

421 USTICK, JOHN G. – [JOHN GANO USTICK]

Publisher

Lexington, Abingdon, Wytheville

Publisher of the *Rockbridge Repository* (1804) at Lexington with John McMullin (298); of the *Holston Intelligencer* (1806-10) and the succeeding *Political Prospect* (1810-20) at Abingdon; and of the *Wythe Gazette* (1820-27) at Wytheville, then called Evansham.

Ustick was a Philadelphia-trained printer who came to the southern Valley of Virginia to establish himself independently from older cousins in the print trade in that competitive locale. As a result, he conducted three different papers in three separate venues in the area over the course of a thirty-year-long residence in the state.

The Ustick family of Philadelphia was one that had a foot in the worlds of both the printing trade and the Baptist ministry, a result of the activities of its *pater familias*, the Rev. Thomas Ustick (1753-1803). He came to his calling early in life after being baptized by the Rev. John Gano (1727-1804) of New York; he prepared himself for a ministerial career by attending the Rhode Island College (today Brown University), graduating in 1771; after preaching in pulpits in New York and Connecticut, he was ordained in 1777; in 1782, he was called from a Massachusetts church to the pulpit of Philadelphia's Baptist Church, where he held forth until his early death in 1803. In the then national capital, Rev. Ustick became a bookseller and librarian as well, out of a need to support his growing family, which eventually reached thirteen children, all with his only spouse, Hannah Whitear/Whittier (1750-1837). Their first son, Stephen Clegg Ustick (1773-1837), was bound out as an apprentice in one of the city's printing offices associated with the father; he achieved trade independence in 1794 as the partner of John Lang (1769-1836) in the firm of Lang & Ustick, which promptly became one of publisher Mathew Carey's favorite printers. Simultaneously, their office also became the primary press for the local Baptist association headed by his father.

Young John Gano Ustick – named for his father's celebrated baptizer – was similarly bound out in adolescence, being a middle son in a set of siblings that spanned the ages of twenty-seven-years to one-year in 1800. When a yellow-fever epidemic struck Philadelphia in 1801, the Rev. Ustick moved those still living with their parents to nearby Burlington, New Jersey, where son Stephen had set up a job-printing office after the federal government moved to Washington. John Gano, then seventeen, joined them and remained there once the plague passed, assisting his older brother in his business. But when their father died in April 1803, John began seeking opportunities for his own trade independence far from the competitive environment of Philadelphia. Ustick found such in an offer to print a weekly in Lexington, Virginia, leaving his brother's employ in May 1804 to accept that tender.

The *Rockbridge Repository* there was the first (and only) journalistic venture pursued by county native John McMullin; begun in August 1801, his weekly was the town's first paper; yet it appears that McMullin was not trained as a printer, and so depended on short-term contracts with tradesmen to produce the paper for him. Thus the five-year-long run of his *Repository* was marked by frequent suspensions from lack of help, of money, and of paper. When Ustick arrived in June 1804, McMullin had just recently restarted the paper – the sole "Republican Paper on this side of the Blue Ridge" – after a suspending publication for about

three months over the preceding winter. But his paper and financial problems continued, undermining the weekly's viability. Moreover, Ustick's arrangement with McMullin appears to have been a simple six-month contract that the printer declined to renew in November 1804, dissolving the firm of McMullin & Ustick. Yet it also seems Ustick stayed in Lexington for a time, as the press continued operating until his subsequent removal to Abingdon in late 1805, after McMullin finally closed his troubled paper in August 1805.

In the year following the end of his alliance with McMullin, Ustick evidently pursued backers for a new weekly elsewhere in the southern Valley, finding such in the Washington County seat of Abingdon. That market town was emerging as a regional commercial center then, so had the potential to support a journal that could end the town's dependence on Lynchburg or Staunton papers. The area was also heavily Republican in its politics with a sizable Baptist population, constituencies that fit Ustick's background and interests. So in January 1806, the printer opened his *Holston Intelligencer and Abingdon Advertiser* there. The geography seen in that lengthy title demonstrates Ustick's intent to aid in the town's development as the trade hub for the valleys of the three branches of the Holston River that stretched into Tennessee to the southwest. The weekly also reveals that Ustick learned from his Lexington experience, as he required payments of subscriptions in advance, so avoiding the need for costly collection efforts – at least at the outset.

Ustick unmistakably understood his new readership, as the weekly continued for fourteen years. During those years, the journal was "uncompromising in its Republicanism," having backed "the policies of Madison and supporting his administration upon all occasions," particularly during the War of 1812. At the outset of the war, he even altered the title of his weekly to match that partisan viewpoint, now issuing *The Political Prospect*. His support for the administration was not simply oratorical; Ustick volunteered for military service; when the war began, he enlisted as a private in the local militia company, but he did not actually serve until early 1815, when he joined a western rifle company raised then to assist in the defense of Norfolk. In the post-war period, that overt patriotism reinforced his standing in southwest Virginia. So too did his support for the Staunton Convention of August 1816, which pushed for changes in the Virginia state constitution to make representation in the General Assembly conform to population, so increasing western influence. These choices allowed Ustick to build a stable business, unlike what Lexington had been.

Yet the monetary contraction accompanying the Panic of 1819 apparently changed Ustick's situation dramatically. Sometime in early 1820, he moved his business from Abingdon to Wytheville, some 50 miles down the valley to the northeast; the *Political Prospect* went with him and became the *Wythe Gazette*; Abingdon would wait until 1831 for a successor.

What is most interesting about the move is that Ustick rented a press to produce his weekly there, suggesting he lost the press he used in Abingdon in late 1819, a date corresponding to the last surviving copies of the *Political Prospect*. That rented press was owned by Robert Engledow (158), the Wythe County merchant-planter who had conducted the town's first paper a decade before with William A. Dromgoole (149), his tradesman brother-in-law; as Engledow still owned that press, he may have induced Ustick's relocation. Though Engledow died about the time of the move, his estate accounts record him leasing his press to Ustick,

provided that the printer did not remove that press from town. The proviso suggests that Ustick's Abingdon business, despite its longevity, had not left him with a press to move, or with the wherewithal needed to buy the Wytheville press outright. So it is clear that Ustick suffered a major financial reverse in late 1819, and he was either pushed out of Abingdon by that problem, or pulled to Wytheville by a proposition from Engledow, or both.

Ustick would use the old *Republican Luminary* press for at least another two years (the term of the lease) and perhaps until his departure from Wythe in 1834. His *Wythe Gazette* was apparently just as successful as had been the *Holston Intelligencer* before; but over time, the urban-born editor found himself more and more out of step with his rural Jacksonian readers, having embraced the economic perspective of Henry Clay from nearby Kentucky; about 1824, he attempted to make that regional association clearer by once again altering the name of his weekly, this time employing the title *Western Virginia Argus and Farmers' Register*. Still, the struggle seems to have continued, as he sold his recast *Argus* to the firm of Smyth, McComes, & Foster at the end of June 1828 and retired from journalism.

The printer remained in Wythe County for another six years before joining other Ustick relatives in Alabama. It was part of a dispersion of a new generation of that Pennsylvania family that spread from Illinois to Texas, the latter being where at least two of Ustick's children died in the 1880s. In his case, he relocated to Sumter County, Alabama, a county formed in 1832 out of the land concessions compelled from the Choctaw Nation in 1830. Settling in the county seat of Livingston, Ustick lived out the rest of his days as a gentleman planter, surrounded by his children and grandchildren, as well as those of a sister and of Thomas Whittier Ustick, the one brother who had joined him in Virginia in 1806. He died at his Livingston home in September 1844 at the age of sixty.

NB: The shift of Ustick's business from Abingdon to Wytheville has led to some confusion in bibliographic sources over its timing and the newspaper titles involved. The 1903 *History of Southwest Virginia* by L. P. Summers appears to be the source of that confusion, given the few surviving copies of each Ustick paper that he saw; his assessments were repeated by Cappon, though not by Brigham. Successions and titles reported here are drawn from more recent secondary sources and from records of the U.S. Newspaper Program (1982-2011).

Personal Data

Born: Jan. 24 1784 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Married: June 14 1804 Jane Berry @ Rockbridge County, Virginia.
Died: Sept. 4 1844 Livingston, Sumter County, Alabama.
Children: Hannah (b. 1805); William King (b. 1806); Elvira L. (b. 1812); Edward Harris (b. 1814); Elizabeth Berry (b. 1815); Jane Catherine (b. 1819).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Kegley, *Wythe County*; Summers, *Southwest Virginia*; Cathcart, *Baptist Encyclopedia*; *Ustick Family Register*; *Early Alabama Newspaper Notices*; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress.