

CLARKSBURG 02: Republican Compiler

01: Western Virginian (1815-1817)

02: Republican Compiler (1818-1820)

The second weekly published in Clarksburg issued shortly after the demise of the first. And like its predecessor, the new paper experienced supply and finance problems as well, ones that apparently led to a long period of suspended publication when the original proprietors dissolved their concern. Yet that interval may also have been extended by a lack of support for a Republican journal in a traditionally Federalist area.

Clarksburg's first weekly, *The Bye Stander*, was very much a mercantile advertiser. Launched in 1810 to fill an advertising void anticipated with the impending death of the *Monongalia Gazette* in nearby Morgantown, it was also a journal tied to James Pindall, a Clarksburg attorney and a key Federalist political figure in the region. The *Bye-Stander* was published by Pindall's brother-in-law, Forbes Britton (053), and his brother, Alexander Britton (052). After a five-year run, the Brittons were obliged to close their paper in the summer of 1815, mired in unpaid bills and uncollected debts, as well as seeing ever-declining support for the weekly's Federalist perspective in the wake of the War of 1812.

The *Western Virginian* made its appearance within weeks, probably that November. It was published by Alexander G. McRae (300) and Gideon Butler (067), two men unknown in the American print trade outside of their work in western Virginia after the War of 1812. The rapid succession suggests that McRae & Butler were local figures who secured the use of the Brittons' press, probably through a lease, and began publishing their version of Harrison County's journal of record.

All that is known of the *Western Virginian* has been derived from one surviving 1816 issue, now lost, and references to the paper in other journals. The new weekly was a Republican journal supporting John G. Jackson, a Clarksburg lawyer and mill-owner then representing the First District (Virginia west of the Appalachian ridge) in Congress – and a brother-in-law to Dolley Madison. Yet within a few months of the paper's launch, Jackson had declined to run for reelection in 1816; he was then more interested in an effort by the state's western counties to amend and democratize the 1776 Virginia Constitution (leading to the Staunton Convention that August) and in refitting his war-weakened business; he also recognized the effects of popular anger over the Compensation Act of 1816, which increased the pay of Congressmen. By February 1817, the drive to amend the Constitution had been blunted in the Assembly by the eastern counties, and Jackson was about to yield his seat in Congress to Federalist Pindall. McRae evidently decided to retire from the venture at this point, and Butler announced that the *Western Virginian* would be transformed into the *Republican Compiler* on April 1st – possibly the end date of a six-month agreement between the two.

The transition did not go as planned, however. On the appointed date, publication of the weekly was suspended while McRae and Butler settled the firm's accounts. But the restyled *Republican Compiler* did not appear until fifteen months later in July 1818. The interruption appears to have been both financial and political. When the *Compiler* finally issued, Butler

owned the press that it was printed on, indicating that he had finally bought a press of his own and so no longer depended on the old Britton press; it may be that he had bought that press while it was still part of Forbes Britton's legally-contested assets, but such a purchase would have been complicated and require funding that Butler may not have had then; it could also be that Butler lost access to the Britton press as a result of his paper's support for Jackson and so had to find another. Meanwhile, the regional network behind James Pindall now backed a new Federalist journal in Morgantown – *The Monongalia Spectator* of William McGranahan (288) – one that competed with the *Western Virginian* all through its short life. These impediments were not relieved for more than a year, and then only after Pindall had been narrowly reelected to Congress in 1818.

The *Republican Compiler* issued for almost exactly two years (105 numbers) from about July 24, 1818 to July 28, 1820. Those dates suggest either two one-year financial agreements or a two-year one that sustained Butler's weekly. As the only surviving run of the *Compiler* is from its last six months, it is difficult to ascertain how the paper was received initially, but in 1819 Butler called into question the practices of the unchartered Saline Bank of Virginia in Clarksburg (i.e. not authorized by a democratically-elected Assembly), in which Pindall was a major player. While the bank was vindicated in the end by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1828 (26 U.S. 100: *U.S. v. Saline Bank of Virginia*) via an appeal successfully argued by Pindall, the affair brought an end to his Congressional career in the 1820 elections. By then, Pindall had also brought McGranahan to Clarksburg (after the printer had a falling out with his partners in Morgantown) to publish a new Federalist paper in opposition to Butler's weekly: *The Independent Virginian*. So it seems that a combination of an expiring financial arrangement, his disapproval of an "undemocratic" bank, and competition from McGranahan compelled Butler to cease publishing the *Compiler* with the issue of July 28, 1820. Butler immediately advertised the sale of his press office and reported that a Republican paper was still a viable proposition in Clarksburg. So it may be that the closure of the *Compiler* was tied to Forbes Britton's forced bankruptcy that same month – an event that required the sale of all of his property, including his press, and a collection of all his debts within weeks.

Despite Butler's assertion, another Republican journal did not issue there until 1822, when McRae, his former partner, issued *The Clarksburg Gazette* that February – another year-and-a-half gap. McGranahan thus remained proprietor of Clarksburg's primary newspaper until its closure at the end of 1824. Butler evidently did not sell his press, though; instead, he moved to Weston in Lewis County (just west of Harrison) and started publishing the *Western Star* there, probably in early 1821; his trail through the American print trade ends the following year there when a fire claimed Butler's Weston office.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-059729; Norona & Shetler 1231 & 1226; Brigham II: 1170; Rice, "West Virginia Printers," Haymond, *Harrison County*; Callahan, *Morgantown*.