

LEESBURG 01: True American

01: The True American (1798-1801)

The first newspaper issued in Leesburg has left a scant trace on the historical record. With just two numbers known extant, only three individuals can be definitively associated with its publication, which makes any assessment of its short life essentially a speculative venture.

The *True American* weekly evidently began publication on November 29, 1798, based on the eighth number issued on January 17, 1799. That issue identifies the paper's proprietors as Matthias Bartgis (024) and Wyllys Silliman (541). The pairing of these men in this project is both strange and familiar. Bartgis was a newspaper entrepreneur from Frederick, Maryland, who initiated a series of journals in the Great Valley regions of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia during the 1780s and 1790s, by partnering with a printer or editor who lived at that paper's locale; this Leesburg weekly was yet another in that series. But his choice of Silliman was different, in that the purportedly Republican Bartgis formed an alliance with a young Federalist lawyer from Connecticut at the height of the Alien & Sedition Acts controversy.

The only other number of the *True American* known extant is that for December 20, 1800, which shows that the firm of Bartgis & Silliman had, at some point in the preceding twenty-three months, sold the weekly to Patrick McIntyre (289), whose colophon adorns that issue. McIntyre appears to have been a native son of Loudoun County who was trained by Bartgis as a printer in either his Frederick or Leesburg office and was the journeyman who managed the *True American* press for the absent Bartgis and the lawyer Silliman. He would continue printing in Leesburg for the rest of his life, later as proprietor of *The Washingtonian* there from 1808 to 1840.

What is known of all three men suggests a simple scenario for the publishing history of the *True American*. In 1798, Bartgis had found an agreeable partner in Leesburg in Silliman for a weekly to further expand his sprawling business. Yet Bartgis also evinced, throughout his career, a capacity for quickly cutting his losses when faced with unprofitable or discordant situations; so it is likely that the political tensions between the Republican Bartgis and the Federalist Silliman reached a head during the heated 1800 presidential campaign which led, in turn, to the dissolution of their partnership, probably in the summer of 1800. It may be that McIntyre then took up the challenge of conducting a weekly because Silliman remained the journal's editor for a time. Such is suggested by the fact that Silliman is not seen again in extant public records until September 1801, when he was soliciting subscribers for a new Federalist journal – *The Ohio Gazette, and the Territorial and Virginia Herald* – in Marietta, Ohio (then still the Northwest Territory). Local histories there report Silliman had edited a newspaper in "western Virginia" in 1800, so confirming both the year McIntyre acquired the *True American* and Silliman's possible editorial work for him, conceivably into early 1801.

The end of McIntyre's tenure as proprietor of the *True American* is entirely a mystery. He may have closed the paper as early as the spring of 1801, if Silliman's departure then was a contributing factor, or as late as the winter of 1802-03, just before a new Federalist paper started in Leesburg – the *Impartial Journal* of Valentine M. Mason (282) – or somewhere

between those bookends. At the end of 1800, McIntyre was issuing a paper with a smaller page-size and coarser typeface as compared to both the earlier Bartgis & Silliman paper and to papers of his contemporaries. In the one extant number of his paper, McIntyre promised a larger page and better typography in the near future, as a result of his growing subscriber base. Whether he achieved that goal is uncertain, as is the date when he finally decided to end the run of Leesburg's first newspaper.

Sources: LCCN no. 83-026139; Brigham II: 1118. Wust, "Matthias Bartgis"; Poland, *Frontier to Suburbia*; Reid, *Inside Loudoun*; Currier, *Beginnings of Ohio Journalism*.