and that he would not resume a daily schedule until a number of paid subscriptions sufficient to sustain such an effort had been accumulated; hence, the *Phenix* did not reach that goal until December 1825, possibly as a result of Snowden's support of the unpopular John Quincy Adams in the 1824 election.

Still, the forced reorganization restored Snowden's solvency, with the trustee granting him the right to collect debts owed to his former concern in April 1825. And after that, his affairs evince a more cautious approach. In October 1825, his father-in-law, John Longden, drew up a will that was his last one, bequeathing the Royal Street building that housed Snowden's press and paper to the printer's only son Edgar, so ensuring that, whatever the fate of the *Phenix Gazette*, the Snowden family would have a home and office.

In taking on Thornton as his partner, Snowden was able to effect one of the many refits that his press regularly undertook – a purchase of new type, a "new dress" to replace the founts worn by the demands of daily use. Indeed, it was the principal reason that Snowden gave as

the cause of the *Gazette's* end. Once again, he said that the *Phenix* was not "a continuation of the other, but as a new and independent journal," just as he had distanced his initial *Alexandria Advertiser* from the earlier *Columbian Mirror*.

Despite growing frustrations with Adams, Snowden & Thornton remained loyal to the ideas and approach of the sitting president. That choice reflected the evolution of the one-time Federalist journal into a voice of the Whig leadership, particularly to one supporting then Secretary of State Henry Clay with whom Edgar Snowden became closely associated both politically and socially. Yet the 1828 election brought the firm of Snowden & Thornton to an end; Thornton sold his interest to Snowden in July and moved across the Potomac to start a new campaign paper in Washington proper in support of the president's reelection, and removed to Kentucky afterward. Meanwhile, Snowden somewhat reluctantly returned to editing, despairing of the "vindictive, unrelenting, and illiberal opposition...towards the present Administration, by its enemies and prosecutors," which he found unprecedented, even after he having lived through and contributed to the Federalist/Republican discord of earlier years. One of those enemies, the Jacksonian *Old Dominion* of Edward Pescud (324) in Petersburg, published a fictional account of the "Order of the Funeral Procession of the Administration" after Jackson was formally elected by the Electoral College; Snowden reprinted it – noting that he could "laugh at a joke, even at our own expense" – which made him out as a prominent mourner in the procession, alongside the Whig editors Peter Force, Joseph Gales, and John Hampden Pleasants (330). Such targeted satire evinces the journalistic influence Snowden still wielded then.

Familial Transition

Once Jackson assumed the presidency, and Clay returned to Congress in opposition to him, the fifty-three-year-old Snowden began to reduce his involvement in his Alexandria daily. From 1829 on, the *Phenix* became ever more the responsibility of his twenty-year-old son Edgar. That shift was frequently acknowledged in the daily itself when Edgar was identified as its editor and Samuel as its publisher. In June 1831, father and son formally announced that the *Phenix* had become a joint venture between them, though without alteration to the then current conduct of the paper. That acknowledgement may have been prompted by the growing circulation of their journal; it seems that merchants in the capital district found the *Phenix* useful in promoting their businesses and reliable in its political perspective; so with such growth, the energies of the younger Snowden became essential to its success.

It also appears that the older Snowden was then in the throes of the illness that claimed his life. The announcement of the Snowden & Son partnership came just three weeks before the senior partner died "of a severe illness" on July 14th. Bereft, the junior partner let the *National Intelligencer* of Joseph Gales and William Winston Seaton (373) speak for him and his paper in memorializing his father by simply reprinting the notice that the old Republican editors published:

"His generous heart and cheerful temper acquired the esteem of all who knew him; and, long as he pursued the editorial profession, even in the most exciting times, his political differences never degenerated into rancor. or made him a personal enemy.

This tribute is due from us to his memory, as we ourselves, though differing from him in former times, widely and warmly in politics, never found cause to abate our private esteem or friendly intercourse."

Edgar Snowden assumed sole proprietorship of the daily on his father's death, having taken possession of the office's building previously on his grandfather's death in 1830; he even restored the paper's previous title – the *Alexandria Gazette* – in January 1834 in honor of his father. He continued as sole proprietor until August 1860, when he made his sons into his partners. The *Gazette* even survived the Civil War, though suppressed during the war for its Confederate sympathies; when it reappeared in 1865, it was still a father-son concern that continued until his 1875 death; it then passed from his sons to a grandson in 1893, who sold it out of the family in 1911. Subsequent transfers and acquisitions have allowed the *Alexandria Gazette* to survive in the modern day as the *Alexandria Gazette Packet*.

Personal Data

Born: In 1776 Piscataway, New Jersey
Married: Mar. 3 1800 Nancy Longden @ Alexandria, Virginia
Died: July 14 1831 Alexandria, Virginia [then District of Columbia].
Children: One son, Edgar (1810-75), his successor.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; *Artisans & Merchants*; Quenzel, *Snowden*; Ackerman, *Failure of Founding Fathers*; HABS Report on John Longden House (VA-685); notices in the *Washington Federalist* (1800-04); [Georgetown] *Centinel of Liberty* (1800); [Baltimore] *Federal Gazette* (1799-1806); *Alexandria Expositor* (1802-04); *Alexandria Herald* (1810-24), [Leesburg] *Genius of Liberty* (1817-19), and the various iterations of the *Alexandria Gazette* (1800-34).