

## 455 WISE, JOHN

**Printer, Publisher**

**Staunton**

Publisher of *The Virginia Gazette* (1796-98) at Staunton, in initial partnerships with Robert Douthat (147) and one Adams (001), and of *The Phenix* (1798-1803), its successor.

John Wise was a practical printer who used his short career as a journalist in Staunton to build a thirty-year-long business as a major mail stage operator in southwest Virginia.

Born as Johannes Frederick Weiss in 1773, Wise was trained as a bilingual printer – one competent in both English and German composition – in his hometown of Frederick, Maryland, then called Fredericktown. His mentor was apparently Matthias Bartgis (024), the Philadelphia-trained bilingual printer who arrived in that Potomac River valley town in 1785 and conducted the only press and newspapers there until 1790.

In mid-1792, Wise left his childhood home to join the "Legion of the United States" then being organized near Pittsburgh to campaign against the Western Indian Confederacy on the Great Lakes frontier. Led by the Pennsylvania-born Maj. Gen. Anthony Wayne – known commonly as "Mad Anthony" for his harsh treatment of inept subordinates – the force campaigned in 1793 and 1794 in the Wabash and Maumee River valleys along today's Ohio-Indiana border, pressing the native forces into negotiations after their defeat at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in August 1794, where Wise was present. That winter, the legion returned to its base at Fort Greeneville, where the treaty bearing the fortress's name was completed the following summer, ending native claims to modern-day northwestern Ohio (west of the Cuyahoga and north of Columbus and Dayton). Wayne was feted for his success but, as one Valley historian noted, he "escaped being President of the United States by dying in 1796."

Wise mustered out with the Legion's return to Pennsylvania, where he was persuaded to move to Staunton to conduct a press office founded in early 1793 by William Throckmorton (415). At the end of 1795, Throckmorton determined to leave Staunton, for reasons still unknown, but his abrupt departure from town suggests that either a major financial crisis resulting from indebtedness or a dispute with his mercantile patrons compelled the sale. Whatever the case, Throckmorton sold his interest in both that office and his three-year-old weekly paper to Robert Douthat, an Augusta County merchant. Douthat proved to be a transitional figure in the paper's life, taking titular ownership of the sheet only until a new tradesman could be engaged. Douthat found Wise, probably on the recommendation of Bartgis, who had owned a newspaper in Staunton in 1790 and so knew Douthat as well. In early 1796, Wise took control of the printing office, while the paper was now produced by "John Wise for Robert Douthat;" their arrangement continued through that summer. In December, Wise brought in a new partner named Adams to assist him in acquiring Douthat's interest; Wise would then gain full control of the paper in April 1797 by purchasing Adams' minority share then.

The marked brevity of the new Wise & Adams partnership – about four months – indicates that Adams was also a transitional figure. His absence from other Staunton imprints makes further identification of him difficult, especially given the common nature of his surname. It

is possible that he was the William Adams – an Irishman from Belfast – who attended meetings of Staunton's Masonic Lodge in early 1797, where Wise and Douthat were leading presences. But after Wise bought his share about that same time, all trace of Adams in any bibliographic or historical record is lost.

Wise, however, now became a noteworthy figure in Staunton. As other Virginia journalists were then doing, Wise began to develop a recognizable geographic identity for his paper by adding the subtitle *Staunton Weekly Advertiser* to its title; while the simple *Virginia Gazette* moniker made a claim for authoritative content, the added phrase better described its true function. Yet the decline in Atlantic trade that developed over the ensuing year, a result of the Quasi-War with France, brought economic hardship to the Valley; Wise felt its effects in his patrons' inability to pay for his services, meaning that he could not pay his suppliers and creditors either. So in the summer of 1798, Wise was forced to suspend the publication of his weekly and reorganize his financial affairs. That suspension seems to have also caused the bankruptcy of his local paper supplier, Daniel Womelsdorf, whose paper mill on Mossy Creek (on the Augusta-Rockingham border) was the first of several built there before 1830.

Wise's hiatus lasted about two months, ending in September 1798 by the use of a common tactic: he closed the old paper and started a new one, so separating the two businesses into distinct entities that were customers of his printing office. He made that distinction obvious in the name he chose for the new weekly: *The Phenix*. That paper continued in his hands for the next five years, interrupted only by shortages of paper and not of funds. Indeed, his office's business ledger – one of just two sets of early Virginia print-trade journals that have survived – show a considerable record of bartering, particularly for leather (mostly cattle hides) which could be used by bookbinders; he traded those with his distant suppliers in lieu of cash payments for ink, paper, type, and unbound books. Similarly, Wise took flour on account, becoming a trader in that desirable commodity in order to draw cash into his office from distant buyers. Still, Wise understood the limits of his relatively small office, despite these creative business practices, and produced almost no imprints larger than pamphlets or handbills.

Much of that ancillary work was in German, reiterating his bilingual training with Bartgis in Frederick, often for Jacob Swoope, the Federalist leader among Augusta County's Germans; their relationship seems particularly close, as Wise named a son after Swoope in 1810. That connection also appears to have been the impetus for Wise offering a German-language edition of his *Phenix* beginning in January 1800, that pivotal election year. As no copies of that journal survive – with the only sign of its existence coming from his business ledger – it is impossible to say whether its content was customized for that audience or was simply translated from that week's English-language paper. But the effort, in and of itself, evinces Wise's political and cultural loyalties, despite the earlier Anglicization of his surname, as does the German paper's continuation for about two years.

In the five years of his proprietorship of the *Phenix*, Wise also pursued contracts for the mail routes that connected Staunton to other parts of the country – and so aided the distribution of his weekly. In the end, such contracts proved to be the foundation on which he built his personal fortune. After the 1797 reorganization of the federal post office, the Postmaster-

General greatly expanded the number of contracts granted to carry the mails west into the newly settled Ohio River valley area. About 1799, Wise acquired the contract for carrying the mails from Staunton to Lewisburg in Greenbrier County. Over the ensuing decade, that route became the primary one over the Alleghenies that fed into the overland mail routes south of the Ohio into Kentucky – so an important and profitable appointment. As a result, Wise abandoned his problematic *Phenix* in 1803; that August he took Ira Woodruff (458) into partnership in the weekly, then sold Woodruff his interest in October. Yet the transfer of the *Phenix* was not an abrupt end, as had been Wise's acquisition of that office in 1796. Rather, the paper continued, through a series of iterations, until the First World War; it was acquired by William G. Lyford (272) in 1804, who then sold it to Isaac Collet (100) in 1810 as the *Republican Farmer*; in 1823, Collet transferred it to Kenton Harper (203) as the *Staunton Spectator*; Harper was still conducting that paper when he went off to fight in the Civil War.

By 1841, Wise had relinquished his mail contracts, and so his stage-coach business, and had started a profitable retail business at Warm Springs in Bath County with his son David. That concern was his principal business interest at the time of his death in the summer of 1844. His will evinces the same cool business calculation that he had employed during his life, despite an evident emotional attachment to his family. The son named after Jacob Swoope went on to practice medicine in Louisiana; Wise paid for his education at the Universities of Virginia and Pennsylvania, which he deemed a sufficient patrimony for this son, so excluded him from the distribution of his estate. Son and partner David was named his executor, provided that he followed the terms his father set forth in his will, else that administration devolve to his mother and younger sister. Wise gave his Staunton house "to my beloved wife Catharine for and during her natural life;" thereafter, the property was to be sold and the proceeds divided equally among his four remaining sons, as would the residue of his estate once a cash bequest was paid to daughter Eliza as her dowry. David was also told to conduct the Warm Springs business in a way that supported his mother (until her death) and sister (until her marriage), while administering the legacy given to son John Jr. as a trust, indicating that Wise's namesake had a troubled life (he died unmarried in 1857).

Yet the man himself was better recognized and respected than for his service in the North-western Indian Wars than as a publisher or a businessman. Such was noted in his published obituaries, but the most widely-reported evidence of the reverence of his contemporaries came with a story published in 1840 during the presidential campaign of William Henry Harrison. That Whig candidate had served as Anthony Wayne's aide-de-camp during the 1793-94 expeditions in Ohio; but now in the heat of an ugly political contest, Harrison was accused of cowardice during that service. A public meeting in Staunton in March featured a debate between the local proxies for the Jacksonian and Whig candidates; after a two-hour harangue by the Jacksonian speaker, the Whig orator stopped short, early in his speech, when he saw the aged Wise standing in the middle of the room:

"I see a witness amongst you—an old soldier and an honest man! Stand forth, John Wise! What say you? Was General Harrison a brave Soldier?"

Taken aback by the request, Wise paused momentarily before stating loudly: "As brave as ever was!" His answer brought the meeting to a quick and emotional end; Augusta voted in great numbers for the Virginia native that fall – thanks, in part, to Wise's testimony.

***Personal Data***

Born: Sept. 2 1773 Frederick, Maryland.  
Married: October 1796 Catharina Hanger @ Augusta County, Virginia.  
Died: July 28 1844 Staunton, Virginia.  
Children: Catherine (b. 1798); Henry (b. 1800); John Frederick Jr. (b. 1802);  
David Greiner (b. 1804); Eliza C. (b. 1810); Jacob Swoope (b.  
1810); Michael (b. 1816).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; John Wise Business Account Ledger, 1796-1802, Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia; Wust, "Bilingual Printers;" *Annals of Augusta County*; Chalkley, *Chronicles*; [Washington] *Madisonian*, Mar. 28, 1840.