

LEESBURG 03: The Washingtonian

01: The Washingtonian (1808-1851)

The third newspaper issued in Leesburg was published by a printer associated with the first a decade before. But unlike its two Federalist predecessors, this like-minded journal found solid backing in Leesburg, initially as the voice of arch-Federalist Charles Fenton Mercer.

Patrick McIntyre (289) had printed (and then published) Leesburg's first weekly paper, the *True American*, between 1798 and 1801. After its demise, he apparently continued there as a job-printer, rather than leaving town as did many other publishers after they had closed their failing papers. That choice evinces McIntyre's familial ties to Loudoun County, where his father had been a moderately-wealthy planter before his death in late 1788. So over the ensuing years, he developed strong ties to the county's mercantile community and a deep attachment to their Federalist perspectives as a result of that employment.

The 1807 Embargo Act and the election of James Madison as Jefferson's successor in 1808 led many Federalists to recast their party as "Washingtonians," as opposed to Jeffersonians; they claimed to have always adhered to the principles of George Washington, rather than to those of the derided John Adams, and so distanced themselves from the controversies and issues of the Adams presidency. McIntyre became the first of five publishers who embraced that term as a title for new political journals during Madison's presidency (beside Leesburg, two in Pennsylvania, one each in Vermont and New York). McIntyre began his publication of *The Washingtonian* about December 6, 1808, just one month after Madison's election. This approach evidently suited McIntyre's intended subscribers in Loudoun County, as his weekly would survive the Civil War, making it the focus of the rest of his journalistic career.

One of the area's self-styled Washingtonians was Charles Fenton Mercer, a young lawyer then emerging as the county's chief Federalist voice; Mercer promptly adopted McIntyre's *Washingtonian* as a platform for partisan organizing and campaigning, which indicates that he was one of the paper's original financial backers, if not the primary one. In that key role, *The Washingtonian* helped Mercer to win elective office continuously from 1810 to 1839, starting with his election to the Virginia House of Delegates in 1810, and then to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1816. In that first campaign, McIntyre and Mercer faced a new competing Republican paper published by John Newton (313); however, that short-lived *Republican Press* (issued from March 1810 to May 1811) had little if any effect on the polls; Mercer and his Federalist colleague, William Noland, quadrupled the small vote for their Jeffersonian opponents.

Over the course of the next two years – a period from which all of the surviving pre-1820 numbers originated – *The Washingtonian* was a paper that mostly reprinted the long and acerbic speeches of the Federalists then in Congress and commentaries from the major anti-Madison journals in Washington and Baltimore. Yet despite the violence loosed on those source papers in June 1812, at the start of the war with Britain, McIntyre's weekly appears to have escaped such popular retribution; indeed, Mercer was a leading figure among those who commanded militia units from Loudoun County in the War of 1812. However, a clear

assessment of the tone and content of *The Washingtonian* during the war is impracticable, as only one issue of the journal survives from the 1812-1820 period.

What little that can be discerned about *The Washingtonian* comes from contemporaries to McIntyre's paper. The most important of those other papers is a Republican one started in Leesburg by Samuel B. T. Caldwell (074) in 1817: the *Genius of Liberty*. Caldwell was actually a transplanted Federalist from Massachusetts who came to Leesburg in 1816 to conduct a mercantile concern; but once in Virginia, Caldwell was radicalized by the immediate loss of his accustomed political rights, particularly that of suffrage, ensuing from his non-property-holding status. He began writing essays on the subject, but found that employing others to publish his arguments was ineffectual, leading him to become his own publisher.

The trigger for Caldwell's decision was apparently Mercer's election to Congress in 1816; he had defeated Armistead Thompson Mason, a young militia general who carried Loudoun's Republican standard, by a vote of 782 to 706; in Mercer's column were many non-resident property owners, who were allowed to vote wherever they owned property, while residents like Caldwell were not. So in January 1817, fully two months before Mercer took his seat, Caldwell launched his Republican alternative to McIntyre's *Washingtonian*, and immediately questioned the legitimacy of Virginia's electoral process and the efficacy of the state's 1776 constitution. In asking such questions, he was in agreement with the criticisms voiced by the counties of western Virginia at the Staunton Convention of August 1816. But being a New Englander, Loudoun's Federalists were suspicious of his motives, especially when it became known that Caldwell was backed by Mason, just as Mercer backed McIntyre. Mason and Loudoun's Republicans challenged the 1816 vote when the 15th Congress opened in March 1817, with Caldwell and McIntyre printing charge and countercharge between Mason and Mercer over most of the year. So when Congress certified Mercer's election that November, Mason shifted his focus to actual non-resident voters, including his Federalist cousin, John Mason McCarty, who had voted in Leesburg while he lived in Washington. The exchange between them was even more vitriolic than Mason's with Mercer had been, with McCarty repeatedly defending himself in *The Washingtonian*. The interest that this clash generated led each Leesburg publisher to reprint the exchanges in carefully-edited pamphlets in the late 1818, which increased their sales and kept the animosity alive; hence, this personal and political conflict eventually drew challenges to a duel, with Mason dying at McCarty's hand on the infamous Bladensburg dueling ground in February 1819.

This two-year-long episode was clearly a key to the survival of both newspapers in the post-war years. Yet it also reveals the localist base that sustained *The Washingtonian*. In the wake of the War of 1812, Federalist papers faded in popularity in consequence of their opposition to a conflict that ended favorably and heroically in the minds of most Americans. What now nourished McIntyre's paper was the sustenance that he had drawn on since its founding – a well-organized local political and commercial circle. And so long as Mercer held public favor in the community, *The Washingtonian* would continue publication, regardless of the national party's fortunes. In contrast, Caldwell retired from this perilous trade within months of the duel, selling his paper to Brook Watson Sower (396), a grandson of the first German-language printer in America. So the *Genius of Liberty* continued to compete with *The Washingtonian* until 1841, with the Republican journal evolving into a Jacksonian one in

the 1820s as McIntyre's became a Whig journal. But Caldwell's withdrawal gave McIntyre primacy for Loudoun County's job-printing work, which had always been a solid foundation for his business.

McIntyre, however, did not long benefit from this financial and political victory. In July 1821, he died unexpectedly, leaving a young wife, Mary, and an infant son, Christopher. His will directed his executors to continue operating the press office with his new partner, Patrick J. Hawe (206) – apparently a journeyman lately from Alexandria – and to involve his son in the business for as long as it remained a profitable endeavor. Hawe had left the *Washingtonian* by the time he was married in Leesburg in December 1822, suggesting that a one-year-long partnership agreement with McIntyre had expired in the interim. But his departure from the office did not doom the paper; it continued for two more decades, possibly in the hands of his executors for all those years, before his son, now known as C. C. McIntyre, took sole control of the paper in the midst of the hotly-contested presidential election of 1840.

C. C. McIntyre conducted his father's journal energetically until 1851. The Whig victory of 1840 brought an end to the *Genius of Liberty* as Democratic partisans began to divide along sectional lines. After 1851, the new proprietors of *The Washingtonian* made it into an ever-more strident voice for secession, and so it has been regularly misidentified as a Democratic paper, an identification that has also been carried back, incorrectly, to its earliest days. The newspaper that McIntyre's son sold in 1851 was far removed from the journal that he had established in 1808, simply because of the course of events over that period. Yet both iterations of *The Washingtonian* truly represented the views of an influential majority of Loudoun County's readers. Such unflinching popularity gives evidence of both the father's and son's proficiency as attentive journalists with deep roots in the community. It may also explain the dearth of surviving copies of this popular paper from the antebellum period: it was simply read into oblivion.

Sources: LCCN No. 83-026138; Brigham II: 1118; Cappon 730; Poland, *From Frontier to Suburbia*; Reid, *Inside Loudoun*; guides to McIntyre's and Caldwell's papers at Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg; articles from *The Washingtonian* (1810-51), *Genius of Liberty* (1817-41), and references to both in Alexandria, Baltimore, Washington, and Fredericksburg papers (1808-51).