

LEXINGTON 02: Virginia Telegraphe

- 01: The Virginia Telegraphe, and Rockbridge Courier (1802-1803)
 - 02: The Virginia Telegraphe, or Rockbridge Courier (1803-1804)
 - 03: Virginia Telegraphe (1806-1810)
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The second newspaper issued in Lexington was founded as an avowedly Federalist weekly in competition with its Republican predecessor. Yet, despite reflecting the majoritarian views of this part of the Valley of Virginia, the journal soon faded into obscurity when its founder embraced a religious ministry in this bastion of the Presbyterian Church in America.

The *Virginia Telegraphe* was a weekly conducted by Samuel Walkup (426), the twenty-year-old son of one of Lexington's leading storekeepers, and backed by the town's merchant class. Those merchants had failed to support, and likely undermined, the first newspaper established in Lexington in August 1801: the *Rockbridge Repository* of John McMullin (298); his journal was an advocate for the Jefferson administration, which placed this Rockingham County native in conflict with many of his neighbors; as a result, his deteriorating finances forced him to suspend publication by August 1802 to reorganize his affairs.

Walkup and his mercantile backers used the opportunity afforded by McMullin's hiatus to organize and start a Federalist challenge to his Republican journal. The *Virginia Telegraphe* was first issued as a weekly in November 1802, conducted by the firm of Samuel Walkup & Co. Beyond its overt partisan perspective, little can be said about Walkup's new paper's initial days, as only seven numbers survive from its first year. But the new journal seems to have quickly found its footing; in early April, Walkup was able to increase his publication pace to twice per week, so manifesting a more reliable flow of revenue from his advertisers than McMullin had experienced. Yet the approach of the 1804 election campaigns would change Walkup's approach, and so his fortunes.

In early October 1803, McMullin restarted his *Rockbridge Repository*, offering a forthright statement that implicated Lexington's merchants as the cause of his fiscal difficulties, which justified the sharper political edge that his paper now adopted. For the ensuing year, both papers found sufficient support from each party's supporters to pursue a vibrant contest between them, one that lasted until the outcome of that election became clear.

Almost immediately, Walkup began a search for a seasoned journeyman printer to assist him in meeting the resurrected challenge from McMullin. Through much of the following winter, he advertised for a tradesman who

"would be fond of living in a healthy village, and would put up with moderate wages, will find constant employ for one year by making application to this Office. He must be sober-inclined, and be willing to work both the case and the press, as occasion may require. It is necessary you should understand Book-work."

In the end, Walkup found a partner rather than an employee. William Gilman Lyford (272) was a journeyman already employed in the *Telegraphe* office then; he had trained in the Exeter, New Hampshire, office of Henry Ranlet, a prolific Federalist printer-publisher. Lyford

may have been with Walkup from the start of the *Telegraphe* in 1802, but most likely he came to Lexington when Walkup's paper became a twice-weekly one in April 1803. The new firm of Walkup & Lyford began publishing the *Telegraphe* on February 28, 1804.

Still, when Jefferson's reelection became a certainty that fall, both partners considered new opportunities for the near future. Lyford decided to remove to Staunton to buy the office of *The Phenix* of Ira Woodruff (458), who was about to suspend its publication because of his financial difficulties, potentially leaving the largest Shenandoah Valley market town south of Winchester without a mercantile advertiser. At the same time, Walkup decided to take on a new publishing project as well. In the summer of 1804, the faculty at Lexington's Liberty Hall Academy (today Washington & Lee University) had organized an effort to produce a new Presbyterian periodical – the bi-monthly *Virginia Religious Magazine* – from Walkup's press. He was a fitting choice to oversee its production being a devout Presbyterian himself, as well as brother-in-law to Rev. Dr. John McElhenney, a noted Presbyterian evangelical. So with the two partners being drawn in such different directions, their seven-month-old firm was dissolved with the October 8, 1804 issue of the *Telegraphe*; Walkup then suspended publication of his two-year-old newspaper, apparently in order to devote his press to the Presbyterian magazine alone.

The *Virginia Telegraphe* remained in suspension essentially for the duration of the life of the *Virginia Religious Magazine*. In the summer of 1806, the Synod of Lexington agreed to hand over their magazine project to the supervisory Synod of Virginia, who hoped to employ the more capable press offices in Richmond to produce a successor. So in apparent anticipation of the end of Lexington-based magazine that December, Walkup resumed publication of his *Telegraphe* on August 23, 1806. It was a cautious restart, as the paper was issued weekly now rather than twice-weekly. Walkup also turned the journal away from its partisan past:

"It is not intended that this paper shall be exclusively devoted to the views of any political party; information which appears useful subject, will always find ready admission; but slander and personalities aimed at private character, and every kind of indecency, shall uniformly be rejected."

In treading this less controversial course, Walkup again moved to exploit an opportunity afforded by McMullin's absence. His former competitor had finally closed the *Repository* in August 1805 for financial reasons, just after his shop foreman and one-time partner, John Gano Ustick (421), had left Lexington for a new independent prospect in Abingdon, just as Lyford had left Walkup in 1804 for Staunton. Thus Lexington had been without a paper of its own for a year, a situation making a newly-non-partisan *Telegraphe* a journal acceptable to Federalists and Republicans alike there. Still, Walkup realized the financial perils involved in starting up his journal again, warning his potential subscribers that any arrearages in their subscription payments would result in an additional 25% fee being added to the annual rate as a penalty.

Yet Walkup evidently still yearned to be involved in political journalism. In February 1808, he proposed moving his weekly from Lexington to Richmond as

"A weekly paper, well conducted there, may speedily convey much valuable intelligence to every part of the state...whilst the lowness of its price, puts it in every

man's power to procure it. And, as on most post-roads, the mail is carried but once a week, it will be found that a weekly print furnishes as late news as those published oftener."

Moreover, he seems to have thought that many Virginians had tired of the heated political controversies that had attended the recent presidential elections, and which promised to be a part of that year's campaign:

"The *Telegraphe* will be continued on the same impartial principles which have heretofore characterized its columns, not devoted to the views of any political sector, it will faithfully record the passing events...To our readers it belongs calmly to judge for themselves...This course we conceive peculiarly proper at the present crisis... When we are menaced from abroad, let no efforts be made at home to distract the public mind."

However, Walkup did not find sufficient support for such a relocation, suggesting that the perspective his paper now represented was particular to the Valley, and not one popular in the Tidewater. So he continued publishing in Lexington for some time thereafter.

The issue carrying that spurned proposal (February 3, 1808) is the latest surviving number of his *Virginia Telegraphe*, making a clear determination of its ending date impracticable. It seems that Walkup continued the *Telegraphe* at least into 1810, as that title appears in the list of U.S. newspapers then issued that appeared in Isaiah Thomas's authoritative *History of Printing in America* that May. But after 1810, Walkup was plainly pursuing non-publishing ventures, eventually joining the Presbyterian ministry in Rockbridge County, so making the seven years or so of his association with his Lexington press his only ones in the print trade, a mere fraction of a seven-decade life.

Sources: LCCN nos. 88-061222 & 85-025520; Brigham II: 1119; Morton, *Rockbridge County*; Boley, *Lexington in Old Virginia*; Waddell, *Annals of Augusta County*.