

541 SILLIMAN, WYLLYS – [a.k.a. Willis Silliman]

Publisher

Leesburg

Publisher of the *True American* (1798-99) at Leesburg with Matthias Bartgis (024).

Wyllys Silliman is best known as a prominent lawyer and legislator in Ohio after statehood, as well as one of that state's early newspaper publishers. But his first foray into journalism was in Virginia as a part of the network of publishing entrepreneur Matthias Bartgis.

The pairing of the two men in this project is both strange and familiar. Bartgis was a newspaper entrepreneur from Frederick, Maryland, who initiated a series of journals in the Great Valley regions of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia in the 1780s and 1790s by partnering with a printer or editor who lived at the place where each paper issued. In November 1798, he began the *True American* weekly in Leesburg with Silliman as his editorial partner. But his choice here was different than those partnerships that had preceded this one, in that the openly Republican Bartgis formed an alliance with a Federalist lawyer from Connecticut at the height of the Alien & Sedition Acts controversy.

Connecticut

Silliman was a child of the Connecticut elite whose Puritan ancestors colonized the region in the 1630s. His given name evinces his descent from Gov. George Wyllys (1590-1645), with descendants of the original Backus, Trumbull, and Woodbridge families sprinkled in among his immediate forebears. His American progenitor came from an Italian family (*Sillimandi*) who found refuge in Geneva during the Reformation; Daniel Silliman (1621-90) migrated to Connecticut from England in 1658 when Oliver Cromwell's death threatened the safety of his dissenting community there. Silliman's parents' families were significant local figures in the Revolutionary War, with his father and four uncles serving in the Connecticut militia. Of particular note was his uncle Gold Selleck Silliman (1732-90), commanding general of the newly-independent state's military forces; in May 1779, he was kidnapped by his Loyalist neighbors while visiting his pregnant wife, and held captive on a British prison ship off Long Island for a year; the child the pair were then expecting was Benjamin Silliman (1779-1864), later professor of chemistry and geology at Yale College; thus, Wyllys was a cousin and close contemporary of the celebrated scientist.

His immediately family has more prosaic history. Silliman was the son of Hezekiah Silliman (1738-1804) and Amelia Hubbard (1742-94); he was the ninth among their 13 children who survived childhood, and the third of their six adult sons. His father was a silversmith in the town of Fairfield in the 1760s and then a clerk of the Fairfield County Court in the 1770s. His mother was a daughter of John Hubbard (1703-73), a justice of the Fairfield County Court, who then was both a supervisor of and father-in-law to the senior Silliman. Consequently, it is not surprising that Wyllys was trained in the law while still young, and that training gave him a foundation to build on for the rest of his life.

The Revolutionary War brought the destruction of Fairfield when, after two years of raids from safe havens across the Long Island Sound, British forces burned the port after Gen.

Silliman's capture. In the post-war era, the town faded in importance as residents struggled to rebuild it while competing, undamaged locales thrived, such as Bridgeport to the east. That struggle led to the resettlement of many of the area's residents to places far distant from the Connecticut shore. Wyllys Silliman was among those who left Fairfield, as were cousins who went south to Baltimore and west to Pittsburgh. Indeed, Silliman family lore reports that those kinsmen who left did so in order "to start over."

Virginia

Leesburg, Virginia, was one place that appeared a promising venue for many New England expatriates in the 1790s. Situated on the Potomac River in the most populous county in the state then, the town was an interface between water and land transport, with new roads extending both east-west and north-south. Still, the precise reason that Silliman chose this southern town as his new home is unknown; a familial reason is suggested by the removal of a cousin to Baltimore to start a mercantile business there, so making Leesburg a viable outlet for that concern, one needing a reliable representative there. Yet all that is known for certain is that Silliman was a Leesburg resident by the fall of 1798, and that Matthias Bartgis had brought him into a partnership that issued the town's first newspaper that November.

The *True American* was first and foremost a mercantile advertiser, a paper generally lacking commentary on local politics, as were all such journals. So the entrepreneurial Bartgis was likely trying to profit from a known Federalist market by linking to a like-minded editor. The weekly continued as such after both founders had severed their ties to the sheet. The only surviving numbers of the *True American* show that sometime between January 17, 1799 and December 20, 1800, the firm of Bartgis & Silliman had been dissolved and the paper sold to Patrick McIntyre (289), a Loudoun County native who may have been the weekly's printer from its start. Consequently, the political disjunction between the Republican Bartgis and the Federalist Silliman may not have been much of a factor in their parting. A more likely cause would be the end of a year-long contract between the two men (ca. November 1799), with Bartgis then cutting his losses by selling a marginal venture to McIntyre.

Such an outcome fits with Silliman's known interest in new opportunities with old friends and associates from Connecticut in the Northwest Territory. In 1800, Elijah Backus (1745-1812), a lawyer who owned the Yantic iron-furnace that had provided cannon and arms to Gen. Silliman's troops, took his family to Marietta on the Ohio River. His son James (1764-1816) had helped found that town in 1788 as an agent for the Ohio Company of Associates, a land speculation venture organized in 1786 by Revolutionary War veterans from New England, who used their military warrants to claim land along the northern bank of the Ohio River. Settlement of their tract lagged before a treaty was negotiated in 1795 between the United States and the Northwest Confederacy – called the Treaty of Greeneville – in which the area's native peoples gave up their claims to the southern two-thirds of modern-day Ohio. That treaty meant that the lots in the Ohio Company's tract were then quickly sold, bringing an end to the need for the company in 1796. Marietta grew rapidly subsequently, drawing many Connecticut veterans and their families, such as that of Backus.

Ohio

Silliman landed there as well at about that same time. Local histories all report that both men arrived in Marietta in 1800. Those accounts also report that they were the only lawyers then residing in all of Washington County. In December 1801, Silliman began publishing the town's first journal, *The Ohio Gazette and the Territorial and Virginia Herald*, with Backus as his editor and backer. As the title evinces, the area was then still a territory, and so Silliman and Backus used the sheet to press for statehood, which was achieved a year later in the winter of 1802-03. Its title also shows they attempted to draw readers from the opposite shore of the Ohio River in the newly-formed Wood County, Virginia, which would not host a paper until 1833. Then in order to continue their essential legal practices, the pair employed Samuel Fairlamb (1779-1854) as their printer; he was Philadelphia-trained printer and the brother of the then Richmond bookseller John R. Fairlamb (488).

This was especially important to Backus, who was now teaching the law as well as practicing it. His first and most illustrious student was Lewis Cass (1782-1866), the future U.S. Senator from Michigan. Cass arrived in Washington County in October 1800 to join his parents and siblings in Marietta; his father was Major Jonathan Cass (1753-1830), a Revolutionary War veteran from New England who had commanded Fort Hamilton on the Great Miami River in southwestern Ohio during the conflict that ended in the Treaty of Greeneville; he then used his amassed land warrants to acquire about 4000 acres near Zanesville and moved those in his family still living at home to Marietta in 1800, before building a new home on their tract in Dresden in 1801. That move had great significance for Silliman, as shortly after the Cass family arrived in Ohio, he made the acquaintance of the major's eldest daughter, Deborah, who he married in early 1802. Hence, a young Lewis Cass developed important connections to both of the proprietors of the *Ohio Gazette* in very short order. Indeed, it is in the letters of Deborah Cass Silliman exchanged with her brother that his early public life is best traced.

Silliman, Backus, and Cass all became significant political and governmental figures once Ohio gained statehood in March 1803. In elections for the first legislative session of the new state government, Silliman was elected as a representative and Backus as a senator; that body then appointed Silliman as presiding judge for the Common Pleas Court circuit that included Marietta and Zanesville to its north. This appointment evidently induced Silliman to quit journalism, as he sold his interest in the *Ohio Gazette* to Backus after the legislature adjourned in 1803. Backus then used the weekly to advance his personal political fortunes; but in the wake of the 1804 elections, he fell out of favor in southeastern Ohio – a region rent by factional divisions between the migrants of New England, Pennsylvania, and Virginia origin, and of both partisan perspectives. So in 1805, Backus decided to relocate once again, removing to the capital of the Illinois Territory, Kaskaskia, where he died in 1812. He sold the *Ohio Gazette* to Fairlamb, who struggled to continue the weekly without its founders; he abandoned the effort in the winter of 1810-11. Meanwhile, Cass was able to navigate these turbulent waters and was elected to the legislature in 1806; he remained in Ohio until the War of 1812 erupted, when he found the fame and fortune in Michigan upon which the rest of his public career was based.

For Silliman, his judicial appointment led his down a different path from either Backus or

Cass. After the first session of the Court of Common Pleas in Zanesville in 1804, he resigned his seat, accepted appointment as the Register of the federal Land Office there, and began a legal practice in that town. By accepting that federal post from Jefferson, Silliman has often been identified as a Republican notable; but "one old Federalist" contemporary described him this way to another:

"[The] renegade Federalist Wyllys Silliman ... has never been a sneaking Democrat, Horn-blower, or anything of the kind; in terms of talents, I think he will not be behind any other candidate."

This comment was made during the 1825 elections, when Silliman was elected to the state senate as a supporter of the National-Republican party of John Quincy Adams. That choice reflected his commitment to the development and modernization of Zanesville. He resigned his federal position in 1811, and promptly became an investor in and director of a series of local "internal improvement" projects, starting with the town's first water-works in 1816, with the Zanesville and Lancaster Turnpike Co. that winter, and then with the Zanesville and Cambridge Turnpike Co. in 1817. But his life after 1811 was focused on his legal practice, which continued uninterrupted there until 1836.

As a lawyer, Silliman was considered "a great natural orator," even though his training was deemed deficient. Still, he was someone sought after, especially "in the great criminal cases where his power as an advocate was demonstrated." Consequently, the last few years of his life exhibit some transiency, as he moved his practice from Zanesville first to Cleveland, then to Wooster, then to Cincinnati, before returning to Zanesville shortly before his death in 1842. Those wide-ranging labors meant that his published obituaries all focused on his life as a lawyer and judge, generally omitting his role as a journalist. But where he has been long forgotten as such in Virginia, many nineteenth-century histories of Ohio make note of his early life as "in West Virginia, where it has been said he edited a Federalist paper."

NB. A brief history of Loudoun County papers published in 1986 identifies Bartgis's partner in the *True American* as "W. Sullivan" (524). The variance appears to be a result of a mistaken reading of an indistinct impression, as nineteenth-century sources clearly identify Silliman in that role, so making that modern report inaccurate.

Personal Data

Born: Oct. 8 1777 Fairfield County, Connecticut.
Married: Feb. 3 1802 Deborah Webster Cass @ Marietta, Ohio.
Died: Nov. 13 1842 Zanesville, Ohio.
Children: Mary Emalie (b. 1804); Deborah Cass (b. 1806); George Wyllys (b. 1807); Louisa (b. 1809); Emalie Hubbard (b. 1811); Mary Sophia (b. 1815); Oscar Bernadette (b. 1817); Charles Oscar (b. 1818); Lewis Cass (b. 1823); Isabel Emalie (b. 1825); Leverett Augustus (b. 1827).

Sources: Imprints; U.S. Newspaper Directory; Library of Congress; Currier, *Beginnings of Ohio Journalism*; Andrews, *History of Marietta and Washington County*; Evans & Stivers, *History of Adams County, Ohio*; Prince, *Birth of American Science* (2010); Bohan, et al. *Early Connecticut Silver, 1700-1840*; Klunder, *Lewis Cass and the Politics of Moderation*; and biography published in *Zanesville Daily Courier* (15 Dec. 1877).

Family charts on *Ancestry.com* incorrectly state marriage date as July 14, 1802 in Coshocton, based on published accounts in nineteenth-century; Washington County, Ohio, marriage registers show date was February 3, 1802 in Marietta, J.P. Seth Coshart presiding.