

## 416 TONNER, THOMAS – [DR. THOMAS TONNER]

**Publisher**

**Wheeling**

Publisher of *The Virginia North-Western Gazette* at Wheeling (1818-20), initially with Joseph Clingan (095).

Tonner was a physician who established the leading paper issued in Wheeling before 1850. His journal was an advocate for regional development and the political reforms that could assist such activity, and remained so even as he left the venture after just two years.

Described as one of Wheeling's "earliest settlers," Tonner appears to have come to the Ohio River port from the area of nearby Washington County, Pennsylvania, as he often used papers there to advertise his mercantile business in Wheeling before his weekly was born, rather than the larger ones in Pittsburgh. Yet it also appears that he was born in Ireland, and that Pennsylvania was but an intermediate stop for the immigrant. Contemporary records refer to him as "Doctor," though he did not use that identifier in print himself; and the place he studied medicine remains a mystery.

Tonner's first appearance in print was as a political advocate. In August 1816, he spoke at a town meeting in Wheeling – as reported by the *Ohio Herald* of Steubenville – held to elect representatives for the forthcoming Staunton Convention from Ohio County; that gathering was called to press for a state constitutional convention that would address inequities in the representation of Virginia's western counties in the legislature, and so the control of that body by eastern interests. Tonner's particular concern was monetary; after reviewing the historical legitimacy for such a meeting, he stressed how those eastern interests reinforced their power by allowing payment of taxes in bank notes drawn on eastern banks, while defeating bills that would create western banks; he also argued that the town's future as a commercial hub was threatened without such financial institutions. While the Staunton Convention of 1816 (as well as one in 1825) failed to bring about such a reform congress, it did encourage the General Assembly to charter western banks, with that fall's Assembly passing a bill creating banks in Wheeling and Winchester.

However, the Assembly did not follow up on that concession the next year, so instigating a highly personal response from Tonner in Wheeling – a new local paper that would advocate for western rights and commerce. This county seat had been without a weekly since late 1808 when Alexander Armstrong (014) closed his eighteen-month-old *Wheeling Repository* and returned to his hometown of Washington, Pennsylvania; and now the town faced a new challenge from the nearby port of Wellsburg, fifteen miles upriver, and its two-year-old *Wellsburgh Gazette* of John Berry (033), also a Pennsylvania printer.

Tonner issued his new *Virginia North-Western Gazette* in April 1818, in partnership with yet another Pennsylvania printer, one Joseph Clingan. Like Tonner, Clingan came from the area south of Pittsburgh and had trained as a printer at Greensburg in Westmoreland County. As Tonner was not a printer, Clingan was essential to his paper's early survival; but it appears that the printer was not convinced that the inexperienced Tonner would be sufficiently effective as its editor to make their weekly a success; rather, he evidently signed a short-

term agreement and withdrew from the venture after just six months, travelling on to new opportunities in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Still, Tonner had carefully assessed the situation there, recognizing that the town could now support a weekly local advertiser, unlike in 1808, and that there was a readership agreeable to his political and economic views. Hence the paper easily survived Clingan's departure, despite enforced suspensions caused by paper shortages in late 1818 and summer 1819. Tonner now employed printers, rather than making them partners, continuing the *North-Western Gazette* for another eighteen months.

By the summer of 1820, he owned a stable and profitable weekly, but evidently wanted to return to the less-strenuous demands of his medical practice. Seeking a like-minded buyer, he found one in Robert I. Curtis (114); the New-Jersey-born, Philadelphia-trained printer had conducted a series of papers in towns on the southern shores of Lakes Erie and Huron in the years after the War of 1812, and had closed the last of those in April 1820, facing fast multiplying competition in an area that could barely support one weekly paper. Tonner's *Virginia North-Western Gazette* was an enticing alternative, and Tonner sold it to him in September 1820. Curtis conducted the paper, soon called the *Wheeling Gazette*, until 1835.

Tonner remained in Wheeling until about 1835 as well. The federal census shows a growth of his family from two to eight children over those fifteen years, though some genealogical sources report he had eleven in all, ten daughters and one son. Sometime in the 1830s, Tonner moved his family to central Pennsylvania where he evidently lived out his life. But the most visible legacy that the Irish physician left was still in Wheeling, in his founding of first stable weekly newspaper there.

### ***Personal Data***

Born:	ca. 1794	Ireland.
Married:	ca. 1815	A "Nancy" in Pennsylvania?
Died:	before 1860	Pennsylvania?
Children:	Possibly ten daughters and one son; only recorded names: Jemima, Elizabeth, Mary, Sarah Ann, and Hugh.	

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Rice & Brown, *West Virginia*; Federal Decennial Census (1820-50); genealogical material from discussions posted on Ancestry.com (March 2013).