

396 SOWER, B. W. – [BROOK WATSON SOWER, SR.]

Printer & Publisher

Leesburg

Publisher of the *Genius of Liberty* (1819-35) at Leesburg.

Sower was born into the pre-eminent family of German language printers in America and carried on that tradition in a career spanning four decades. In that vocation, he became the proprietor and editor of the first successful Democratic newspaper in Loudoun County.

Remarkably, this fourth-generation American printer was not born in the United States, but in England, a consequence of his father's loyalty to the Crown during the Revolution. His great-grandfather was Christopher Sower I (1693-1758), who migrated to Pennsylvania in 1724; in 1738, he established the first German-language press in Pennsylvania – with the help and encouragement of Benjamin Franklin – and published the first German vernacular Bible in North America. His grandfather was Christopher Sower II (1721-84), the German Baptist (Dunker) minister who inherited and expanded the family's printing business in Germantown, Pennsylvania, as a part of his ministry.

Yet with the coming of the Revolutionary War, the family soon found their religiously-based values in conflict with those of their colonial neighbors. Christopher II was arrested and deported to the Pennsylvania frontier (then Berks County) for his non-compliance with the edicts of the Revolutionary government, and so remained a part of the family press until his death in 1784. But his eldest son Christopher Sower III (1754-99), also a printer trained at their Germantown press, chose to leave Pennsylvania entirely. In 1778, he abandoned the family's business, joining the British forces who had occupied Philadelphia the year before as they withdrew to New York City; there Sower worked for Major John André in collecting intelligence among the German-speaking settlers of the Northeast, then travelled to London in 1781 as part of a Loyalist delegation proposing a still-born peace plan. On his return he met and befriended Sir Brook Watson, the British merchant sent to organize the evacuation of American Loyalists from New York to Nova Scotia; that acquaintance paid off handsomely for Christopher III, as Watson represented him at the Loyalist Claims commission in London in 1784, gaining compensation for his losses in Pennsylvania, and then helped him obtain the posts of Printer to the King and Deputy Postmaster General for the province of New Brunswick in maritime Canada. In obvious gratitude, Sower named his newly-born first-son after his benefactor. Christopher III moved his family to Saint John, New Brunswick, in the summer of 1785, where they would remain until 1790; that October, he began publishing there the weekly *Royal Gazette and the New Brunswick Advertiser*. In 1792, he was ordered to remove his press to Fredericton, the actual colonial capital some seventy miles inland, where he conducted his business until 1799.

In these Canadian years, it appears that young Brook Watson Sower was introduced to the family trade in his father's office. But in June 1798, the fourteen-year-old scion was sent to Philadelphia to train in the office of Zachariah Poulson (1761-1844), who was married to his mother's sister, and who had trained as a printer at the Sowers' Germantown press under Christopher II. This connection kept Christopher III well informed of conditions in his native country; believing that he could reestablish his business in Baltimore, the Loyalist expatriate

resigned his royal commissions, sold his Fredericton press in March 1799, and then returned to the United States. However, he had been plagued by ill health since about 1796 and the journey apparently cut short his life; he died in Baltimore in July 1799 while still trying to acquire another press there. As a result, Poulson became the young Sower's mentor and father-substitute, employing him for the ensuing eleven years. During that time, Poulson acquired the *American Daily Advertiser* of David Claypoole (1757-1849), the successor to the *Pennsylvania Packet* of John Dunlap (1752) and launched into the world of journalism assisted by B. W. Sower. In January 1810, Poulson vouched for his then twenty-six-year-old nephew in a naturalization proceeding in Philadelphia that bestowed American citizenship to this descendant of colonial settlers, completing his family's rehabilitation.

That spring, Sower moved on to Baltimore to conduct the office of the aging John Hagerty (1747-1823), as an independent journeyman printer at last. There he continued the family tradition of printing Bibles, issuing a duodecimo New Testament in 1810 and a duodecimo Bible in 1812, both for Hagerty, both profitable. In early 1811, Sower formed a separate job-printing firm there, the first to bear his name as titular proprietor: B.W. Sower & Co. Late in 1813, Sower closed that office and returned to Philadelphia to conduct the office of William McCulloch there in 1814, continuing until his contemporary's early death in 1816.

It is unclear who or what employed Sower in the ensuing three years; he may have stayed close to Poulson's office in Philadelphia, as before; but it may also be that Sower travelled to Leesburg in the winter of 1816-17 to conduct the new *Genius of Liberty*, the paper that he would later buy, then owned and edited by its non-printer founder Samuel B.T. Caldwell (1774); the introductory address he published when he acquired the paper in October 1819 certainly suggests a previous association with Caldwell and a familiarity with his readers.

Caldwell was a New Englander who came to Loudoun County as a retail merchant in 1816; but once in Virginia, he discovered that the property qualifications for suffrage in the state immediately disenfranchised him. As a result, he became a voice for universal suffrage and equal rights for the rest of his life and the *Genius of Liberty* was intended as a means to that end; he vowed the weekly would pursue Republican principles not "in name only but in principle and practice" as well. But Caldwell was not a printer, only an editor; so the physical production of his weekly was a burden that limited his ability to provide the other services then expected of a press office, job-printing and bookselling in particular. Hence, it is likely he engaged a journeyman like Sower to assist him. But eventually Caldwell shifted course, believing that serving in public office would fit his plans better than publishing a paper. So in October 1819 he sold the *Genius* to Sower, who he praised in his valedictory address as a practical printer of sound Republican principles; he then rebuilt his bookselling business into a stationary, bookselling, and job-printing one, while campaigning for office.

Sower took a similar tone, stressing continuity of editorial practice and political perspective in the introductory address that he published beneath Caldwell's lengthy farewell:

"Sincerely attached to his country's weal, he [Sower] is in sentiment and principle a republican; and, as such, shall ever feel himself conscientiously bound to support our republican institutions and general government, as far as he conceives them to comport with the *genius of liberty* and the *spirit of republicanism*."

Given the loyalism of his father, Sower's politics were certainly radical, and so easily in line with the perspective implicit in his paper's title. Yet they were evidently less radical than had been Caldwell's; the *Genius* survived for a quarter century after this 1819 transition, indicating that he found ample support in the countryside that offset any lack of support for his weekly among the patrons of *The Washingtonian* in Leesburg proper, particularly after McIntyre's unexpected death in mid-1821. What is more, the ensuing years seem to be ones where the two publications easily counterbalanced one another. Between them, there were no great controversies, only the reflections of such hostilities in locales like Alexandria, Richmond, Winchester, and Washington. Nor was there an effusion of ancillary titles from the two presses that would fan the flames of any such heated contest, as had been the case in the early Caldwell years.

That reality is evinced in the surviving issues of the *Genius of Liberty* from Sower's period. His paper is unusual among those from this era in that a substantially complete run of the first sixteen years of issues survives: an unbroken run from January 11, 1811 to April 10 1821 is followed by a broken run through December 1827 that is missing less than one-third of the issues published (240 of 349 numbers survive). That corpus provides a clear view of the initial sixteen years of the weekly's publication. After that, however, only one number from each of the years 1829, 1831, 1832, 1840, 1841, and 1843 survive, making the paper's content over its last sixteen years known largely by its reflection in other journals.

Public records indicate that each of the two Leesburg newspaper offices in Sower's time were small, family-oriented operations, with each man employing his eldest son as his main assistant, and then passing that going concern on to that favored son – for McIntyre, his son Christopher in 1821; for Sower, his son Brooks Jr. in 1835. With Sower, such an inheritable asset was a family tradition, one that saw four successive generations conduct the original Germantown press for more than a century. Here it was simply from father to son.

That succession came in September 1835, almost exactly sixteen years after Sower bought the *Genius of Liberty* from Caldwell; he turned his successful paper over to his eldest son, Brook Watson Jr., then just twenty; his son would follow his lead for the next five years, before selling the paper out of the family and retiring from the print trade. Father Sower apparently took his proceeds and invested them in mills and stores in the area, as Caldwell also had. Local legend reports that Sower was briefly involved in efforts to publish an anti-slavery newspaper in Leesburg in the late 1840s; but whether he was so involved, or that the charge was as specious as were most such accusations lodged then against anti-Jackson Democratic editors, we will never know without better evidence.

It is clear, however, that an aging Sower departed Leesburg at the outbreak of the Civil War, seeking a quiet place away from the military campaigns in northern Virginia, finding one in Floyd County in the mountains of southwestern Virginia – an area notoriously sympathetic to the Union cause. Sower died there in May 1864 in the company of daughter Hannah, one of his nine surviving children, just shy of his eightieth birthday.

NB: The family name is spelled "Sauer" in German; Christopher I set the precedent of using that style in German-language imprints only, using "Sower" in English-language ones. It was a tradition that was passed down to Brook W. Sower, who employed the English version exclusively, as he never issued a German-language imprint under his family's name.

Personal Data

Born: June 28 1784 London, England.
Married: Aug. 29 1811 Ruth Harryman @ Middle River Neck, Maryland.
Died: May 22 1864 Floyd County, Virginia.
Children: Matilda (b. 1813); Hannah (b. 1814); Brook Watson Jr.* (b. 1815);
Ellen B. (b. 1817); Maria (b. 1821); Eliza (b. 1823); William Penn* (b.
1824); George Fox (b. 1826); Charles C. Harryman* (b. 1828); Mary
Catherine (b. 1830); John (b.1832); James (b.1834); *Printer.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Poland, *Frontier to Suburbia*; Naturalization Petitions, Eastern Pennsylvania, 1806-32 (NARA series M1522); notices in the *Genius of Liberty* (1817-40); genealogical data from *Descendants of Christopher Sower* (1887).