

CHARLESTOWN 03: Farmer's Repository

- 00: Farmer's Museum (1808)
 - 01: Farmer's Repository (1808-1809)
 - 02: Farmer's Repository (1809-1827)
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The *Farmer's Repository* was the first lasting newspaper published in Charlestown, and so became one of Virginia's longest-lived Jeffersonian journals. A key to that longevity was the paper's success in reflecting the views of Jefferson County's agrarian interests, rather than those of the area's Federalist merchants, as did the largest papers in the lower Shenandoah Valley. It was an innate outlook for its founder, Richard Williams (447), himself a life-long resident of the central Potomac River valley.

Charlestown acquired a printing office in early 1802, when William Brown (058) moved his press from Martinsburg to the new Jefferson County seat. Evidently, from that date until at least 1806, this Federalist printer produced two weekly papers for unnamed Republican editors – first the *Charlestown Patriot*, then the *Farmer's Register* – both of which have long since disappeared from the archival record, likely as a result of very short print-runs and the essential differences between the editors and their printer. With Jefferson County lacking a journal-of-record by late 1807, Ferdinando Fairfax (160) launched an effort to start another weekly in the winter of 1807-08; a justice on the county court and the county's largest land-owner, Fairfax collected a substantial subscriber list for a paper he proposed editing called the *Farmers Museum*. Yet he was also the county's most prominent Democratic-Republican leader, meaning a need to hire Brown to print another Jeffersonian paper – a situation as problematic as had been the preceding efforts. Negotiations stalled between Fairfax and Brown, until Richard Williams became the way to compromise.

Born in Washington County, Maryland, and trained on a Democratic-Republican press in nearby Hagerstown, Williams was apparently employed by Brown in Martinsburg in 1801 and so came with him to Charlestown when that office relocated. His political roots made Williams an agreeable figure for Fairfax and other Jeffersonians, even as they continued to struggle with Brown's leanings. So in early 1808, Fairfax and his associates changed their approach for the proposed paper: they made Williams – who it seems then had an interest in the Charlestown printing office – their front man in the project. Fairfax sold his subscriber list to Williams in March 1808 without ever issuing a number of the *Farmers Museum*; Williams, in turn, forged a one-year agreement with Brown to publish the new *Farmer's Repository* as the firm of Williams & Brown, so giving the Federalist a monetary interest in the Republican weekly; then Fairfax endorsed the new journal as a properly Jeffersonian one when it was first issued on April 1, 1808.

In his inaugural address to his readers, Williams set out to identify his journal as one which would deemphasize politics in favor of pieces on scientific farming and domestic industry:

"Sensible of the futility of great promises or professions, he thinks he may yet say, that the root Repository will be conducted with impartiality and decorum, as

respects individuals; and with a primary view to the promotion of Agriculture and the other Useful Arts of life, as far as his opportunity for suitable selections and other aid will extend; not omitting the news and interesting public affairs of the day; by condensing the less important to make room for the more important matter."

Yet Williams was also aware that in pursuing such an agrarian course, his *Repository* would inevitably become embroiled in partisan controversy. Still he planned to only engage in civil exchanges with his critics, if they addressed him in kind:

"So far as political discussions may come into view, this paper will afford its decided support to the principles of a Representative Democracy; but the editor, convinced of the inutility of personal or party invective to any good cause, will, at all times, be disposed to reciprocate, with his brother editors and others advocating different principles, a gentlemanly and liberal exchange of good offices — so long as they, by manifesting a similar disposition, shall entitle themselves thereto."

The new weekly was an immediate success, unlike its predecessors, making the *Repository* an oft-quoted commentator on political and commercial events. Indeed, there was not an attempt to publish an opposing paper in Jefferson County until 1816, and that journal – the *American Eagle* – was the first in a succession of short-lived Federalist papers issued from Shepherdstown and not Charlestown.

Brown withdrew from his partnership with Williams at the end of March 1809 and moved on to Hagerstown; there he began a new, avowedly Federalist weekly in May 1809. Clearly, his plan was to now take on Williams and Republican publishers nearby in Hagerstown and Frederick, Maryland. That paper continued for nearly five years, though it did not make him as wealthy or influential as he had hoped; Brown departed Hagerstown at the end of 1813, financially broken, physically beaten, and widely ridiculed.

Williams, in contrast, survived and prospered in Charlestown through his adroit handling of potential readers and knowledge of the region's sentiments on political economy. Quickly he became an established and well-respected figure, resulting in his taking on a significant role during the War of 1812. Appointed a lieutenant in Capt. Joseph Grantham's Company of the 55th Regiment of Virginia Militia, he was dispatched with his unit to defend Norfolk in April 1814. That deployment forced Williams to leave his press and paper in the hands of John S. Gallaher (177), a young printer originally from Jefferson (when still part of Berkeley) who then worked in the Baltimore office of the celebrated Hezekiah Niles, publisher of the *Weekly Register*; he would manage the business until Williams returned in August 1815.

Gallaher went on to a long career as a journalist and politician, but he made his first mark politically by publishing a long mock-heroic poem about a riotous Federalist celebration in Shepherdstown over Napoleon's abdication in spring 1814: "The Cossack's Celebration" was reprinted in Republican papers elsewhere and then issued as a pamphlet later that fall in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Yet Gallaher was soon called to militia service in August 1814 as well – to defend Washington during the British invasion then – forcing a three-week long suspension of the *Repository*. Still, Gallaher's contributions added to the reputation of the *Farmer's Repository*, despite its proprietor's enforced absence.

After the war, Williams picked up his journalistic labors where he had left off in 1814, and so continued to prosper. But over the course of the 1820s, competition increased dramatically in the region, with multiple papers issuing from Winchester, Martinsburg, Hagerstown, and Frederick, and nationally-circulated papers like Washington's *National Intelligencer* growing in reach and influence. Williams found competition within the county as well in the series of Federalist papers at Shepherdstown, as well as two papers published at Harper's Ferry by Gallaher. The protégé now exceeded his former mentor; he had started publishing a weekly *Free Press* there in June 1821 and the first successful female-oriented paper published in Virginia – *The Lady's Garland* – in February 1824. So by late 1826, Williams was looking for a way out before the competition undermined his hard-won financial security.

When Williams first began looking for a successor, Gallaher offered his Harper's Ferry paper for sale so as to finance his acquisition of the larger, more prominent *Farmers' Repository*. But the two men soon realized that by merging their papers, instead of selling either one, Gallaher could forge a powerful new Republican voice in the northern valley, one that could better oppose the candidacy of Andrew Jackson in the coming 1828 election. So in early 1827, Williams came to an agreement with Gallaher to merge their weekly papers. Williams issued the last number of his nearly two-decade-old *Repository* on February 28, 1827; then a week later, Gallaher issued the combined *Virginia Free Press and Farmers' Repository* from Williams's Charlestown office on March 7, 1827, indicating that Williams probably retained an interest in Gallaher's paper for a time, either as a silent partner or a creditor.

While the title *Farmers' Repository* stayed on the weekly's masthead, its secondary position meant that the older name would eventually pass into obsolescence; Gallaher dropped the phrase from his masthead in July 1832, making the journal simply the *Virginia Free Press*; it was also now one of the most visible Whig papers in the state, and not the Jeffersonian one founded by Williams in 1808. So while the *Virginia Free Press* continued until 1916, it must be said that the *Farmers' Repository* came to an end with Williams's retirement in 1827. His death in 1853 was widely reported throughout country, all noting that he was "an old and prominent citizen" of his adopted town. Those notices also reported that Williams founded the *Farmer's Repository* in 1802, showing how much that paper's longevity and reputation had forced into the shadows the two short-lived papers that preceded it in Charlestown.

Sources: LCCN No. 83-025563, 84-037835, & 84-026784; Norona & Shetler 1187, 1191, 1256 & 1257; Brigham II: 1169; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Scharf, *Western Maryland*; Williams, *Washington County*; Bushong, *Jefferson County*; [Charlestown] *Farmer's Repository* (1808-27).