

LEESBURG 05: Genius of Liberty

01: The Genius of Liberty (1817-1839)

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The *Genius of Liberty* was, at once, the fifth paper published in Leesburg, the second rival journal to the well-established *Washingtonian* there, and the first viable Republican weekly issued in that Federalist stronghold. It was also one that had a twenty-year-long association with the print-trade family who first printed in the German language in America.

The title of this Leesburg weekly was one with a clear connection to the revolutionary ideals of the continental Enlightenment, particularly with those of the French Revolution – *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (liberty, equality, brotherhood). At that time, the common axiom "genius of liberty and equality" was often portrayed in engravings and paintings as a winged female figure, which led to that image's enshrinement in the statue by Augustin-Alexandre Dumont atop the *Colonne de Juillet* (July Column) in the *Place de la Bastille*, the site of the notorious Paris prison whose sacking in July 1789 symbolizes the start of that Revolution. From that date on, the radicalism of the "Jacobins" there was assailed by more conservative elements in the American body politic (the Federalists), who applied the label to their opponents here (the Republicans) as one of derision. Some Republican journalists, however, embraced the inference, using the phrase "genius of liberty" as the title for their newspapers, seeing that ostensible insult as an honorific instead. From 1795 to 1845, eleven new journals, published from Vermont to Illinois, adopted that title, including two in Virginia – this one issuing in Leesburg in 1817 and the other in Fredericksburg from 1797 to 1800.

Origins

This Leesburg instance was, perhaps, the most fitting acceptance of that implied radicalism. The weekly's founder, Samuel Brooks Tobie Caldwell (074), had been both politicized and radicalized by his experiences in the town. He was a native New Englander who relocated to Leesburg in 1816 to conduct a mercantile concern. But once resident in Virginia, the young Massachusetts Federalist was faced with the immediate loss of his accustomed political rights, particularly that of his suffrage, which ensued from his non-property-holding status. As a result, Caldwell became a determined advocate for universal suffrage and equal rights for the rest of his life, despite his conservative upbringing. His first public commentaries on Virginia's essential inequities were written as a correspondent for Winchester's *Republican Constellation* of Jonathan Foster (168). But Caldwell soon found that employing others to publish his remarks was unsatisfactory, so leading him to become his own publisher.

The trigger for Caldwell's decision was apparently the 1816 election of Federalist Charles Fenton Mercer to Congress. 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, repeatedly, wherever they owned property, while residents like Caldwell were disenfranchised. So in January 1817, two months before Mercer took his seat, Caldwell launched his Republican

alternative to *The Washingtonian* of Patrick McIntyre (289) and promptly began publishing articles and commentaries on the efforts of Loudoun County Republicans to invalidate such votes and so elect Mason in Mercer's place.

Those efforts were part of a broader democratization movement in Virginia then seeking to expand suffrage and apportion representation according to population rather than wealth. Caldwell was thus a suitable advocate for that movement, given his own experience and his grounding in the Enlightenment classics that advocated liberty and equality. Consequently, his new *Genius of Liberty* would be consistent with those values, so making it,

"...in all its features, REPUBLICAN—not republican in *name* only; but in *principle* and in *practice*. Although decidedly Republican, I shall not pledge myself to become the general advocate of every act of the party—"to err is human." Neither would I be understood to become the avowed enemy of every man who calls himself a FEDERALIST—No! Liberality and candor are essential requisites in the management of a Public Paper. There are certain principles of rectitude, in the political creed, which, when faithfully followed by men of whatever party, should be countenanced and applauded; but when men swerve from the strictest rules of integrity, abdicate the cause of their country, wander in the quagmire of political corruption, or chain themselves to the chariot wheels of faction; no matter to what party they are attached; no matter what plausible name they may assume; no matter what professions they make—the alarm should be given—the cloak of hypocrisy should be rent asunder—their naked deformity exposed, and the lash of satire applied."

In his questioning the constitutional *status quo*, Caldwell was in agreement with criticisms voiced by the counties of western Virginia at the Staunton Convention of August 1816. But being a New Englander, Virginia Federalists were openly suspicious of his motives. The first to publically doubt Caldwell's candor and scruples was John N. Snider (392), publisher of the *American Eagle* in nearby Shepherdstown; Snider apparently objected to the deviation from Southern principles seen in the essays Caldwell published in the *Republican Constellation*, asserting that the same apostasy was the crusade he intended for his new Leesburg weekly; Snider evidently continued his assault by casting aspersions on his loyalty to his old friends in Massachusetts, citing them as reasons behind his divergence from Virginia traditions. Caldwell's two-column response took Mr. "Snoider" to task for his "fountain of sophistry" wherein he employed "false premises" to arrive at "false conclusions" to delude his readers; Caldwell suggested that the "incapable" Snider was simply fronting for "secret masters" still unknown, before closing his reply with the Biblical injunction that "Johnny" should "*go and sin no more*." Caldwell then offered his readers an apology for

"...noticing the wild effusions of the factious myrauder of Shepherd's-Town. It was our first intention to transfix the creature with the dagger of satire and hold it up to the optical demonstration of those who are fond of the marvelous; but pity interposed & we forbore, and have addressed it as Peter addressed the mummy, by that beautiful figure in our language called *per-son-i-fi-ca-tion*."

The exchange of rhetorical blows between the two editors ended with Snider's departure from Shepherdstown early that summer. Yet Snider was more a nuisance than a real foe.

From the beginning, Caldwell's actual adversary was the Federalist weekly also published in Leesburg: *The Washingtonian*. He clearly found it amusing to report on the shortcomings of its proprietor, Patrick McIntyre. In one instance, in the summer of 1819, Caldwell happily noted that McIntyre had

"...come into contact with a matter of fact, as well as the most simple and plain rules of orthography and syntax, to which he has long been an open enemy. We heartily commiserate his situation, and would most willingly lend a helping hand, as a grateful return for past favors. ... we would humbly suggest, for his consideration, the only plan which at present appears calculated to bring about a reconciliation with such powerful and obstinate enemies, as truth, orthography and syntax: *videlicet*—To become reconciled with truth, never contradict her—never state for a fact that which you are entirely ignorant, lest you fall into error. *Ignorant* blunders render you nearly as obnoxious to her, as *malicious* ones."

While Caldwell employed here the satiric voice he had hoped to employ regularly against his critics, much of his content had a far more cutting edge, especially in regard to the two-year-long controversy between Mercer and Mason over the disputed 1816 election.

Despite Caldwell's protestations that Mason did not have any direct influence on his *Genius of Liberty*, it is evident that Mason and other Republicans in the county were his financial backers, just as Mercer and Loudoun's Federalists then backed McIntyre's *Washingtonian*. So when the 15th Congress opened in Washington in March 1817, the Republican challenge to Mercer's election became the focus for both papers. Caldwell and McIntyre alternately printed charge and countercharge between Mason and Mercer over most of that year, as well as pseudonymous essays supporting the contenders. The contest shifted course when Congress certified Mercer's electoral victory that November; Mason quickly fixed his ire on the non-resident voters in Mercer's column in essays he provided for Caldwell thereafter; among those targeted was his Federalist cousin, John Mason McCarty, who had voted in Leesburg even though he lived in Washington. The exchange between the two kinsmen was even more vitriolic than had been Mason's with Mercer, with McCarty repeatedly defending himself in *The Washingtonian*. The interest this clash generated led each Leesburg publisher to reprint the exchanges in carefully-edited pamphlets in late 1818, which both increased their revenues and kept the antagonistic exchange 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.

Following the death of his most visible patron, Caldwell turned his *Genius of Liberty* more toward state political concerns rather than national ones. Three days after the deadly duel, he published a lengthy commentary on the powers of the executive branch of the state's government in regard to the appointment of militia officers. It was instigated by a serious misreading of Virginia's constitution printed in *The Washingtonian*. One of McIntyre's more ardent correspondents claimed that the Republican governor (then James P. Preston) was required to appoint officers chosen by Loudoun's Federalist county court only; he cited the phrase "on recommendation" of the local courts for an ensuing assertion that the governor must be impeached and removed from office for overstepping his constitutional authority.

Caldwell pointed out that the phrase in question was actually "or recommendation" before he went on to skewer that writer with the illogical reasoning behind his claims.

"It is with reluctance we notice so mean and contemptible an artifice to excite political animosity, and to impose upon the understandings of the community. It is only in discharge of a solemn duty which we owe to the public and to ourselves, to expose such base attempts to deceive the unsuspecting, that we have noticed the subject at all."

By fall 1819, however, Caldwell had tired of the ongoing effort and expense of producing this highly politicized journal when he was not himself trained as a printer. Moreover, the potentially fatal results of engaging political controversy in Virginia seems to have surprised him, as evinced by his rapid refocusing state politics. Accordingly, Caldwell sold his weekly that October and retired from journalism for the time being.

Transitions

The issue of the *Genius of Liberty* for October 19, 1819, carried two lengthy addresses, a valedictory one from Caldwell, and an introductory one from his successor, Brook Watson Sower (396). In exiting, Caldwell reiterated the courteous tone of his introductory address nearly three years before, and defended his sporadic deviations from such civility:

"On all occasions I have warred with *principles* and not with *men*, and consequently entertain no antipathy—no hatred—no malice against any person because he cannot *think* and *feel* as I do. ... Has my zeal, on any occasion, carried me too far, call into exercise that divine attribute, Charity. Forget and forgive. I have always endeavored to pursue the course dictated by my own judgment, and the exigencies of the times—or, in other words, endeavored to please myself, and on no occasion have I permitted the editorial department of my paper to be controlled by friends or foes. Whatever merit or demerit may be found there falls upon my own head."

For his part, Sower agreed with Caldwell's approach, declaring fealty to the same principles that had guided his predecessor since the founding of the paper. He pledged that he

"...shall never take a pride and defamation, or indulge in that low and groveling spirit of slander which is too prevalent this day. It is, nevertheless, hardly to be expected, however pure his motives, and proper his pursuits, that he shall himself be screened from that invective and abuse, which too often mark the narrow minds of political opponents; this, however, is what he shall endeavour neither to deserve nor yet to fear; nor will he ever basely deserved his duty to avoid the shafts of malice."

Sower was a fourth-generation printer, the great-grandson of Christopher Sauer, who had established the first German-language press in Germantown, Pennsylvania, in 1738 with the help and encouragement of Benjamin Franklin. His father, Christopher Sauer III, had been a Loyalist during the Revolutionary years and had taken his family to Canada, where his son was first introduced to the family business. When Sower relocated to Philadelphia in 1798, he adopted exclusively the Anglicized spelling of his surname that had been seen only in the family's English-language imprints previously, probably to differentiate his views from those

of his father. It appears Sower had served as Caldwell's printing tradesman, perhaps from the start of the *Genius of Liberty* project in the winter of 1816-1817; indeed, his address suggests a long-standing association with Caldwell and an easy familiarity with his readers.

Given the loyalism of his father, Sower's politics were certainly radical, and so easily in line with the perspective implicit in his paper's title. Yet they were evidently less radical than had been Caldwell's; the *Genius* survived for a quarter century after this 1819 transition, indicating that he found ample support in the countryside that offset any lack of support for his weekly among the patrons of *The Washingtonian* in Leesburg proper, particularly after McIntyre's unexpected death in mid-1821. What is more, the ensuing years seem to be ones where the two publications easily counterbalanced one another. Between them, there were no great controversies, only the reflections of such hostilities in locales like Alexandria, Richmond, Winchester, and Washington. Nor was there an effusion of ancillary titles from the two presses that would fan the flames of any such heated contest, as had been the case in the Mason/McCarty affair during the Caldwell years.

That reality is evinced in the surviving issues of the *Genius of Liberty* from Sower's period. His paper is unusual among those from this era in that a substantially complete run of the first sixteen years of issues survives: an unbroken run from January 11, 1811 to April 10 1821 is followed by a broken run through December 1827 that is missing less than one-third of the issues published (240 of 349 numbers survive). That corpus provides a clear view of the initial sixteen years of the weekly's publication. After that, however, only one number from each of the years 1829, 1831, 1832, 1840, 1841, and 1843 survive, making the paper's content over its last sixteen years known largely by its reflection in other journals.

Public records indicate that each of the two Leesburg newspaper offices in Sower's time were small, family-oriented operations, with each man employing his eldest son as his main assistant, and then passing the going concern on to that favored son – for McIntyre, his son Christopher in 1821; for Sower, his son Brooks Jr. in 1835. With Sower, such an inheritable asset was a family tradition, one that saw four successive generations conduct the original Germantown press for more than a century. Here it was simply from father to son.

That succession came in September 1835, almost exactly sixteen years after Sower bought the *Genius of Liberty* from Caldwell, and nearly thirty years before his death. As his eldest son, Brook Watson Jr., was then just twenty, the handover was likely a means for the son to establish an independent trade identity and share in the successful paper's profits, while his father pursued new business interests. Sower Jr. followed his father's lead for the next four years, while Sower Sr. began investing in mills and stores in the area, just as Caldwell had before him. Local legend reports that the Sower Sr. was briefly involved in efforts to publish an anti-slavery newspaper in Leesburg in the late 1840s; but whether he was so involved, or whether that the charge was as specious as were most such accusations lodged against anti-Jackson Democratic editors then, we will never know without further evidence.

That Sower Sr. was easily identified as an anti-Jackson editor at that time indicates that the *Genius of Liberty* had evolved politically into such a journal as well. Such an evolution also suggests a motive for Sower Jr. to sell the long-lived paper out of the family in 1839 and retire from the print trade. The cross-town *Washingtonian*, then conducted by Christopher

C. McIntyre, son of Patrick, had evolved as well, from a Federalist journal into a Whig one, so claiming one end of the political spectrum opposite the Jacksonians. As a Democratic-Republican paper that did not support the party's standard bearer, the *Genius of Liberty* probably saw a decline in subscriptions and revenue after Jackson's election as president in 1828 – the era with few surviving copies of the Sower family weekly. Indeed, a Jacksonian challenger to the *Genius* issued briefly in 1828 (*Leesburg Observer*), with another emerging in 1840 (*The Spirit of Democracy*). Hence, their entrenched journal was probably in need of reorganization and reinvigoration in advance of the 1840 campaign if it was to continue.

Following the issue of October 5, 1839, Sower Jr. sold the *Genius of Liberty* to a consortium headed by editor George Richards; the new proprietors immediately added a geographical marker to the weekly's title, making it now the *Leesburg Genius of Liberty*, effective with the October 12th issue. As only three issues of this iteration of the *Genius* are now extant, little can be said about the final years of this paper. That it was challenged by a new Jacksonian paper just nine months later, and that it was succeeded by a more stable Democratic paper in 1846, implies that the *Genius* did not much alter its stance from the latter Sower years under the new owners, so fading into irrelevance over time. The last known issue is that for May 20, 1843, indicating a closure later that year, possibly in October at the end of the proprietors' fourth year in control of the weekly.

Three other journals entitled the *Genius of Liberty* were launched in this concluding period of the Leesburg one, all of which died within a year of their introduction. That coincidence leads one to think that the inspirational power of that Revolutionary era turn-of-phrase had long evaporated by 1840. *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* were no longer important concerns to a generation of Americans who had not lived under imperial rule. Rather, practical issues, like territorial expansion and economic development, were more vital to them than those once faced by their parents and grandparents who had praised the "genius of liberty."

Sources: LCCN nos. 83-026137 & 86-071616; Brigham II: 1117; Cappon 718; Guide to Caldwell Papers, Thomas Balch Library, Leesburg; *Descendants of Christopher Sower* (1887); Poland, *Frontier to Suburbia*; notices in the *Genius of Liberty* (1817-40).