

ALEXANDRIA 05: Alexandria Herald

- 01: The Alexandria Herald (1811)
 - 02: The Alexandria Herald (1811-1821)
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The *Alexandria Herald* was the second non-Federalist journal issued in this Potomac River port. It was a Madisonian successor to the earlier Jeffersonian *Alexandria Expositor*, which was removed to Washington in late 1807, more than three years previously. The paper's fifteen-year life evinced both its less-inflammatory political tone and its mercantile utility.

By the spring of 1811, the town's only operating newspaper – *the Alexandria Daily Gazette, Commercial & Political* of Samuel Snowden (393) – presented readers with an exclusively anti-administration perspective, one consistent with the port's maritime-trade interests, which Snowden also claimed to be the true national interest. His content reflected a long-standing conflict between the differing interests of urban merchants and rural farmers; British impressment of American sailors was an issue for those trading 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. But many farmers who used Alexandria as an export outlet for their produce objected to those merchants' unwillingness to trade with the French Caribbean and the Mediterranean, as the way to end British control of the American economy. Thus, Snowden's paper was seen by those interests as undemocratic, both in dismissing the concerns of the rural majority as irrelevant and in willfully undermining the administration's policies and arrangements just for personal gain. Hence, an alternative to the *Alexandria Gazette* was called for by many.

A prospectus for such an alternative paper was circulated on April 1, 1811 by two young Alexandrians – John Corse (106) and Nathaniel Rounsavell (367). Neither man was native to Virginia; both arrived in the port town in adolescence with fathers who became tavern-keepers there. By 1811, the New-Jersey-born Rounsavell was working as a journeyman printer at one of the many printing offices in the capital district, while the Delaware-born Corse was operating a tavern as his father had, after having also trained as a printer. The two were part of a generation of American men then reaching adulthood who wanted to pursue their fortunes in the country's growing cities, only to be stymied in such quests by the entrenched mercantile interests who dominated those urban places. The partners, whose print-trade training made them friends as well, built a classic tradesman/financier newspaper concern to overcome such problems; Rounsavell was responsible for the trade side of their venture, while Corse took on the financial aspects, alongside a retail store that evolved over time into a "lottery & exchange" office, a business which would make him a

wealthy man by the mid-1820s.

The twice-weekly paper offered by the new firm of Corse & Rounsavell was one that they thought would be "conducive to a correct dispensation of information," in contrast to the prejudicial practices of the *Alexandria Gazette*. Yet they were careful not to pick a fight with Snowden's established Federalist daily:

"We are aware that in conducting a paper in this town some difficulty will arise with respect to the politics of the print.....We do not profess ourselves to be party-man, and shall be as impartial as the nature of things will admit; but it is due to candor to state, that we feel disposed to be friendly to the present administration, and to approve its measures as far as reason and propriety dictate. A frequent recurrence will be had to fundamental principles in order to ensure correct practice; and pleasure will always be taken in bringing forward original merit."

The pair soon found support in the "liberality of an enlightened public," as they had hoped. The first number of the new *Alexandria Herald* on June 2, 1811, just two months after they had offered their prospectus.

Archetype

From the beginning, Corse & Rounsavell published long passages from official government documents in the *Herald*, consistent with their promise to present a "correct dispensation of information." With the gathering of Congress that fall, the partners extended that effort by deciding to print full transcriptions of important Congressional debates, rather than the simple summaries then offered in most newspapers. So on November 4, 1811 – the first day of the 1st Session of the 12th Congress – they converted the *Herald* from a twice-weekly journal into a thrice-weekly one to accommodate the planned increase in content, with a country edition issued on the alternate days. Their decision proved insightful, as this Congressional session yielded a declaration of war against Great Britain the following June, after a winter and spring of heated debate over foreign policy. And as much of that debate appeared verbatim in the pages of the *Herald*, its content was reprinted in newspapers of all political stripes across the country in those months, making the *Herald* into a nationally recognized source for reliable public information.

This approach has made Rounsavell into a historic figure as the first actual recorder of Congressional debates, and not just a summarizing reporter. But his continual presence in the Capitol that winter also made him a reluctant contributor to the legal history of press freedom and government secrets in the United States.

In April 1812, a Select Committee on Foreign Affairs formed by the House was considering whether engaging in a war with Britain was an advisable course. During their deliberations, an account of its "secret" proceedings appeared in the Washington paper of James B. and John M. Carter (084), the anti-Madisonian *Spirit of Seventy-Six*. A subsequent investigation revealed just how porous the veil of secrecy over such deliberations was in reality; it was just a simple prohibition placed on those reporters in attendance to not either discuss or publish what they heard when discussions were declared "secret." Charles Prentis (361), later editor of the *Virginia Patriot* for the Richmond Federalist Augustine Davis (119), was

one of those reporting the 1811-12 session; he said that he had given the Carter brothers an account of the secret proceedings based on a conversation he had had with Rounsavell, and not from any first-hand knowledge of them. The committee summoned Rounsavell to discover from whom he had learned of those proceedings, knowing that he had not been present. Rounsavell testified that he was told of the committee's proceedings by a member of Congress; but when he was pressed to identify that member, he refused to answer his examiners; the committee then ordered him detained by the House's sergeant-at-arms for his defiance of their authority. A considerable debate ensued in the House the next day, resulting in his release, but only after he had apologized to the House and had revealed the source of the story – the Virginia representative John Randolph of Roanoke. In Randolph's absence, his peers presumed that his disclosure had been an inadvertent one, and that Rounsavell had no way of knowing of the secrecy injunction as a result. This event is still a starting point for discussions of journalists' legal rights and responsibilities when reporting on government secrets. But for both Corse and Rounsavell, the affair was one where they came close to disaster from a suppression of the *Alexandria Herald* by Congress.

Throughout the War of 1812, the partners continued to publish a considerable volume of government material, so sustaining their reputation as a relatively impartial source. And if the uninterrupted numbering of their paper is accurate, the pair even managed to avoid a suspension of their publication schedule during the British occupation of Alexandria in late August 1814, unlike Snowden's competing *Alexandria Gazette* – suggesting their temporary relocation at that time. This constancy was rewarded after the war; they were engaged by Secretary of State James Monroe to produce of a register of federal officials in 1815; then with the 1815-16 Congressional session, Monroe granted them one of the coveted federal licenses to publish that session's laws in their *Herald*, a substantial windfall for any such licensee, but here one given to the principal competitor to Snowden's opposition journal when that Federalist and his paper were again in financial distress.

Still, Corse and Rounsavell faced challenges in the post-war period, as did most American publishers of that day. The first major problem they faced was a legal one. In 1818, a civil suit was filed against them for a story that they published concerning the solvency, or lack thereof, of the Mechanics Bank of Alexandria. In short order, a run in the bank ensued and it failed. The administrators of the bank's remaining assets filed suit against a long list of Alexandria merchants, apparently for their devastating withdrawals, and against the firm of Corse & Rounsavell for publishing an "inaccurate" story that triggered the collapse of what they claimed was an otherwise "sound" bank. The suit went on until late 1825 when the plaintiff-administrators finally gave up trying to recoup their losses. Meanwhile, the bank was reorganized, with several of the defendants named in the suit serving as its new directors; Rounsavell was one of those serving, demonstrating that his and Corse's concern had always been with the bank's management and not with its assets. Unfortunately for all involved, the reorganized bank still did not survive the Panic of 1819.

Transitions

That economic downturn also brought about the end of the Corse & Rounsavell concern. Corse had been speculating in the paper currencies of many American banks, and as they

failed, his finances deteriorated; eventually, the situation required that he find an infusion of new capital. In late 1820, he began negotiating with Rounsavell for a sale of his interest in the office. By early 1821, Corse had settled with his long-standing partner, dissolving their firm on February 10th. Rounsavell immediately brought in another practical printer named Henry Pittman (327) as his new partner, with Corse apparently simply signing over his share to Pittman in exchange for a promissory note that he expected would be retired by funds Pittman garnered from the profitable *Herald*.

The rapid succession of Corse to Pittman as Rounsavell's partner suggests Pittman already worked in the *Herald* office, making him a known quantity to Rounsavell and Corse alike. He was as energetic as his new partner had always been. Shortly before he joined with Rounsavell, Pittman bought the press of Samuel H. Davis (126), an Alexandria job-printer who had just assumed legal ownership of the office of the *Alexandria Gazette*, as part of yet another reorganization of Samuel Snowden's finances. Using that press, Pittman issued a new literary weekly called *The Alexandrian* with printer Douglas Thomson (413); but that venture failed after just four months, as many such journals did in that era, with Pittman & Thomson's assets being sold to the new firm of Rounsavell & Pittman.

With the *Herald* reinvigorated and enlarged, it probably seemed that the new partnership was poised for another decade-long run of journalistic success, as Corse & Rounsavell had achieved. But after just fifteen months together, the firm of Rounsavell & Pittman came to an abrupt end. Rounsavell was forced by ill health to retire from the business on April 29, 1825. His retirement was not announced until July 29, 1822, apparently only after Pittman had quietly secured the financing needed to purchase his partner's interest in the *Herald*. Rounsavell's poorly-described disease finally claimed his life in January 1826.

Pittman's savior was, once again, John Corse, although the financier would come to regret his role in the transfer. Pittman signed a new promissory note that he and Corse expected would be retired from the paper's profits. But the realignment also gave Corse a significant claim on those profits, if not all of them, in combination with the prior note. Unfortunately, Pittman was not as talented of a businessman as he was a printer. Over the ensuing four years, Pittman found it ever more difficult to balance the ongoing expenses of his paper with his indebtedness to Corse in the face of both ever-growing newspaper competition in the District and lagging payments from his advertisers and subscribers. Those financial difficulties compelled him to reduce publication of the *Herald* from its customary thrice-weekly mode to a twice-weekly edition on July 24, 1826. Yet the reduction in expenses attending in the July restructuring meant a concomitant reduction in Pittman's revenues, and so his ability to pay off Corse. In the end, he was compelled to cease publication of the *Herald* after its November 15, 1826, issue, and sold his subscriber list to John S. Meehan, publisher of the *United States' Telegraph* in Washington. Turning to collections of monies owed him, he was using Meehan's newspaper within a week to beg for payments from his former advertisers and subscribers alike. Then a month later, Pittman offered to sell two of his office's three presses and most of his type and supplies in an overt attempt to satisfy his creditors, Corse among them. By doing so, he guaranteed an end to the *Herald*.

Desperation

As Pittman retained one or his presses, it is clear that he thought he could eventually pay off his debts by working as a job printer. But events in January 1827 derailed those plans. A fire which destroyed Corse's business swept through Alexandria's business district then; he immediately pressed his debtors for payments in order to gather the capital he needed to rebuild; Pittman was unable to make any payments and moved to Washington City proper to avoid daily contact with Corse. That move did not deter his litigious creditor, however; Corse soon filed suit against Pittman in an attempt to force the printer into bankruptcy. After several months of acrimony, the affair came to a disturbing head on December 27, 1827, when Pittman actually tried to kill Corse by shooting him in the darkened entry to the financier's home. Corse survived the attack and promptly identified his assailant as Pittman, who was then arrested and held without bail in the District of Columbia's jail in Washington. When he was tried in December 1828, it turned out the only witnesses to that evening's events were two Africans who could not testify against a white person in the District's courts. As a result, Pittman was acquitted and quickly fled to New Orleans, where he died impoverished in 1833. Corse not only recovered from the attack, but he prospered, leaving a sizeable exchange brokerage to his son on his death in December 1845, never having again been part of a publishing concern after the death of the *Alexandria Herald*.

Sources: LCCN No. 84024513; Brigham II: 1110; Cappon 37; Miller, *Artisans & Merchants*; Gales & Seaton, *Proceedings in the Congress* (1811-12); *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* (1918); notices in the *Alexandria Herald* (1811-26), the *Alexandria Gazette* (1811-45), the [Washington] *United States' Telegraph* (1826-27), and the [Washington] *Daily National Journal* (1826-27).