

450 WILLIS, NATHANIEL, JR.

Apprentice Printer

Winchester, Shepherdstown, Martinsburg

Apprentice in the Virginia offices of his father, Nathaniel Willis Sr. (449), before 1796; later publisher of the nationally-popular *Boston Recorder* and *Youth's Companion* weeklies.

Willis had a long and distinguished career as a magazine publisher in nineteenth-century America; yet that post-1820 prominence was grounded in the Virginia printing offices of his father before 1800, an experience that shaped both his political and social awareness.

Born in Boston in 1780, Willis was the son of an accomplished political journalist. At that time his father, Nathaniel Willis Sr., was proprietor of that city's *Independent Chronicle*, the political voice of a radicalized generation of artisans and tradesmen there during the Revolutionary War; both his father and his grandfather, Charles Willis, were active members of the Sons of Liberty before the war erupted, with his namesake participating in the Boston Tea Party in 1773 when just eighteen. He was also the son of Lucy Douglas of New London, Connecticut, who he barely knew, as she died when he was but three years old.

His father moved the mother-less family to Winchester, Virginia, in mid-1788, after an angry departure from Boston in 1786 under threat of libel prosecutions, joining with the bilingual Maryland publisher Matthias Bartgis (024) in 1787 to conduct the *Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser*. From his arrival in that Shenandoah Valley town, Willis worked in his father's press office, first as a printer's devil, then as a junior apprentice, as the elder Willis moved his press first from Winchester to Shepherdstown in 1790 and then to Martinsburg in 1792. Eventually, Willis was sent north to Boston to complete his training in the office of Thomas Adams (1757-99), the man who bought the *Independent Chronicle* from his father.

But in an 1857 autobiography, Willis claimed that his journey north was not one instigated by any need for proper training, but rather it was an escape from the corrupting influence of slavery. His father had remarried in 1789 and his second wife, Mary Cartmell of Frederick County, brought with her a domestic slave whose presence in the household gave the nine-year-old Willis an immediate and intimate knowledge of that "peculiar institution;" echoing the anti-authoritarian rhetoric of his father, he saw that the practice was

"not only debasing and brutalizing as regards the slaves, but [en]genders habits of oppression in the masters and mistresses towards all over whom they have power. I felt its effects from my step-mother."

So in April 1796, he left Martinsburg and his step-mother's domination for an independent life as a printer in New England, his family's ancestral home.

The *Independent Chronicle* office of Thomas Adams was one that the most determined opponents of Federalism in the city then patronized; his experience in that office was much like that his father experienced during his training in the pre-Revolutionary press office of Benjamin Edes (1732-1803) and John Gill (1732-85), a period of political radicalization as well as one of trade education that reinforced the footing set in his father's house before. Such attitudes were no doubt confirmed when Adams was prosecuted in 1799 for seditious libel under the Alien & Sedition Acts, shortly before his death – one caused, many claimed,

by that unconstitutional prosecution. On Adams's death, Willis's training fell to Ebenezer Rhoades (1775-1818), who hired him as a journeyman once his indenture ended in 1801.

In the ensuing two years, Willis earned a reputation as a committed Republican; so in 1803, he was invited to relocate to Portland in the District of Maine to publish a new paper in opposition to the three Federalist papers in the district. With the support of Jeffersonians there, embodied in a partnership with Caleb Day, a leading Maine Republican, Willis issued the first number of his *Eastern Argus* on September 8th. However, that support evaporated in late 1804; Day withdrew from the venture shortly before Willis was prosecuted for a libelous essay published in his paper during that fall's congressional campaign; the author of the essay had promised to indemnify Willis, but the publisher ended up in jail for ninety days with a debt of more than \$1300 owed to his lawyers and bondsmen. An appeal to his subscribers to pay their arrearages retired that debt, yet Willis was now determined to extricate himself from the morass in Maine, as his sponsors had "used me as the cat's-paw, but took good care to keep all the chestnuts for their own eating."

The immediate need for his withdrawal from Maine abated when his Federalist persecutors were turned out of office in 1806. Though still an avowed Republican, Willis had tired of the "personalities and misrepresentations" that were now the norm among political journals. In late 1807, he was inspired to take a more religious tack in his journal by publishing articles from Methodist evangelicals. His fickle Republican supporters complained that the *Argus* was "priest-ridden, or turning Federalist" and threatened to start a more vocal competitor. But Willis preempted the coup by selling the *Argus* to Francis Douglas, his new financial partner, in October 1808.

Willis remained in Maine until 1812, developing his religious sensibilities, and considering the idea of publishing a religious newspaper rather than a political one. When he finally returned to Boston, he set up a religious job-printing office on State Street and explored the possibilities of religious journalism. In October 1815, Willis began circulating a formal prospectus for a weekly that came to be known as the *Boston Recorder*; its first number issued on January 3, 1816; Willis continued with the *Recorder* with the assistance of a succession of editors until 1843; one of those editors, Sydney E. Morse, would later claim that the successful paper was his idea, leading to a debate that was largely settled by an autobiographical account that Willis wrote in 1858 detailing the *Recorder's* birth and its place in his journalism career. It was indisputable, however, that Willis originated the idea of a religious weekly for children; in April 1827, he introduced a weekly juvenile companion to his *Recorder*, the *Youth's Companion*, in conjunction with Asa Rand, designed to promote "virtue and piety, and...warn against the ways of transgression." That publication survived until September 1929, making it the longest-lived publication of its day. Willis remained a part of this venture until 1857 when, he claimed, his health began to fail. Still, he lived another thirteen years, suggesting that at seventy-seven, Willis had decided it was simply time to pass his business on to a new generation.

Willis married Hannah Parker, a pious but playful woman from Holliston, Massachusetts, in 1803. Together they raised a family of seven children. They gave the eldest son both of their names – Nathaniel Parker – at his mother's insistence, out of her "fear that she would never

have another son." That son would become one of the most popular poets and magazine writers of the antebellum period, a contemporary, and confidante of both Edgar Allan Poe and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Unfortunately for the lesser-known father, he outlived his celebrated son by three years, attesting to his extraordinary longevity in a profession that regularly experienced premature deaths.

NB: There is considerable confusion in nineteenth-century histories (and in modern works based on those 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 the events of his father's and grandfather's lives in their telling of the ancestry of that celebrated nineteenth-century poet. The account presented here corrects several of those erroneous narratives.

Personal Data

Born: June 6 1780 Boston, Massachusetts.
Married: July 20 1803 Hannah Parker @ Holliston, Massachusetts.
Died: May 26 1870 Boston, Massachusetts.
Children: Lucy Douglas (b. 1804); Nathaniel Parker (b. 1806); Julia Dean (b. 1809); Sarah [Fanny Fern] Payson (b. 1811); Edward Payson (b. 1816); Richard Storrs (b. 1819); Ellen Homes (b. 1821).

Sources: Imprints; Beers, *N. P. Willis*; Cartmell, *Shenandoah Pioneers*; Hudson, *Journalism* [autobiography]; Vaughn, *American Journalism*; genealogical data from Willis family charts posted on Ancestry.com (May 2013).