

**550 HARRIS, WILLIAM C.** – [William Clawson Harris]

**Printer**

**Berkeley County**

Virginia-trained printer and publisher who died in York, Pennsylvania, in 1818.

William C. Harris was apparently part of the Virginia print trade as an apprentice, though he pursued his trade chiefly in Pennsylvania. Yet that beginning is only recorded by the writer of the obituary published in his newspaper upon his death in late 1818:

"DIED. At York, Penn. on Saturday the 10th inst. [Dec. 1818], Mr. **WILLIAM CLAWSON HARRIS**, Editor of the York Gazette, in the 26th year of his age.... [He] was a native of Berkeley county, Virginia. At the usual period for choosing a profession, he choose [*sic*] that of a Printer. After having acquired the mechanical part of the art, he devoted some time to medical and desultory reading. Though a youth of 20, when he commenced his career as an Editor, he so well executed, that he left the stage of existence applauded and regretted—applauded, because his admirable address combatted and surmounted every obstacle that is usually thrown in the way on the first appearance in the world—regretted, because he made his exit at the threshold of his vocation, disappointing our anticipation of what his riper years might have afforded."

This cryptic account, when read against the known history of printing in the northern Valley of Virginia, suggests that Harris was trained in Winchester, particularly as the only Virginia newspaper to republish this laudatory obituary was the *Republican Constellation* there. The region was dominated then by Federalist newspapers, with the Frederick County seat being the only locale able to support a Jeffersonian alternative. And as the *York Gazette* was, from its founding, a Republican paper as well, it seems Harris learned his trade in such an office, and the most likely one was that of Joseph A. Langan (266). That press operated from 1805 to 1810 and was the immediate predecessor of the *Constellation* office of Jonathan Foster (168). If so, then that origin may also explain Harris's later presence in central Pennsylvania, as network connections were trade necessities. At its outset, Langan's office was financed by Matthias Bartgis (024), the Frederick, Maryland, publisher who was raised and trained in York during the Revolutionary War, and who maintained life-long connections to the town.

Pennsylvania local histories report Harris returned to the print trade in September 1814 when the *American Volunteer* started publication in Carlisle, a date corresponding to the age mentioned above for the start of his editorial career. His association with that sheet and its publishers – brothers William B. (1779-1850) & James (1789-1834) Underwood – lasted about six months, for in May 1815, Harris started his own journal in York, a town long dominated by the Federalist *York Recorder*. He quickly made it clear that his paper would oppose that voice:

"The Federalists have tried slander, misrepresentation, and falsehood so long without effect, against their opponents, that they are driven to last resort to prop up a sinking and bad cause, by bribery and corruption."

Such an energetic and confrontational approach proved problematic, however. When Harris visited his family in Virginia in 1816, three unsuccessful attempts were made, in the course of one week, to burn his press office to the ground. But he was not daunted by this effort to drive him from the town; he returned to the editorial chair reenergized and offered a \$200 reward for the arrest of the arsonists. He also engaged in bilingual printing in an obvious attempt to broaden his paper's appeal by serving the local German-speaking community.

In spite of such overt professional vitality, Harris was soon undone by ill-health. An ailment contracted in mid-1818 led to his death on December 10th. The *Gazette* was conducted for the benefit of his estate by one W. M. Baxter – probably his shop foreman – until the office and paper were sold in May 1819 to a partnership headed by Dr. Adam King (1783-1835), then clerk of the county-court and later congressman from Lancaster County. That transfer put the journal into the hands of the county's Democratic-Republican leadership, so helping to guarantee the paper's continuance for the ensuing 150 years. The *Gazette* both absorbed and withstood local competitors until financial issues finally forced its closure in 1970.

### ***Personal Data***

Born:           ca. 1793   Berkeley County, Virginia.

Died:    Dec. 10 1818   York, Pennsylvania.

His obituary does not report a wife or children as survivors.

Sources: Obituary reprinted in [Winchester] *Republican Constellation*, Dec. 19, 1818. Imprints; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Glossbrenner, *History of York County*; histories of the *York Gazette*, drawn from the paper's archives, published in its successors (1945 & 2010); and *Biographical Annals of Cumberland County*.