

ALEXANDRIA 06: COLUMBIAN TELESCOPE

01: The Columbian Telescope and Literary Compiler (1819-1820)

The *Columbian Telescope* was the first literary journal published in Alexandria. Though just a single-sheet weekly – unlike publications with similar content then in circulation – it was a periodical with an extensive readership, as evinced by the many reprintings of its essays and verses across the breadth of the country during its single year in print.

This weekly was also the first journal published by Samuel Hopkins Davis (126), a native of New Jersey who had learned the print-trade in Alexandria after the War of 1812. By January 1819, he had sufficient skill and confidence to propose publishing a weekly maritime journal in partnership with Timothy Mountford Jr. (305), curator of Alexandria' Masonic Museum. While that weekly never issued, the process of soliciting correspondents and subscribers for the journal provided Davis with vital information needed to then propose and publish this literary alternative five months later, making it a quick success.

The first number of *The Columbian Telescope and Literary Compiler, being a Miscellaneous Repository of Literary Productions* issued on June 16, 1819 in a quarto size (29 cm. x 24 cm.) on a folded half-sheet. The four page format was markedly shorter than that seen in other literary journals then, which were twelve (duodecimo) or sixteen (sextodecimo) pages in quarto or octavo sizes. The smaller form of the *Telescope* meant that Davis did not need to solicit as many contributors for each issue as did those other journals, nor did his weekly require the amount of paper, type, and ink as did his contemporaries; as a result, he could offer the journal to subscribers for \$2.00 per annum (if paid in advance; or \$3.00 if taken on credit), a sum about half the price of most weekly papers then published. The *Telescope* was issued with a continuous pagination, indicating that Davis intended the journal to be bound in completed volumes, and indeed, the extant copies of this title known today are all bound volumes of the full run of the first and only volume.

Just how much control Davis had over the content of his *Columbian Telescope* is unknown. It carried the imprimaturs of three pseudonymous editors (Geoffrey Whimsical, Solomon Studious, and Peter Quiz) – known as "The Trio" – along with items from similarly masked poetic contributors. An early-twentieth-century commentator described its content thusly:

"The poets sang of love and friendship, admonished their readers to follow the path of virtue, told of humorous occurrences at convivial gatherings, and proclaimed the glory of Columbia. The heavy articles were reviews of serious books, and moral and semi-religious essays."

That description suggests that Davis published the *Telescope* for the editors, taking a share of the profits for his tradecraft and management of the subscriber list.

That suggestion is supported by what is known of his other activities in 1819. In September, Davis became legal owner of the port-town's long-lived daily: *Alexandria Gazette*; Samuel Snowden (393), that paper's debt-ridden proprietor, needed to reorganize his business, so he sold the paper to Davis, in order to call in the debts of his now legally-defunct business

and so settle all of its accounts; Davis then sold the journal back to Snowden on the last day of 1819, reporting he had been only the "nominal proprietor" of the *Gazette* and so "merely a nominal editor" in the deal; Snowden had actually conducted the paper in those months as a Davis employee, and now he would continue his paper until his death in 1831, surviving two further financial crises along the way. Davis clearly profited in the process. After ending his business with Snowden In early 1820, Davis took an interest in the advertised sale of the *Winchester Republican* by its proprietor, George McGlassin (287). It seems that his recent financial windfall allowed Davis to consider buying this well-established weekly, even as he conducted the *Telescope* – indicating further that Davis was just that journal's printer. After negotiating with McGlassin over the next few months, he acquired the Winchester paper effective in mid-June 1820.

The purchase required Davis to relocate to Winchester, so bringing an end to the *Columbian Telescope*. Its last number was issued on May 20, 1820, concluding a print run of 51 weekly numbers, or not quite a full year. As Davis had acquired McGlassin's entire Winchester press office, he left his Alexandria press in the hands of others there, and it probably continued as a job-printing concern over that summer, just as it was before the *Telescope* appeared. That September, Davis ended his Alexandria associations by selling that office to the new firm of Henry Pittman (327) and Daniel Thomson (413), journeyman-printers who may have been working for him and/or Snowden. The two would attempt the resurrection of the *Telescope* that November with a new weekly entitled *The Alexandrian*.

Sources: LCCN No. 07-007326; Sabin 14884; Hunt, *Life in America One Hundred Years Ago* (1914); notices in the *Alexandria Gazette* (1818-20).