

## CLARKSBURG 01: The Bye Stander

01: The Bye Stander (1810-1815)

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The first newspaper published in Clarksburg was representative of an ongoing competition with nearby Morgantown over control of commerce in the Monongahela Valley in the early nineteenth century. It also represents the political competition in that region between Federalists and Republicans in the era of the War of 1812.

*The Bye-Stander* was the second weekly started in the Monongahela Valley by Philadelphia printer Forbes Britton (053). He relocated to Morgantown in 1803 to join Joseph Campbell (078) in publishing the *Monongalia Gazette*. The move acquainted him with the influential Pindall family of nearby Clarksburg; in November 1805, Britton married Elizabeth Pindall, a sister of James Pindall, a Clarksburg attorney and a key Federalist political figure in the area; then in January 1806, he sold his interest in the Morgantown paper to Campbell and moved to Clarksburg. It appears that Britton conducted a job-press there from the start, one often patronized by Pindall, who was elected to the Virginia Senate in 1808.

By 1810, the brothers-in-law resolved to start a weekly in Clarksburg. They were evidently aware that Campbell's *Monongalia Gazette* was then in deep financial trouble and that such a journal would fill an advertising void created by the impending death of that paper; it would also help build Clarksburg into an important regional commercial center that might supplant Morgantown, as well as serve as the journal-of-record for Harrison County. So Britton persuaded his brother Alexander (052) to relocate to Clarksburg to assist him in producing the new weekly.

*The Bye-Stander* was first issued on July 26, 1810, or so its numbering scheme implies; there are only three numbers of the paper extant, the earliest from July 1813. It may have been earlier than that, given the problems with transporting needed supplies from the East that the Brittons experienced often, perhaps even as early as April or May 1810, following the March death of the *Monongalia Gazette*. Yet such supply issues were apparently secondary to ones of finance in a region lacking currency and so dependent on in-kind payments; such fiscal problems were only heightened by the disruptions on the War of 1812.

In terms of the *Bye-Stander's* long-term survival, however, the most significant issue that the paper faced was apparently its Federalist perspective and its support of James Pindall. By the end of the War of 1812, the Britton brothers faced imminent bankruptcy from their unpaid bills and uncollected debts, seemingly a result of a decline in subscribers for a "pro-British" paper during a war with Great Britain. Now the tables were turned on the Brittons and their patron James Pindall; Morgantown's civic leaders, brought another Philadelphia printer to that town to start a new weekly there, sensing the demise of the *Bye-Stander*. In mid-1815, the Brittons were forced to close their five-year-old paper; simultaneously, the new *Monongalia Spectator* issued in Morgantown. (Remarkably, that new Morgantown printer also defected to Clarksburg in 1819 to start the town's third newspaper.)

Alexander Britton soon left Clarksburg for Ohio, but his brother Forbes remained behind, tied now to the town by familial allegiances. It seems that he leased his press to a new pair

of journalists who attempted Clarksburg's next newspaper in November 1815: the *Western Virginian*. Still, that revenue and Britton's other financial maneuverings were not enough to prevent a personal bankruptcy in 1820, one in which he lost his house and furnishings. His bitterness at this unfortunate turn of events can be seen in the title he chose for the only other journalistic venture he attempted there in 1822: *The Rattlesnake*. Britton died two years later, broken physically and financially.

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Sources: LCCN No. 84-037837 Brigham, II: 1170; Norona & Shetler 1207; Rice, "West Virginia Printers"; Hayward, *Harrison County*; Wiley, *Monongalia County*.