

444 WILLCOCKS, HENRY

Printer, Publisher

Winchester, Richmond

Publisher of the *Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* (1787-88) with Matthias Bartgis (024); then of the *Virginia Centinel or Winchester Mercury* (1788) with Richard Bowen (045); also an itinerant journeyman (1786-87) working in Richmond.

Willcocks was a journeyman printer who has left a spare decade-long trace in the history of the American printing trade. Yet in that time he was proprietor of five different newspapers in Virginia and Pennsylvania, a noteworthy record, before leaving the country in 1796.

Where Willcocks was born and trained is unknown, but the context of his first newspaper suggests that he was part of the same trade network that produced and sustained Matthias Bartgis, his first partner. If so, then Willcocks was either from the Philadelphia area, where Bartgis had trained with the celebrated master-printer William Bradford (1719-91), or from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where Bartgis started life as an independent printer; given Willcocks later attachment to that rural area, it seems likely that it was his birthplace.

That first paper was in Winchester, though that locale was not his first choice. On January 1, 1787, Willcocks issued a prospectus for a weekly that would be published in Tappahannock, the seat of Essex County on the Rappahannock River; *The Virginia Gazette and Hobb's Hole Advertiser* proposed to serve readers in the counties of the Northern Neck opposite Essex who used Tappahannock as their trade entrepôt. That town was an interesting choice for a mercantile advertiser being essentially equidistant from the major port cities of Alexandria, Baltimore, Norfolk, and Richmond. Yet his plan was flawed, as Timothy Green (194), the job-printer in nearby Fredericksburg, was simultaneously circulating a prospectus for his new *Virginia Herald and Fredericksburg Advertiser* in that larger port town, appealing to the same subscribers as Willcocks was then. Green's project makes this offering seem to be a desperate ploy to draw the mercantile focus of the Rappahannock River Valley away from Fredericksburg by the Tappahannock merchants who backed Willcocks, especially as Green already conducted an office there while Willcocks was a transient journeyman without a press, laboring in one of Richmond's three printing offices during the lengthy Assembly session of 1786-87. Fredericksburg's primacy in the region was confirmed by the publication of Green's first *Virginia Herald* in June 1787, with Willcocks then employed in the Frederick, Maryland, office of Matthias Bartgis.

The lack of support for his planned journal was probably a godsend for Willcocks, as 1787 was also the year that Bartgis determined to expand his business into two new locales – one in Pennsylvania and one in Virginia. In both places, Bartgis employed a business tactic that he would repeat throughout his career: this older practical printer financed a younger tradesman in starting a paper at a location distant from his Frederick office with each partner sharing in the proceeds. The unencumbered Willcocks thus became his partner in a bilingual press office in Winchester. Bartgis came to Frederick from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1785 to start publishing the German-language *Marylandische Zeitung*; the next year, he began an English-language counterpart to the *Zeitung*, his *Maryland Chronicle*; commonly known as *Bartgis's Gazette*, it was a newspaper that long survived him. The immediate

success of both Frederick journals encouraged him to expand his business to the east and west along the Great Wagon Road in 1787.

In April 1787, four months after the Tappahannock prospectus issued, Bartgis and Willcocks announced the formation of a partnership that would conduct a job-printing concern in Winchester beginning that May; they also stated that their new office would issue a weekly paper there – *The Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* – once a sufficient number of subscriptions had been gathered. This time the journal that Willcocks proposed did not face a local competitor; moreover, the closest weeklies then were those of Bartgis in Frederick fifty miles away, essentially guaranteeing that there would be distinct advertising spheres for each journal to ensure their survivals.

Still, competition for Bartgis would eventually arrive in the town that was then the key market center for the northern Shenandoah Valley – and Willcocks enabled that effort. His arrangement with Bartgis in Winchester was apparently designed to last just a single year, giving Willcocks the opportunity to attempt another independent venture elsewhere once the agreement expired. But rather than build a new office in an untried locale, Willcocks remained in Winchester, joining with Richard Bowen (045), an Alexandria journeyman and schoolmaster who had been a part of the first attempted daily in Baltimore, to produce *The Virginia Centinel or the Winchester Mercury* in April 1788. Their journal, known later as the *Winchester Gazette*, proved to be more attuned to Winchester's mercantile community than was that of Bartgis, and so it prospered immediately. Yet Willcocks left Bowen and Winchester in December 1788 to take on a new weekly in York, Pennsylvania.

Bartgis had targeted York in his 1787 expansion as well; there he opened *The Pennsylvania Chronicle or York Weekly Advertiser* that October with editor Thomas Roberts as its resident proprietor. But by mid-1788, the pair had only succeeded in angering local political leaders who supported the new federal constitution by the open debate on ratification that they had allowed into their weekly in its first year; those leaders withdrew their patronage, the newspaper failed, and Roberts moved their press to Harrisburg to try again, apparently keeping that tool out of the hands of its previous owner. Meanwhile, those same leaders began looking for a suitable replacement for Bartgis & Roberts, focusing on Willcocks, who had built the press that Roberts took away with him. With a deal in hand, Willcocks formed a new partnership with the printing brothers James and John Edies as the firm of Messrs. Edies & Willcocks, which issued the initial *Pennsylvania Herald and York General Advertiser* on January 7, 1789. This third paper in three years would prove to be the one that Willcocks was associated with the longest, fully three years. But eventually, the brothers took control of the press, buying out Willcocks at the very end of 1791.

In 1792, Willcocks seems to have resided in southwestern York County, as he is reported to have purchased lots in the prospective town of Oxford, located in today's Adams County. Then in early 1793, he was printing German-language tracts in the nearby town of Hanover. That flexibility brought him an offer later that year to relocate to Ephrata in neighboring Lancaster County where he published a very short-lived bilingual weekly – the *Lancaster County Political Mirror* – with Solomon Mäyer, a printer who afterward published a German paper in York in completion with the Edie brothers. But Willcocks was drawn to the county

seat of Lancaster in early 1794 by an offer to conduct the county's journal-of-record there, so bringing the Ephrata paper to an end. His new *Lancaster Journal* appeared on June 18th, a paper that has survived, in various guises, to the present day.

Willcocks was named the postmaster of Lancaster the following year, and so he added a printing-partner in William Hamilton to assist in the project. Hamilton would continue the paper until January 1819; but Willcocks left the *Journal* in July 1796, just over two years into its run, to pursue an opportunity elsewhere. What that opportunity was is unknown, but where he went is certain. He travelled first to Philadelphia to settle his outstanding account with the Postmaster General, assigning his Oxford lots to the government as payment. The clerk then noted in the printer's official record that he was bound for India. Willcocks never returned to the land of his birth, or so it seems, leaving his fate unknown.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Morton, *Winchester*; Jensen & Becker, *First Federal Elections*; Knauss, *Social Conditions among Pennsylvania Germans*; Scharf, *Western Maryland*; Carter & Glossenbrenner, *York County*; Prowell *York County*; Ellis & Evans, *Lancaster County*.