

ALEXANDRIA 02: Alexandria Gazette

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The *Alexandria Gazette* has the unique distinction of being the longest-lived journal in the history of Virginia. From its birth in the late eighteenth-century, its successive incarnations have survived into the present day through both acquisitions and mergers.

Founding Era

Such longevity was not manifest in the journal's early years, when the paper was quoted widely around the country as the *Columbian Mirror*; its ownership changed hands five times in its first seven years. The one constant in this shuffling was Ellis Price (342); it appears that Price was a printer trained in the office of the town's first newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette & Alexandria Advertiser*. In July 1792, the twenty-two year-old printer joined with John Smith (389), a local merchant, in proposing publication of a twice-weekly mercantile advertiser in competition with that established weekly. The partners noted that their planned paper's essential utility lay in its ability to transmit news in a more timely fashion, though they also observed that "the advantages from an early insertion of Advertisements are too obvious to require a single remark." Their journal's fiscal foundation would be set in its advertising, as Smith & Price were determined to start issuing the paper once 200 subscribers had been obtained, fewer than was then the norm. But they also required the payment of one-third of the \$3.00 subscription price before the paper issued, in order to purchase the materials they needed to produce their new advertising sheet. As a result, the process of engaging subscribers and purchasing equipment took a full four months' time; hence the *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette* did not issue its first number until November 21, 1792.

The first year of the *Columbian Mirror* was evidently quite successful for Smith & Price. The sheet-size of their paper was approximately one-third larger than that of their competition, and when issued twice each week, it represented an increase in page space of more than 250 per cent – space readily available to serve Alexandria's mercantile needs. The partners also had an unparalleled location in Alexandria, issuing their paper from an office "at the

East End of the Market-House," the heart of the city's merchant community. By August 1793, Price had accrued sufficient capital to purchase Smith's interest in their enterprise, and by December he had the wherewithal to increase the paper's frequency from twice-weekly to thrice-weekly, adding to his office staff to do so. This second change was aided by the demise of the competing *Alexandria Advertiser*. In mid-November 1793, Thomas Bond (039) sold his interest in the weekly to his partner, Samuel Hanson (200), and removed to Morgantown; Hanson, in turn, moved the paper across the river to Georgetown, where it reappeared as the twice-weekly *Columbian Chronicle* in December. So as 1794 began, Price conducted the only paper in Alexandria and would continue to do so, with a raft of hired hands, until 1797.

Over those years, the partisan divide between Federalists and Republicans emerged and Price made the *Columbian Mirror* into a supporter of the administration, both out of loyalty to his subscriber, George Washington, and out of his ongoing mercantile interests. At the end of 1796, rumors began circulating about plans for a new Republican competitor to the *Mirror*, plans that came to fruition in April 1797 with *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* of John V. Thomas (410) and James D. Westcott (437). So in November 1796, Price added Henry Gird Jr., the son of a local merchant-planter and land speculator, as his new partner, in an attempt to solidify his paper's finances and reinvigorate its editorial perspective. Gird was a Dublin-trained printer who had relocated to Baltimore when his father moved their family to Virginia in 1793. He left Baltimore in February 1796 after attempting to start a new daily paper there, to become the foreman in Price's office. So with the issue of November 29th, Price announced that the firm of Price & Gird would henceforth publish the *Mirror*.

The change marked the start of a three-year-long period of uncertainty for the journal, primarily as a result of the disruptions in Atlantic trade that attended the Adams presidency, but also by the presence of *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser*. Gird was a full partner for just one year; Price bought his interest in November 1797, probably to allow Gird to pay off the notes he had signed to purchase that share originally. Yet that transaction also seems to have straitened Price's finances as well; just six weeks later he was soliciting offers for a new partner in the *Mirror*. Gird had remained in the office as Price's foreman and, with his affairs now settled, he could now buy the *Mirror* outright, likely with help from his father. In late February 1798, Price sold the business to Gird, who now took complete control of the *Columbian Mirror* for the ensuing twenty months.

While the sale relieved Price's fiscal stress, it also seems to have been a move designed to distance the paper itself from the heated partisan war then raging over the Jay Treaty, the Quasi-War, and the resulting Alien & Sedition Acts. Still, Gird was eventually pressured to sell the *Mirror* as a result of the antislavery views that he brought to the paper's pages, even as they echoed Price's editorial perspective. So in December 1799, Gird convinced Price to re-acquire the journal, though retaining the right to collect its outstanding debts. Gird then left Alexandria for New York City and journeyman work there, never to return.

Price now came under similar pressure, particularly in light of concurrent efforts by local Quakers to press "freedom suits" for enslaved Africans in the region's courts. Likewise, he soon found that the paper's continuing problem with delinquent subscribers restricted its

operation. In January 1800, he even forged an agreement with his competitors at *The Times* for a mutual increase in their advertising rates as a way to offset "the enhanced expense of labour and materials." But as before, Price eventually went in search of another partner and found a buyer instead, one William Fowler (173). He was yet another Alexandria merchant, not a trained printer, who reportedly conducted a dry-goods store. Fowler took on the *Columbian Mirror* under the same conditions that Price had taken it from Gird: he acquired the office and subscriber list in September 1800, leaving collection of outstanding debts to the former owner. Yet Fowler too found the fiscal burden excessive and was seeking a way out of the mess within two months. His solution to the dilemma was to sell the office's assets. First he sold the *Mirror's* subscriber list to two print-tradesmen seeking to launch a Federalist paper in Washington proper: New Jersey journeyman Samuel Snowden (393) and Matthew Brown (057), a Federalist editor from Baltimore, where both men were part of the firm of Yundt & Brown, publishers of the incendiary *Federal Gazette*. He then sold his press and type to other Alexandria shops, with most of those tools landing in Snowden's hands.

Political Journal

On December 3, 1800, the firm of Samuel Snowden & Company published the first number of their *Alexandria Advertiser and Commercial Intelligencer*, so converting the thrice-weekly *Mirror* into Alexandria's first daily newspaper. While the pair noted in their introductory address that they were not obliged to honor any of the advance payments made to Fowler or Price before, they did make a calculated appeal to the *Mirror's* merchant subscribers to remain on their rolls, employing a litany of Federalist maxims:

"...their principles will be correct and strictly Federal—making the preservation of the Union, an attachment to the government, obedience to the laws, and an indifference to all national interests but those of their own country, the leading objects of their political career."

From this starting point, the daily's content and perspective remained in Brown's purview, while Snowden conducted the technical end of the business. But eventually Brown found that he could not serve two masters, as he was intimately involved in editing both the *Alexandria Advertiser* and the Baltimore *Federal Gazette*. So in early June 1802, just over nineteen months from its start, Brown sold his interest in the *Advertiser* to Snowden in order to focus on his commitments in Baltimore, as well as to assist in the new journalistic venture of his brother, William Brown (058), in Jefferson County: the *Charlestown Patriot*.

While now an independent tradesman, Snowden was also heavily in debt, a condition that proved a recurring problem for him throughout his career. With Brown's departure, he signed a promissory note guaranteed by his father-in-law, John Longden; a major merchant-planter in Alexandria and adjacent Fairfax County, Longden was also an influential figure in the port, a Revolutionary War veteran who was a leader among the Federalists who then dominated the city's politics and government. The support of that faction was crucial to the survival of the *Alexandria Advertiser*, particularly during times of economic difficulty when advertising revenues shrank. Almost from the start, the paper was also patronized by the national Federalist leaders who had been sidelined by the Republican victories of 1800; of

particular note was Bushrod Washington, nephew of the late president, an associate justice of the Supreme Court, and inheritor of nearby Mount Vernon; Washington also convinced Chief Justice John Marshall to patronize Snowden's journal on occasion. Still, it took several years for Snowden to retire the note he gave to Brown, likely well after his old partner retired from journalism in 1806. But at the same time, Snowden's links to these influential local leaders gave him a modicum of stability he probably could not have attained on his own. As a result, his daily published continuously for the duration of the yellow-fever epidemic of 1803, unlike other journals which relocated or closed during such outbreaks; he also increased the size of his page-sheet during the outbreak, simplifying his paper's title in the process; it would be called the *Alexandria Daily Advertiser* until 1808.

Still, Snowden experienced difficulties in this period, generally as a result of the fluctuations in maritime commerce attending the Napoleonic Wars, and especially with the embargo on trade with European belligerents instituted in 1807. His fiscal troubles were exacerbated at times by supply problems, specifically a lack of paper, which seem to have been the only reason for gaps in the *Advertiser's* publication schedule; three such interruptions between 1806 and 1809 were tied directly to failed deliveries of paper from Baltimore. The larger financial issues, though, brought Snowden three particular crises: in 1806, in 1819, and in 1824. And each of his solutions raises the question of who actually managed to content of his paper – Snowden or his backers?

The *Alexandria Advertiser* was well known for its avowed and vociferous opposition to the administrations of Jefferson and Madison and its frequent criticisms of local Republicans. The daily often reprinted articles from the *Washington Federalist* of William Alexander Rind (359), the *Federal Gazette* of Yundt & Brown, and the *Virginia Patriot* of Augustine Davis (119) in Richmond, so placing culpability for many biting commentaries beyond the city's limits. But the *Advertiser* found a particular journalistic target in its cross-town Republican rival, the *Alexandria Expositor* of James Lyon (274) and Richard Dinmore (139), formerly *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser*. Prior to Lyon's departure from that paper in August 1804, the vitriol in Snowden's paper were aimed directly at Lyon, with Dinmore considered only a "tool of Lyon." After that, Dinmore was depicted as the unthinking "Doctor" (he was a physician) duped by anonymous partisans.

Yet such could also be said of Snowden as well. It remains unclear who provided the original editorial content in the paper at any one time. Between September 1807 and September 1808, for example, the journal was "printed daily by Samuel Snowden (For the Proprietor)" as a result of Snowden having to sell an interest in his paper to pay his outstanding debts. The phrasing indicates that he had sold control of its editorial content as well, returning to the mode of operation seen in his days with Matthew Brown. But when that encumbrance was lost in September 1808, the journal was "printed and published by Samuel Snowden" once again, indicating that he controlled its content at that time.

Wartime Crisis

During his 1807-08 restructuring, Snowden altered the title of his journal to the form most regularly associated with him and his successors today: the *Alexandria Gazette*. The choice

of the term "Gazette" is suggestive, as such publications were considered the official record, being both authoritative and truthful in their content; the usage here reflects an ongoing sense among Federalists that the Republicans then in power were not being forthcoming or honest in their published statements. Once Madison became president, and tensions with Great Britain rose, the *Alexandria Gazette* took the view that the scale of the impressment of American seamen was being exaggerated by his administration so as to gain favor with the urban masses, and that the level of French predation on American maritime commerce was being minimized in support of the usurping Napoleon. The divergence in perspective mirrors the concurrent divergence of interest between urban merchants and rural farmers, the core constituencies of each political party. Impressment of sailors was an issue for those in trade with France, which Alexandria's merchants were not, while seizures of vessels by the French was an issue for those in trade with the British Caribbean, which Alexandria's merchants certainly were. Hence the *Gazette* took a political stance consistent with local commercial interests, which were proclaimed to be national ones as well.

When the political debate in Congress resulted in a declaration of war with Great Britain in June 1812, Snowden quickly found both his office and person threatened with violence for the "treasonous" comments found in his paper; on June 22nd, he warned those reading his *Gazette* that force would be met with force should an attack be attempted; the threat was likely a real one, as on that same day the office of the Baltimore *Federal Republican* was destroyed by a mob, initiating a two-month-long war between its editor, Alexander Contee Hanson (and his merchant supporters), and the Republican working class there; the conflict resulted in at least two deaths in a second attack in July and his journal's ensuing relocation to Georgetown for the duration of the war.

This episode led to Snowden taking on an editorial partner, both as a way to secure financial stability for his journal, anticipating the decline in advertising that the war would engender, and to deflect from him the fire of the *Gazette's* Republican opponents to a more nimble controversialist. In early September, Snowden announced "that a gentleman of this town, whose abilities eminently qualify him for the superintendence of the press, has become jointly interested with him" in producing the *Gazette*, effective October 1st. That person was the city attorney, John Douglass Simms (387), son of Alexandria's mayor, Col, Charles Simms, himself a key figure among Alexandria's Federalists; shortly afterward, Snowden announced an increase in the price of his *Gazette*, the result of his increasing the sheet size of the paper by about one-fifth so as to publish more "important intelligence" as the war proceeded. The new partners intended to continue the paper's assaults on the policies of James Madison and his government, but on a larger scale than seen previously. But more importantly, the pairing assured the *Gazette's* subscribers that its non-advertising content would be consistent with the tempered views of the city's elected leaders, an approach that ultimately allowed them to avoid the violence that had beset Hanson and his supporters in Baltimore.

The arrangement between Simms and Snowden apparently continued smoothly, even if not all Alexandrians accepted their paper's perspective; indeed, such dissenters now had a new partisan alternative in the *Alexandria Herald* of John Corse (106) and Nathaniel Rounsavell (367). But the *Gazette's* reporting eventually led to Simms being forced to resign as the

clerk and auditor for the Common Council in September 1813, though he was retained as city attorney, a non-decision-making role, until 1818. Almost simultaneously, war-time shortages forced the pair to reduce the paper's publication frequency from daily to thrice-weekly, a state which continued from October 5, 1813 to April 11, 1815.

However, the public's attitude toward the *Gazette* changed quickly in 1814; in January, the partners reported an attempt to burn their press office by persons unknown, a report that drew skeptical responses from their competitors. But the largest challenge of all came with the British invasion of the capital region and the burning of Washington proper that August. Local Federalists pressed the city's government to negotiate a surrender of the port to the British in order to avoid the devastation witnessed across the river; led by their Federalist mayor, a group of merchants, including Snowden, met with the British naval commander and obtained an agreement that the city would be spared; but the five-day occupation that followed resulted in the pillaging of the port's warehouses and its merchant vessels that left Alexandria essentially unable to conduct any commerce for several months; Mayor Simms was reprimanded by the Common Council and denied reelection in March 1815 as a result. With the war at an end by then, and with his family's reputation now in tatters, the younger Simms sold his interest in the *Gazette* to Snowden shortly after his father's defeat, never again to pursue journalism.

Post-war Challenges

The end of the war in early 1815 did not resolve Snowden's problems; rather they ceased being political issues and became largely financial ones. With Simms's departure, Snowden was once again burdened with a substantial debt. Advertising revenues were increasingly crucial, given that merchants were normally more regular in their payments to him than were his subscribers. The title of Snowden's paper came to reflect that importance; in May 1817, his *Alexandria Daily Gazette, Commercial & Political* – as it was known throughout the war years – became the *Alexandria Gazette & Daily Advertiser*; at the same time, he devoted the daily's front page almost entirely to advertising in place of the political and public notices had been featured there during the war.

Unfortunately, Snowden's alterations had come to naught by the fall of 1819. The economic panic of that year reduced both advertising and payments for such, on top of the lagging subscription revenues; simultaneously, his creditors pressed the publisher for payments to them, Simms apparently among them, as he was then trying to settle the estates of his father and father-in-law as well. So Snowden opted for a dramatic solution to his growing dilemma – he sold his daily and retired from journalism, albeit temporarily. In September 1819, Snowden sold the *Gazette* to Samuel H. Davis (126), then proprietor of a small job-print office in Alexandria; Davis later said that he was only the "nominal proprietor" of the *Gazette* and so "merely a nominal editor" in the transaction; Snowden retained control of a paper owned by another while actively closing out the accounts of his former concern; it was a maneuver that legally severed the newspaper from its debts. At the end of December, Snowden established a new business, bought the journal back from Davis on the last day of 1819, and began issuing the *Gazette* once again on January 5, 1820, without any change in

title or numbering.

This was not the last financial crisis that Snowden faced. A similar situation arose in 1824 and the publisher pursued a similar solution, though evidently involuntarily this time. In August that year, Snowden was forced into a bankruptcy filing by his creditors; the Orphan's Court appointed a trustee to administer his affairs as "an insolvent debtor" according to law; that trustee then compelled the closing of his business accounts at year end. So on December 30th, Snowden issued the last number of the *Alexandria Gazette* and closed his business once again. Two days later, Snowden issued a new thrice-weekly paper in the place of his old daily, called the *Alexandria Phenix Gazette*, in partnership with William Fitzhugh Thornton, who financed the paper and edited its content. In its inaugural issue, Snowden made it clear that his fiscal woes had instigated the change, and that he would not resume a daily schedule until the number of paid subscriptions needed to sustain such an effort had been obtained; hence, the *Phenix* did not reach that goal until December 1825, possibly as a result of Snowden's support of the unpopular John Quincy Adams in the 1824 election.

In taking on Thornton as his partner, Snowden was able to effect one of the many refits that his press regularly undertook – a purchase of new type, a "new dress" to replace the fonts worn by the demands of daily use. Indeed, it was the principal reason that Snowden gave as the cause of the *Gazette's* end. Once again, he said that the *Phenix* was not "a continuation of the other, but as a new and independent journal," just as he had distanced his original *Alexandria Advertiser* from the preceding *Columbian Mirror*. Still, the forced reorganization restored Snowden's solvency, with the trustee granting him the right to collect debts owed to his old concern in April 1825. And after that, his affairs evince a more cautious approach. In October 1825, his father-in-law, John Longden, drew up a will that proved to be his last one, bequeathing the Royal Street building that housed Snowden's press and paper to the printer's only son Edgar, so ensuring that, whatever the fate of the *Phenix*, the Snowden family would have a home and office.

Despite growing frustrations with Adams, Snowden & Thornton remained loyal to the ideas and approach of the sitting president, and such was reflected in the pages of their journal. That choice reflected the evolution of this one-time Federalist journal into a voice of the Whig leadership, particularly to one supporting then Secretary of State Henry Clay with whom Edgar Snowden became closely associated both politically and socially. Yet the 1828 election brought the firm of Snowden & Thornton to an end; Thornton sold his interest to Snowden in July and moved to Washington to start a new campaign paper in support of the incumbent president's reelection, removing to Kentucky afterward. Meanwhile, Snowden returned reluctantly to editing his journal, despairing of the "vindictive, unrelenting, and illiberal opposition...towards the present Administration, by its enemies and prosecutors," which he found unprecedented, even after he having lived through and contributed to the Federalist/Republican discord of earlier years. One of those enemies, the Jacksonian *Old Dominion* of Edward Pescud (324) in Petersburg, published a fictional account of the "Order of the Funeral Procession of the Administration" after Jackson was formally elected by the Electoral College; Snowden reprinted it – noting that he could "laugh at a joke, even at our own expense" – which made him out as a prominent mourner in the procession, alongside the Whig editors Peter Force, Joseph Gales, and John Hampden Pleasants (330). Such

targeted satire evinces the journalistic influence Snowden and his *Gazette* still wielded then.

Familial Transition

Once Jackson assumed the presidency, and Clay returned to Congress in opposition to him, the fifty-three-year-old Snowden began to reduce his involvement in his Alexandria daily. From 1829 on, the *Phenix* became ever more the responsibility of his twenty-year-old son Edgar. That shift was frequently acknowledged in the daily itself when Edgar was identified as its editor and Samuel as its publisher. In June 1831, father and son formally announced that the *Phenix* had become a joint venture between them, though without alteration to the then current conduct of the paper. That acknowledgement may have been prompted by the growing circulation of their journal; it seems that merchants in the capital district found the *Phenix* useful in promoting their businesses and reliable in its political perspective; so with such growth, the energies of the younger Snowden became essential to its success.

It also appears that the older Snowden was then in the throes of the illness that claimed his life. The announcement of the Snowden & Son partnership came just three weeks before the senior partner died "of a severe illness" on July 14th. Edgar immediately assumed sole proprietorship of the daily, having taken possession of the office's building previously on his grandfather's death in 1830; he even restored the paper's previous title – the *Alexandria Gazette* – in January 1834 in honor of his father. He continued as sole proprietor until August 1860, when he made his sons into his partners. The *Gazette* even survived the Civil War, though suppressed during the war for its Confederate sympathies; when it reappeared in 1865, it was still a father-son concern that continued until his 1875 death; it then passed from Edgar's sons to a grandson in 1893, who sold it out of the family in 1911. Subsequent transfers and acquisitions have allowed the *Alexandria Gazette* to survive in the modern day as the *Alexandria Gazette Packet*.

Sources: LCCN Nos. 84-24503, 84-24011, 84-24012, 84-24013, 84-24014, 83-26170; Brigham; Cappon; *Artisans & Merchants*; Quenzel, *Snowden*; Ackerman, *Failure of Founding Fathers*; HABS Report on John Longden House (VA-685); notices in the *Washington Federalist* (1800-04); [Georgetown] *Centinel of Liberty* (1800); [Baltimore] *Federal Gazette* (1799-1806); *Alexandria Expositor* (1802-04); *Alexandria Herald* (1810-24), [Leesburg] *Genius of Liberty* (1817-19), and the various iterations of the *Alexandria Gazette* (1800-34).