

449 WILLIS, NATHANIEL – [NATHANIEL WILLIS, SR.]

Printer, Publisher

Winchester, Shepherdstown, Martinsburg

Printer and publisher of *Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* (1788-89) with Henry Willcocks (444) and Matthias Bartgis (024); then of *Willis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* (1790), which moved to Shepherdstown as *The Potowmac Guardian and Berkeley Advertiser* (1790-92) and then to Martinsburg as *The Potomac Guardian* (1792-99), briefly with Nathaniel Baldwin (018); father of Nathaniel Willis, Jr. (450).

Nathaniel Willis has been a misrepresented figure in the history of the American printing trade, portrayed as a transient tradesman who established a series of unimportant papers in western Virginia. Yet most of what was written about him before World War II was based on flawed memories and erroneous assumptions – rather than on surviving documentary evidence – and those writings are still presumed as authoritative among scholars and lay-people alike today. But the real Willis was an intriguing character, though often ill-fated.

Boston Beginnings

Willis was first and foremost a trained artisan, bred to his craft as a printer in Boston, the publishing center of colonial America. Consequently, he was also raised in the midst of the growing hostility to imperial authority among merchants and artisans there in the 1760s and 1770s. Born in 1755, Willis was descended from one of John Winthrop's band of exile settlers in 1630, George Willis, and from the Puritan divine, Rev. John Bailey; his father Charles was a sail-maker who was a part of the Samuel-Adams-led Sons of Liberty and who had a hand in demolishing the North End residence of Governor Thomas Hutchinson (1711-80) during the riots of August 1765 over the governor's reported support of the reviled and repealed Stamp Act. Not surprisingly, young Willis soon joined the Sons of Liberty as well and so was among the band of Bostonians who destroyed the cargo of tea onboard three East India merchantmen docked in the port in December 1773 – the so-called Boston Tea Party. Willis was just shy of his nineteenth birthday at the time and evidently devoted to his mother, Abigail Belknap, who received a small portion of the ruined cargo from her son, free of duty, to tide her over through the ensuing shortage of tea.

That evening Willis accompanied Benjamin Edes (1732-1803), a member of the Loyal Nine who had founded the Sons of Liberty. He was also co-proprietor of the *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, then the most radical newspaper published in New England and possibly in America. Willis was completing his training that December in the printing office that Edes conducted with John Gill (1732-85) and so had helped them produce the pamphlets and handbills that regularly fueled New England's resistance to the Parliamentary government's policies; that association made his apprenticeship a period of political radicalization as well as one of trade education, reinforcing the foundation set in his father's house before.

The firm of Edes & Gill was obliged to suspend publication of the *Boston Gazette* following the British retreat from Lexington and Concord in April 1775 in consequence of its anti-authoritarian perspective. Edes took their press to nearby Watertown to restart the paper in June 1775, and remained there until November 1776. But by then, Willis was no longer a

part of the *Gazette* office. When British forces evacuated the besieged port in March 1776, he returned to Boston with an eye toward starting his own journal. In July, Willis joined with Edward Eveleth Powars (1749-1834), another Boston-born and trained printer, in buying the Cambridge-issued *New-England Chronicle or the Essex Gazette* of Samuel Hall (1740-1807), formerly of Salem. Within a week, they had moved that office into the devastated port and began publishing the now renamed *New England Chronicle*. The perspective and tone of the inaugural address Powars & Willis presented their readers then would be repeated in all of the journals that Willis published. As their weekly would continue

'in support of our invaluable rights and liberties, we hope to be favored with the custom of all the late and present subscribers of this paper. They may be assured, that the character it has hitherto sustained in exposing, condemning, and execrating the Jesuitical and infernal machinations of Tories and tyrants, and in rendering praise and honor to the manly and virtuous supporters of the GLORIOUS CAUSE OF AMERICA, we shall, with assiduity and zeal, endeavor to persevere."

That November, the partners gave their paper a new dress and a new title consistent with the political events of the past summer, *The Independent Chronicle*, a name that continued until the journal's demise in 1840. In this guise, Powars & Willis provided ample space for the writings of Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and other "prominent Whigs" leading the Revolutionary effort in Massachusetts.

The *Chronicle* was issued continuously during the war years, avoiding the disruptions seen in newspapers to the south, thanks to the absence of military activity after 1776. The office also published more than 500 individual imprints in those years, mostly small pamphlets and speeches. Powars remained with Willis until March 1779, when he sold his interest to his partner and set out on his own; Willis, in turn, continued as the *Chronicle's* sole proprietor until January 1, 1784, when he sold the business to the partnership of Thomas Adams (1757-99) and John Nourse (1762-90); they continued the same sharp critiques of authoritarian governance as had Powars & Willis, resulting in Adams being prosecuted for seditious libel under the Alien & Sedition Acts in 1799, shortly before his death – one caused, many claimed, by that unconstitutional prosecution.

Willis evidently sold the *Chronicle* at the very end of 1783 in order to rejoin Powars in a new semi-weekly paper, the *American Herald*; that journal commenced on January 19, 1784, with Willis appearing on its masthead a week later, once his transaction with Adams & Nourse was finished. Their *Herald* continued to be a thorn in the side of the mercantile elite in eastern Massachusetts who had acceded to political power with the British withdrawal.

By 1786, the state government, then in the hands of those merchants, faced an open revolt from farmers and storekeepers in the western counties of Massachusetts over laws passed by the legislature that allowed for the speedy dispossession of property owned by those unable to pay their debts; that revolt broke out into armed conflict in August 1786, as a result of the closing of courts in those counties to prevent law suits from proceeding – as had been effected by "patriots" in the pre-war period. Yet before that outbreak, there was pressure being brought on printers and publishers in the state to suppress publication of articles and pamphlets sympathetic to the cause of debtor relief. Most famous was the

prosecution of the chief justice of the Court of Common Pleas in Berkshire County, Dr. William Whiting (1730-92), for reading, in open court, his suppressed commentary on the legislature's recent actions; a similar attempt at suppression was seen in the late 1786 launch of a competing pro-merchant paper in Springfield, the *Hampshire Gazette*, financed by eastern interests hoping to draw patronage away from the locally supported *Hampshire Herald* and so stifle resistance.

In this environment, Willis decided that discretion was the better part of valor, being readily associated with the cause of debtor relief; he was then a widower with five children under the age of ten and could not afford the complications arising from threatened prosecutions for seditious libel from aggrieved legislators and officials. So on June 17, 1786, he placed a notice in his *American Herald* announcing his intention to leave Massachusetts:

"deeming Liberty of the Press the greatest bulwark of freedom, and whatever tends to restrain the one, must operate to overthrow the other --- As the Press is so shackled in this State, (he blushes to say the only one in the Union) those who derive their support from it most, unavoidably severely feel the oppression under which it labours, and resort to happier climes to avoid the ruin impending."

His specific problem was a tax on advertisements, which extended to the paid insertions of political content, recently passed by the legislature to help suppress the ongoing debate. That legislation compelled him to

"seek that situation where he can find a maintenance, and where his art is uncontroled and unembarrassed, fully persuaded that he escapes the ruin which must soon overtake his brethren who remain, with whom he sincerely sympathizes."

He went on to offer his three-story dwelling house for sale "on very advantageous terms." On July 17th, Powars took over sole ownership of their *Herald* and by the following spring Willis had left Boston headed for the "unsettled West" of the southern interior; eventually he landed in Winchester, Virginia.

Virginia Publisher

Willis soon found common cause with Matthias Bartgis, the entrepreneurial publisher of Frederick, Maryland. In early 1787, he was putting in motion a plan to expand his bilingual printing business into the towns of York, Pennsylvania, and Winchester, Virginia, where there was a mix of German- and English-language readers. Bartgis formed a partnership that April with Pennsylvania printer Henry Willcocks to run a job-printing office in Winchester; that office would issue the town's first weekly paper— *The Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* – once a sufficient number of subscriptions had been gathered, which came in July. But Bartgis also knew that his arrangement with Willcocks was for but a single year and he began a search for a replacement to Willcocks; Willis appeared on his doorstep sometime that summer. So by late 1787, Willis was resident in Winchester, heading up a household where Willcocks resided and conducting the editorial side of the new weekly for his printer-boarder.

However, competition for that paper was soon in coming. Willcocks left the Bartgis & Willis

office in the spring of 1788 to join Richard Bowen (045) in producing *The Virginia Centinel or The Winchester Mercury*, a purely English paper unlike its German-sprinkled competitor. It seems clear that Willis soon understood the varying audiences for each paper; Bartgis had targeted the assimilating German population, as he had in Frederick, while Bowen had set his sights on the growing community English-speaking merchants; Willis recognized that neither newspaper served the majority of the English-speaking population of the northern Shenandoah Valley. Those people were, as Willis was, the middling to poor descendants of early colonists, farmers and tradesmen who had served in the state's militia during the Revolutionary War, and who now hoped to enjoy the fruits of the liberty they had fought for then. These residents were all potential subscribers to a journal that pressed for an equitable apportionment of representation and taxation in Virginia, as had the *American Herald* of Powars & Willis in Boston. So when his contract with Bartgis expired at the end of 1789, Willis set out to start a third paper in Winchester.

That choice may have been determined earlier in 1789 when the firm of Bartgis & Willis began publishing a German-language edition of their weekly paper: the *Virginische Zeitung*. That affiliate journal likely confirmed his earlier assessment of reading audiences in the area and so guaranteed the end of his partnership with Bartgis; the *Zeitung* died shortly after his departure. Willis would not again employ the German-language in any other publications after this, suggesting that he depended on German-speaking journeymen to set such type in the Winchester office. The use of two languages and issuing an alternative language edition were essentially accommodations of a shrinking ethno-linguistic minority and not a viable foundation for a successful journal in a region that was held together economically and politically by a common use of English.

Still, Willis was attempting a third weekly in a town that appears to have had difficulty in supporting two then – and he quickly understood that difficulty. *Willis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* issued its first number on March 20, 1790, ten weeks after his parting from Bartgis. Yet the experienced journalist closed that paper after just six months rather than continue challenging his established competitors. Instead, he simply moved his office some thirty miles to the northeast and set up shop in Shepherdstown, a small port town on the Potomac River, upstream from Harper's Ferry. There he restarted his weekly paper in November with the title of *The Potowmac Guardian and Berkeley Advertiser*.

His choice of Shepherdstown appears curious, given its smaller size than Winchester, even considering the competition in that town. But items from the *Potowmac Guardian* reprinted elsewhere during the first month Willis operated in this new venue suggest that the move was tied to concurrent considerations of where to locate the new national capital city. The so-called "Residence Act" of July 1790 authorized a presidential commission to find a site "on the river Potomack, at some place between the mouths of the Eastern Branch and the Connogochegue," which would then acquire 10-square-miles of land on both sides of the river and build the necessary buildings before December 1800. This stretch of river runs from Alexandria, Virginia, to Williamsport, Maryland, including the Shepherdstown area. In November 1790, a notice Willis published early that month – perhaps in his first number there – was reprinted in distant newspapers, wherein leading citizens from Shepherdstown, Charlestown, and Martinsburg asked their neighbors for contributions to a fund that could

be used to buy such a site in eastern Berkeley County which, in turn, would be given to the federal government under the provisions of the Residence Act. Such an outcome seems to have been more than speculative in the fall of 1790, given the state of the commissioners' deliberations at that time; if so then Willis's relocation was clearly an attempt to establish his business as the leading press in the new capital, as did happen with other printers once the site of the District of Columbia was certain. By March 1791, however, Washington had settled on a site at the southern end of the prescribed stretch of the river, which brought an end to that advocacy campaign.

In consequence of this setback, it appears that Willis decided that the spurned river-port of Shepherdstown was not a viable locale for his newspaper and job-press; rather, it was clear that Martinsburg, the Berkeley County seat, was destined to become the area's commercial center as a result of its location on the Great Wagon Road; that road facilitated travel down the center of the Valley of Virginia to Tennessee and beyond, making that town a greater catalyst to the region's commerce than were the older river-port towns of Shepherdstown and Harper's Ferry. So sometime between December 27, 1791 and April 3, 1792, he moved his journal and office again, this time to Martinsburg. Over the ensuing eight years, Willis conducted the only paper issued in that market town, and profited from the venture.

Willis became a part of the fabric of the northern valley during the 1790s, sustained by a new wife from a large family with roots among the early settlers in the area. Mary Cartmell gave Willis another six children to add to the five that came south from Boston in 1788. The boys all appear to have assisted their father in his printing office, though only one of them went on to a career in journalism: Nathaniel Willis, Jr. The scion left Martinsburg in April 1796 to apprentice in the Boston office of the *Independent Chronicle* under Thomas Adams until 1799, then under Ebenezer Rhoades (1775-1818) to 1801; after two years in Rhoades's employ as a journeyman, young Willis was induced to relocate to Portland by Jeffersonians in the District of Maine to publish a partisan paper there that opposed the three Federalist newspapers in the district; his *Eastern Argus* issued in September 1803 in a partnership with Calvin Day (1777-1824), also a Boston-trained printer. The path the son followed shows that his political views reflected those of both his father and grandfather before him; he was not inclined to support authoritarian government or limits on personal freedoms.

Republican Firebrand

Such a perspective had brought the father grief in Boston, and in the latter 1790s, it would bring him further grief in Martinsburg. As the political divisions between Federalists and Republicans deepened after 1793, Willis employed his *Potomac Guardian* to criticize the increasing authoritarianism of Federalist officials both in Philadelphia and Richmond. That process began when criticisms of the military expedition launched against the Whiskey Rebellion in the nearby counties of western Pennsylvania found space in his pages in 1794; those censures only grew with the election of John Adams in 1796, and the Jay Treaty with Britain in 1797, reaching a peak with the passage of the Alien & Sedition Acts in the summer of 1798 and the subsequent passage of the *Virginia Resolution* by the General Assembly that December. The commentaries he published beget a growing anger in Martinsburg's mercantile community, who were the principal Federalists in the area and who were also

dependent on Willis's weekly for the advertising they needed to sustain their businesses. Eventually anger became action. At first, Willis found his property vandalized occasionally, most notably when trees on wood lots that he owned on Dry Run were cut down in August 1797, so depriving him of firewood for the coming winter. Then his advertisers began taking their business to Bowen in Winchester, forcing Willis to take on Nathaniel Baldwin as a financial partner for a time in early 1798 as the means for retiring short-term notes then due. But in advance of the spring elections for delegates to the 1799 General Assembly, these clandestine attacks became visible and violent.

In early March 1799, Willis published a "letter" from a local Republican who insinuated that Berkeley Federalists had impeded the passage of Jeffersonian newspapers and pamphlets through the county's post offices, and that the suppression had been aided and abetted by one Magnus Tate, an incumbent Federalist delegate from Berkeley then campaigning for reelection. The morning after the communication ran in the *Guardian*, Tate appeared in his office in the company of William Riddle, a justice on the Berkeley County Court, demanding to know who had written the piece, evidently intent on filing charges of libel against the author. But Willis stymied their effort by refusing their demands and dismissing them from the premises. Unfortunately for the publisher, the two men returned that afternoon and physically attacked Willis; evidently, he was saved from a fatal beating by the intervention of Armstrong Charlton (088), a journeyman then working in his office.

Neither assailant was prosecuted for the deed, but other Federalist leaders in Martinsburg moved immediately to assure the demise of the *Guardian* and so remove Willis from their midst without further violence. Within a month, they had convinced John Alburdis (004), a young printer in the *Guardian* office just completing his training under Willis, to publish a competing journal backed with considerable financial subsidies from local merchants, who could then completely cease advertising in the *Guardian*; his new *Berkeley Intelligencer* issued its first number on April 3rd. The solid foundation of the *Guardian* quickly dissolved in the following weeks, with Willis also suffering from the late-night vandalism of his in-town residence while his family was away that August. By fall, his financial situation had become untenable and Willis was searching for a way out of his dilemma; he found one close at hand in Charlton; he was an English émigré, a refugee from the silencing of "radical" voices in the British press in the mid-1790s who was now ready to resume his journalistic career in Martinsburg. Willis turned his newspaper over to Charlton at the end of October, telling readers that his successor was in "every way qualified for the arduous undertaking," having impeccable democratic principles. While the change in ownership probably cheered local Federalists initially, the longer-term effect was that Willis had empowered someone whose editorial views were more problematic for the county's Federalists than had been those of Willis before. Charlton made those views inescapable by renaming his paper the *Republican Atlas* in April 1800 and bringing Tate's service in the Assembly to an end through his pointed commentaries during that year's elections.

Ohio and Retirement

By the spring of 1800, however, Willis was far removed from that setting. He had taken his family from Martinsburg to a new residence in Chillicothe, Ohio – then the capital of the

Northwest Territory. There he conducted the printing office of Edmund Freeman (1764-1800), publisher of *Freemans's Journal and Chillicothe Advertiser*. He had been a younger colleague of Willis in Boston before the publisher removed to Virginia in 1786; in the mid-1790s, Freeman also went west, landing in Cincinnati where he acquired *The Centinel of the North-Western Territory* in 1796; when the territorial capital was moved to Chillicothe in the winter of 1799-1800, Freeman moved his paper there as well, so becoming the printer for the territorial government. However, Freeman fell ill during the relocation and recruited the now displaced Willis to attend his press for him; but Freeman's health did not improve and he retired from business that September, selling his *Journal* to Willis and his new partner, Winn Winship (1760-1812), also a Jeffersonian expatriate from Berkeley. On October 10th, the firm of Winship & Willis issued their new *Scioto Gazette and Chillicothe Advertiser* for the first time, just two weeks before Freeman succumbed to his affliction.

The *Scioto Gazette* proved an effective stage for promoting the interests of both Winship and Willis. The pair profited from their role as public printer in recompense and association alike. After a year with Willis, Winship left the concern to become the clerk of the territorial land office under Thomas Worthington (1773-1826), later U.S. Senator from Ohio, who had loaned Winship a brace of pistols as protection when he brought type from Philadelphia for the Chillicothe press to use in printing for the government; later he served as clerk of the Court of Common Pleas in Richland County following Ohio's admission to the Union.

Willis remained with the paper until the end of 1805 when he sold the business to Joseph S. Collins & Co., who employed the Republican editor Peter Parcels as its new manager. In the nearly six years of his conduct of the *Gazette*, Willis became a formidable figure in the early growth of the state of Ohio. He editorialized continually for statehood until it was granted in 1802; thereafter he was an advocate for publically-funded internal improvements, primarily for roads needed to support agricultural development in the new state. Willis speculated in undeveloped land, accumulating numerous tracts in the area between Chillicothe and the Ohio River along the Scioto River; he also acquired the federal contract for the postal routes to the east and the federal license to publish the laws of Congress in his *Gazette*.

After he sold the *Gazette*, Willis settled on a large farm southwest of Chillicothe near the border established between Ross and Pike Counties in 1815; there he boosted the building of the nearby agrarian village of Bainbridge centered on his post office. He turned to politics in the years before the War of 1812, campaigning unsuccessfully for election to the state's House of Representatives from Ross County in 1811, 1812, and 1813, placing in the middle of large fields of candidates (10 to 20); thereafter, he organized several efforts to improve and realign roads south of Chillicothe via petitions to the General Assembly. His family also continued to grow with Mary Willis bearing him five more children after they moved from Virginia – bringing Willis's total number of offspring to seventeen by his two wives.

Willis ended his days among the youngest of those children on his now Pike County farm in April 1831. By that time, however, the former publisher had been overshadowed by the journalistic prominence of both his son, Nathaniel Jr., and his grandson, Nathaniel Parker. His passing was noted only in local papers, overlooked even by those in his birthplace.

NB: There is considerable confusion in nineteenth-century histories (and in modern works based on those flawed reports) between Nathaniel Willis Sr., his son Nathaniel Willis Jr., and his grandson Nathaniel Parker Willis. Many of those accounts claim N. P. Willis was the son of Nathaniel Sr. and so conflate events of his father's and grandfather's lives in their telling of the lineage of that celebrated nineteenth-century poet. The familial account presented here corrects several of those erroneous narratives.

Personal Data

Born: Feb. 7 1755 Boston, Massachusetts.
Married [1]: Apr. 13 1777 Lucy Douglass (1755-83) @ Boston, Mass.
Married [2]: Jan. 13 1789 Mary Cartmell @ Frederick County, Virginia.
Died: Apr. 1 1831 Pike County, Ohio.
Children: By Lucy: Elisha (b. 1777); Andrew (b. 1778); Mary (b. 1779); Nathaniel Jr. (b. 1780); Rebecca (b. 1782).
By Mary: Elijah C. (b. 1790); Sarah A. (b. 1791); Mary A. (b. 1793); Eliza A. (b. 1795); Catherine C. (b. 1797); Martin C. (b. 1799); Julia A. (b. 1801); Matilda (b. 1802); Henry C. (b. 1805); James M. (b. 1808); Madeline C. (b. ????).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; Rice, "West Virginia Printers" [esp. discussion of assault & later sale of office]; "U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Beers, *N. P. Willis*; Cartmell, *Shenandoah Pioneers*; Musser, *Shepherdstown*; Buckingham, *Specimens of Newspaper Literature*; Currier, *Ohio Journalism*; Hudson, *Journalism*; Vaughn, *American Journalism*; Evans, *Ross County, Ohio*; election results from A New Nation Votes website (*elections.lib.tufts.edu*); genealogical data on his offspring from various Willis family charts posted on Ancestry.com (May 2013), drawn largely from an unpublished family history compiled in the 1940s.