

CLARKSBURG 03: Independent Virginian

01: The Independent Virginian (1819-1824)

The third paper published in Clarksburg was initiated by Federalist merchants there to both counter the existing Republican paper and replace a recently-closed Morgantown weekly as the primary advertising medium in that stretch of the Monongalia Valley. Remarkably, the printer they employed was the one who had printed that Morgantown newspaper.

Both of the two weekly papers that preceded the *Independent Virginian* had political origins while also attempting to make this river-port the principal commercial center of the central Monongalia Valley through its advertising potential. The result was a series of papers issued alternately in nearby Morgantown and Clarksburg. The sequence was started by publication of the *Monongalia Gazette* in Morgantown in 1804; one of its proprietors, Forbes Britton (053), moved to Clarksburg in 1806 after marrying into the family of James Pindall, one of the leading Federalist figures in western Virginia; when the *Monongalia Gazette* failed in 1810, Pindall and Britton launched a new weekly there, *The Bye-Stander*, as a replacement for the Morgantown paper. When that paper failed in the summer of 1815, replacements quickly issued in both towns: first was the Federalist *Monongalia Spectator* in Morgantown that September, and then the Republican *Western Virginian* in Clarksburg in November. The *Western Virginian* was a vehicle for the region's Republican network led by John G. Jackson, then the area's Congressional representative; meanwhile, the demise of the *Bye-Stander* gave the *Monongalia Spectator* the support of the network behind the Federalist Pindall. Of the two, the *Western Virginian* was the more problematic, suffering a fifteen-month-long suspension (April 1816 to July 1817) as it was transformed into the *Republican Compiler*. The *Compiler* and the *Spectator* were thus engaged in 1819 in a struggle for political and commercial dominance when unexpected events transpired in Morgantown.

William McGranahan (288) was a Philadelphia-trained printer who had been induced by two of Morgantown's largest merchants – Ralph Berkshire and Nicholas B. Madera – to print the *Monongalia Spectator* for them in 1815. The association continued uninterrupted until May 1819 when Berkshire and Madera abruptly dissolved their partnership with McGranahan, purportedly over the printer's drinking. James Pindall moved quickly to exploit the resulting suspension of *Monongalia Spectator*. Now Congressman from the western Virginia district, Pindall had been instrumental in 1818 in gaining one of the federal licenses for three papers in Virginia to print the laws passed by the Congress at going advertising rates for the new Morgantown weekly – an important subsidy for any paper so licensed. Pindall and his key supporters invited the displaced printer to come to Clarksburg to start a new Federalist journal there, and then made sure that McGranahan retained the lucrative federal license which made that Clarksburg venture viable, much to Berkshire's and Madera's chagrin; their *Spectator* never resumed publication.

Once in Clarksburg, McGranahan was more fortunate than were his old partners. His new *Independent Virginian* issued its first number on August 4, 1819, less than three full months after his dismissal in Morgantown. While McGranahan still faced competition from the

Republican Compiler of Gideon Butler (067), that weekly was plagued by its own problems, not the least of which was its criticism of Clarksburg's unchartered Saline Bank of Virginia, one of Pindall's business interests, at about the same time that the *Virginian* launched; that critique apparently cut heavily into Butler's advertising revenues, so forcing the closure of his *Compiler* the following July. With the contemporaneous journalistic void in Morgantown, McGranahan found his paper the journal-of-record for Monongalia and Harrison counties alike, as well as the region's sole advertising outlet; when combined with his federal license, the financial stability of the *Independent Virginian* was assured.

McGranahan maintained that stability for the next five years. But by 1824, political events began to undermine his finances. The *Virginian* had assumed an unmistakably anti-Jackson tone during the contentious presidential campaign that year; a result was that his federal license was reassigned for the second (1824-25) session of Eighteenth Congress to the new *Clarksburg Intelligencer* of Alexander G. McRae, an original owner of the *Western Virginian*. Now lacking that key subsidy, and with several Jacksonian competitors being published in nearby locales, McGranahan chose this moment to close his *Independent Virginian*; its last number issued on December 13, 1824, one week after the Congress had convened.

Yet once removed from the partisan wars, McGranahan's business apparently thrived, as he conducted a job-printing office in Clarksburg well into the 1840s. He returned to journalism in 1840, publishing a Whig-oriented journal there – *The Harrison County Whig and Western Virginia Advertiser* – which he transferred to his son, William H. McGranahan, in 1843. He then disappears from the historic and bibliographic record.

Sources: LCCN No. 84-024744; Brigham II: 1170; Norona & Shetler 1219; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Haymond, *Harrison County*; Callahan, *Morgantown*.