

415 THROCKMORTON, WILLIAM

Printer, Publisher

Staunton

Publisher of the *Staunton Spy* (1793-95), with one Chapman (087), and of its successor, *The Virginia Gazette* (1795-96), independently.

Throckmorton was a trained printer who conducted the first locally-sponsored newspaper in Staunton. Yet that three-year-long residence is essentially all that is known of him.

This tradesman poses a puzzle for historians of the early Virginia print trade. His track in the bibliographic record consists only of his association with a weekly paper in Staunton from 1793 to 1796, while his familial and trade origins remain a mystery. But his published obituary provides clues to those origins, while offering a curious tale of premonition:

"DIED, yesterday morning [August 3] at 2 o'clock, Mr. William Throckmorton, printer. The evening before, he wrote a note for the publisher of this Gazette [in Charleston S.C.], in which he says he was lately the publisher of a newspaper at Staunton, in Virginia; and that he had also lived in Winchester, Richmond, and Alexandria. He requested that if he should die suddenly, we would publish these circumstances and wished the printers in the above mentioned places would do the same. At the time of writing the note, we are informed, he was not apparently, much indisposed, but grew ill in the night, and died in a few hours."

The geographic order seen in this account suggests that Throckmorton had come from the Winchester area, trained as a printer in Richmond, worked as a journeyman in Alexandria, before moving to Staunton to conduct *The Staunton Spy* in early 1793.

That suggestion is supported by the fact that the only surviving reprintings of this obituary come from the *Columbian Mirror* in Alexandria, a town where he may have worked, and the *Virginia Herald* of Fredericksburg, the paper closest to Essex County where his surname then had its largest concentration. A branch of that numerous early-colonial Virginia family removed to Frederick County after the Revolution, with several sons of that branch settling in Alexandria as merchants in the 1790s. Moreover, the growth of printing establishments in all three locales that he mentioned during the 1780s and 1790s leads to a deduction that Throckmorton had been drawn into this transient trade as a young journeyman, and that his Staunton residence was his first attempt at independence as a master printer.

That new venture evidently began in the winter of 1792-93, nearly three years after the demise of Staunton's first newspaper, *The Staunton Gazette or Weekly Western Star*; that 1790 journal was a joint venture between competing newspaper proprietors in Winchester, Matthias Bartgis (024) and Richard Bowen (045); hence, their paper was little more than a way for their northern Valley advertisers to market their goods and services in the central Valley; lacking any truly local connection, the *Staunton Gazette* issued for but three months in early 1790. In contrast, Throckmorton's new *Staunton Spy* would be a locally-sponsored journal, as evinced by the corporate name of William Throckmorton & Co. noted in its colophon. His initial backers are masked by the oft-used "& Co," suffix; yet one of those supporters emerged from anonymity about six months into the paper's life when the suffix

became "& Chapman." The identity of Throckmorton's reported partner is unknown, from the absence of a given name, but one Jacob C. Chapman, a veteran of the Revolutionary War, was an influential merchant in Augusta County then and later a leader among local Federalists. *The Staunton Spy* became an advocate for that partisan perspective over the course of its life, setting the precedent that the town's principal paper would be the voice of "Old Federal" Augusta.

The *Staunton Spy* evidently became a profitable enterprise in short order, as in February 1795, the end of its second volume, Throckmorton was able to purchase Chapman's interest in the paper and continue its publication without backers. In the transition, he renamed his weekly *The Virginia Gazette*, so asserting a claim to the authority of its content, as did other Virginia papers of that era. Yet before the end of its third volume, Throckmorton had sold his newspaper to another Augusta merchant, Robert Douthat (147), and left Staunton. The reasons for that sale are unknown, but the fact that Douthat brought in a bilingual German printer – John Wise (455), also called Johann Weiss – to print the paper for him suggests either that a major financial crisis resulted from the earlier change or that a dispute with his mercantile patrons compelled the sale. In either case, Douthat proved to be a transitional figure in the paper's life, sustaining Wise until he could conduct the paper on his own, as he would from the fall of 1796 to the fall of 1803.

By then, Throckmorton was dead far from Staunton. His presence in South Carolina some six or seven months after leaving Staunton likely indicates that he had returned to work as a transient journeyman, and was then laboring in one of Charleston's press offices. But the dearth of surviving copies of his Staunton newspaper and the solitary notice of his death make a definitive history of his life and travels impossible without further evidence.

Personal Data

Died: Aug. 3 1796 Charleston, South Carolina.

No other personal data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; *Artisans & Merchants*; *Annals of Augusta County*; death notice in [Fredericksburg] *Virginia Herald* (Aug. 19, 1796); Throckmorton family material from *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 42: 1 (1934).