

LEXINGTON 01: Rockbridge Repository

01: The Rockbridge Repository (1801-1802)

02: The Rockbridge Repository (1803-1805)

The first newspaper issued in Lexington was a Jeffersonian weekly that struggled to find support in a strongly Federalist area of the Valley of Virginia. As a result, it experienced a series of suspensions that undercut its viability, especially after the introduction there of a Federalist competitor in late 1802.

John McMullin (298) commenced publishing *The Rockbridge Repository* on August 14, 1801. He appears to have been a native son of Rockbridge County, conceivably a familial relation to a like-named Revolutionary War hero from this part of the Valley. His new journal was one that evinced above average typography for the Valley printers of the time, so indicating either that he had trained in the trade elsewhere or that he employed skilled tradesmen. The latter course seems the more likely, as McMullin regularly referred to himself in print as the newspaper's editor and not its printer, publisher, or proprietor, and as he later took a Philadelphia-trained printer into partnership with him to publish the paper.

McMullin began his journalistic career claiming impartiality:

"The editor will strictly adhere to his motto, "Truth, our Guide: The Public Good our Aim." With these declarations he offers the Repository for public patronage, and hopes it may meet the approbation of a generous people. ... [It] will contain official information, public documents, congressional proceedings and debates, a regular account of foreign events & domestic occurrences with occasional essays on literary, agricultural, and commercial subjects. Morals and Religion shall not be neglected, nor modesty wounded."

Even so, it soon became evident that McMullin's *Rockbridge Repository* was an advocate for the new Jefferson administration. As a result, his weekly suffered from a dearth of paying customers, both as subscribers and advertisers; merchants there – largely Federalists – still employed Staunton or Lynchburg papers to promote their businesses, rather than support his paper; meanwhile, readers often lacked the cash necessary to secure the two-dollar-per-annum subscription. As only eighteen issues of the *Repository* survive from its five-year-long life, it seems that such financial constraints led to small print runs each week, which would further limit its exposure. Consequently, McMullin was forced to suspend publication of the *Repository* at the end of its first volume – probably in August 1802, though possibly earlier than that – for want of money; that suspension continued until October 1803.

When the *Repository* finally reappeared, McMullin was far more forthright about both his political perspective and his fiscal difficulties, intimating that the "circumstances which led to the discontinuance of the *Repository* we shall forebear mentioning; the transactions attending it were too *black* to be here noticed; by those who are acquainted with them; they are *most cordially* abhorred." His resurrected *Repository* now carried a new masthead ornament of the winged female figure of "liberty," a symbolic metaphor often associated

with the French Revolution that so many Federalist loathed. If that image did not make plain his new course, his new introductory address did:

"Notwithstanding its former embarrassments, and the difficulties in which it was enthralled, the Repository, like the Phenix, has again blushed into existence, and as the editor has determined to take a decisive part in the existing political contest, he deems it a duty, which he meets with cheerfulness, to declare that he is a decided friend of the constitution and government, under which he lives, and by which he is protected. When he takes into consideration the numerous presses dedicated to the cause of aristocracy, the falsehoods which through the medium thereof are conveyed to the public, and the necessity of a Republican Paper on this side of the Blue Ridge, to rebut their malicious allegations, it is to be hoped the Repository will meet with an able support from the friends of liberty and republicanism."

In an attempt to enhance his revenues, McMullin made an overt plea for payments in kind, noting that "Merchantable Country Produce, such as Wheat, Rye, Corn, Oats, Flour, Bee Wax, Tallow, Butter, Cheese, and Country Linen, delivered at the Office of the Repository, at the Lexington Market Price, will be received in payment of subscriptions." Still, even such benevolent terms do not appear to have enhanced McMullin's ability to pay for the paper he needed to print the *Repository* each week. If the numbering of the few surviving issues is consistent, he lost one week of publication between November 1803 & June 1804, another between June & September of that year, and then nine weeks during the winter of 1804-05; thereafter, the numbering is evidently confused, with the two extant issues from 1805 both carrying the designation of No. 16 in Vol. III, even though they were issued 18 weeks apart.

The interval in the winter of 1804-05 may have been a result of changes in the conduct of his office as much as for want of paper. Sometime between the issues for April 3 and June 26, 1804, McMullin took on a partner, apparently hoping that the infusion of capital and skill from the addition would solidify the *Repository's* foundation. John G. Ustick (421) was a Philadelphia-trained printer who came to Virginia to establish an identity independent from that of older cousins in the print trade in that competitive neighborhood. Circumstances suggest that he agreed to a simple six-month contract with McMullin in May 1804; yet when that agreement expired in November 1804, Ustick declined to renew it. Hence, it may be then that the following suspension of the *Repository* was one resulting from the depletion of McMullin's limited resources, in buying back Ustick's interest, as much as it was from want of paper. Indeed, it seems Ustick stayed in Lexington for a time, as the press continued operating until the printer's subsequent removal to Abingdon in late 1805, after McMullin finally closed his troubled paper in August 1805.

The greatest challenge to the viability to McMullin's weekly, however, was evidently the introduction of a Federalist competitor during the 1802-1803 hiatus. Samuel Walkup (426), a well-to-do merchant-planter with Federalist sympathies, used the opportunity afforded by that hiatus to organize and commence a Federalist challenge to the *Repository*: the *Virginia Telegraphe*. Walkup first issued the new weekly in November 1802, about three months after McMullin had suspended his paper. The *Telegraphe* was well-supported by local merchants which helped Walkup to hire transient journeymen to print the paper for him,

unlike McMullin. But where money problems continually plagued McMullin, Walkup was dogged by insufficient paper supplies whenever weather disrupted its transport.

McMullin restarted his *Repository* in October 1803 in anticipation of the 1804 presidential election, seeing Walkup's *Telegraphe* as one of the many "presses dedicated to the cause of aristocracy. The ensuing contest between the two papers lasted until the outcome of that election became clear. To enhance his position, Walkup added editorial help in February 1804, taking on journalist William Gilman Lyford (272) of New Hampshire as his partner and increased the pace of his production to twice-weekly. McMullin countered by hiring Ustick to assist him, even though he could not afford to match Walkup's accelerated pace. So it is unsurprising to see each partner leaving these concerns once the election was determined, with Lyford leaving Lexington for Staunton in October 1804, forcing Walkup to suspend publication of the *Telegraphe* then.

Yet despite Walkup's withdrawal from their partisan competition, McMullin still faced the same financial issues he had faced before the appearance of the *Telegraphe*. He was able to continue publishing the *Repository* for just another ten months. The latest surviving copy of McMullin's paper issued on August 6, 1805, and is likely the last number that he published. In that issue, McMullin apologized for the erratic publication schedule seen in recent weeks, revealing that his supply of paper had been interrupted regularly by his provider because of an unpaid account balance with the mill's owner. So he now found it imperative to demand payment from his subscribers of all arrearages, or else the periodic suspensions they had seen recently would become a permanent closing of the *Repository*. That plea was made on a half-sheet version of his paper, demonstrating the severity of his plight. The absence of subsequent issues indicates that it was also the *Repository's* final number. Its demise was guaranteed, it appears, by a law suit entered in the Rockbridge County court three weeks later by a local physician of Federalist leanings, one James R. Willson, charging McMullin with libel and slander in the pages of his Republican weekly. However, the nature of the offending article remains unknown, a result of an incomplete court record and the absence of any later issues of the *Repository*.

In the wake of this failure, McMullin did not pursue another journalistic venture. Instead, he turned to teaching, becoming a leading figure in the Lancastrian School movement in the United States after the War of 1812. He eventually removed to Ohio in following that call.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-025518; Brigham II: 1118; Morton, *Rockbridge County*; Chalkley, *Chronicles*; Maddox, *Free School Idea in Virginia*.