

## 448 WILLIAMSON, JAMES

### Publisher

### Staunton

Publisher of *The Spirit of the Press* (1811-12) at Staunton, hiring Charles B. Rhoades (352).

Williamson was a merchant in Staunton who was publisher of a Republican weekly there. His brief connection to the Virginia print trade was as a transitional figure between two trained printers as proprietor of a partisan press.

The scant evidence of Williamson's life and career as a journalist comes from a single surviving issue of his newspaper and the record of two legal suits in the Augusta County court. Hence nothing is known of his origins or of his fate after that evidentiary period. It appears that he arrived in Augusta County from Baltimore in about 1808 in the company of his wife and her two sisters, one of whom married Staunton merchant John Heiskell shortly thereafter. The women were all mantua makers (an over-gown worn then by women) who evidently supplied Williamson's retail business, which was located in Staunton in 1810 and in Harrisonburg in 1814.

In the early spring of 1811, Williamson acquired the subscription list of the *Staunton Eagle*; Jacob D. Dietrich (135) had successfully published that paper for the preceding four years, thanks to its German readership and the troubled transition of Staunton's Federalist paper from the bankrupt hands of William G. Lyford (272) to the solvent ones of Isaac Collett (100) in 1810-11; but Dietrich was then in the process of relocating to Lancaster, Ohio, where he would reinvigorate the dying *Ohio Eagle*. It seems Dietrich hoped to continue the *Staunton Eagle* with newly hired hands, but apparently he found no one suitable for the task; so he closed the paper and sold his list to Williamson. The merchant then hired a printer, Charles B. Rhoades, to conduct the trade side of the business while he managed its editorial side, using the press that Lyford had left in the hands of George Mitchell, his brother-in-law.

Williamson clearly believed it was essential to continue publishing a Republican paper, as Dietrich's had been, in what was the seat of "Old Federal Augusta." His new *Spirit of the Press* issued its first number in April 1811, about a month after the demise of Dietrich's *Eagle*. The motto on its masthead proclaimed that "The Democratic cause we will maintain, unawed by Fear, and unburied by Gain." In its prospectus, Williamson eschewed the usual grandiose pledges of such inaugural addresses, claiming that he had

"nothing to boast of but an honest desire to promote the true interests of his country. This he believes will be best done by the detection and exposure of falsehood, and the dissemination of truth and correct principles. He has nothing to promise but a faithful endeavor to discharge this important duty."

Despite this optimistic and confident start, it appears that Rhoades failed to abide by the terms of his contract with Williamson over the ensuing weeks, leading one Federalist paper in Philadelphia to describe the *Spirit of the Press* as "a dirty little 'democratic' paper dish-cloth, eked forth sometimes weekly, sometimes once in a fortnight ..." So to sweeten his deal with Rhoades, Williamson offered an additional dollar per week if the printer would adhere strictly to the contract until it expired in April 1812.

Rhoades, however, walked away from Williamson's employ in November 1811, immediately filing suit against his employer in the Staunton's Hustings Court, claiming that he was due that additional dollar during the course of the year, rather than at the end of the contract as Williamson asserted, and so had been defrauded by him in the amount of "fifty-four dollars and ninety-two cents." Rhoades carried the day at trial and Williamson was obliged to sign a note for the disputed sum, even as he promptly appealed the judgment.

The effect on the *Spirit of the Press* was that it ceased publication at about the time that Rhoades left its office – November 15, 1811. But it was not the end of the printer's work in Staunton. Once the court had ruled in his favor, Rhoades secured the use of that now idle press – evidently through the offices of Williamson's security, John McDowell and Morgan Morris – and began publishing a new Republican paper called *The People's Friend* starting in September 1812. That newspaper followed the *Spirit* into oblivion in late 1813, most likely because of Rhoades's death.

Such an outcome is inferred from Williamson's continuing litigation. In May 1813, Rhoades sold the unpaid note that Williamson had tendered in conformance to the 1812 judgement against him at a marked discount (\$10); the buyer, one Seth Norton, then attempted to use the note to purchase a carriage body from Williamson, leading to a new suit over whether either man had defrauded the other in that transaction; while Rhoades was the financier at the root of this new dispute, he does not appear in the case record when trial was held on this matter in February 1814, suggesting that he died sometime between the trial date and October 2, 1813, when the last known number of his paper issued. Williamson lost this case as well and was assessed costs. Interestingly, Williamson was arrested for non-payment of the note to Rhoades before encountering Norton; he posted bond and was restricted to a set boundary in Staunton; after filing his appeal, he felt no longer bound by the conditions of his bail, and violated the boundary in his dealings with Norton, and so was ordered jailed, without possible bond, until both the Norton and Rhoades cases were resolved.

After the Norton case ended, McDowell and Morris sued for the right to sell Williamson's press at auction, after having had to pay Mitchell for Williamson's non-payment of the note he had given to buy Lyford's office three years before. Then, later that year, John Heiskell and his wife filed suit against Williamson seeking to recover monies that they thought due them from the settlement of Williamson's wife's estate, adding insult to injury. It seems that Williamson lost on all counts; McDowell and Morris were allowed the proceeds from the sale of the press in January 1815; meanwhile, Williamson removed to nearby Harrisonburg, effectively fleeing the jurisdiction of the Augusta County Court of which Heiskell was now a member, leaving uncertain the outcome of that subsequent case. As a result, Williamson is last seen, in the record of that suit, plying his mercantile trade in Harrisonburg in 1815.

***No Personal Data yet verified.***

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; *Annals of Augusta County*; Chalkley, *Chronicles*; *Williamson v. Rhoades* (1814-004) and *Heiskell v. Williamson* (1816-050) in Augusta County Chancery Court Records; and *McDowell and Morris v. Williamson* in Staunton Hustings Court Records.