

LEXINGTON 03: Lexington News-Letter

01: Lexington News-Letter (1819-1820)

02: Lexington News-Letter and Western Virginia Telegraph (1820)

The third newspaper published in Lexington emerged after a nearly decade-long journalistic void there. While an up-and-coming endeavor, it was evidently a small one-man operation that perished when its proprietor died unexpectedly and far too prematurely.

From 1801 to 1805, Lexington witnessed an on-again, off-again competition between two partisan papers: the Republican-oriented *Rockbridge Repository* of John McMullin (298) and the Federalist-aligned *Virginia Telegraphe* of Samuel Walkup (426). Of the two, McMullin's *Repository* was the longer lived, despite a lengthy suspension in 1802 & 1803, a remarkable occurrence for this very Federalist town. That endurance was aided in, in part, by Walkup's turn to religious publishing in October 1804, resulting in the suspension of his *Telegraphe* at that time. When Walkup resumed its publication in August 1806, McMullin's paper had been closed for a year, which led him to recast his journal in a new non-partisan light. His *Telegraphe* continued as such for approximately four more years before Walkup abandoned journalism for the Presbyterian ministry.

After that closure, Lexington wanted for a locally-based mercantile advertiser for more than eight years – a period that saw the War of 1812 and its aftermath undermine the standing of Federalists generally, which constrained the introduction of new anti-Republican journals throughout the country. One young printer who appears to have consciously set out to defy that trend was John N. Snider (392) of Pennsylvania. He had trained in the Chambersburg, Pennsylvania office of George Kenton Harper during the war years, before he founded *The American Eagle and Shepherd's-town Weekly Advertiser* in that Potomac River port town in early 1816; it was the first independent venture for the nineteen-year-old publisher. In fairly short order, Snider established the *American Eagle* as a new Federalist voice in the Potomac Valley. In August 1816, Snider began a two-month-long tit-for-tat exchange with one John McFarland, the Irish-born owner of the *Democratic Republican* in Chambersburg; then in March 1817, he began a similar exchange with Samuel B.T. Caldwell (074), the transplanted New-England-native who edited the *Genius of Liberty* in nearby Leesburg; in both instances, Snider derided his rivals' "foreign" ideas and values, ones he deemed radically inconsistent with those of the Revolutionary generation. Still, conducting such a paper in Shepherdstown was a difficult proposition; later in the spring of 1817, he solicited advertisers for his paper in the *Alexandria Gazette* indicating that he had misjudged the capability of Shepherdstown merchants to support his *Eagle*; by July, he had sold his interest in the paper and left town.

Snider reappeared eighteen months later in Lexington; during the winter of 1818-1819, he was seeking subscribers there for a new mercantile advertiser. The advertising void left by Walkup's retirement, combined with the ensuing growth of commerce in Lexington, made Snider's new venture a viable prospect. Hence, he was able to issue a new weekly about two months after his arrival (on February 13, 1819), called the *Lexington News-Letter*. In his new journal, Snider appears to have avoided overt conflict with other editors that had

marked his Shepherdstown days, relying instead on satiric attacks on distant legislators that fit his readers' politics. Surviving reprints of articles from the *News-Letter* indicate Snider was particularly incensed by Pennsylvania's extension to suffrage to free blacks and by objections to the admission of Missouri as a slave state in the Northeast. But the dearth of readily accessible copies of the paper itself limits any finer analysis of its content.

Still, the *News-Letter* seems to have been a difficult financial undertaking, just as had been the *American Eagle*. In June 1819, he was compelled to issue a small sheet to his subscribers "apologizing for the non-appearance of the News Letter today ... owing to a disappointment at the paper mill," a problem that apparently plagued him for the time of his proprietorship, echoing the difficulties experienced by McMullin and Walkup before him. So at the end of his paper's first volume in February 1820, Snider added the appellation *Western Virginia Telegraphe* to the paper's title in a conscious effort to expand its reach – and so his revenue stream – beyond the immediate Rockbridge County neighborhood.

Whether that alteration had any effect on the circulation or advertising Snider's weekly will remain a subject of conjecture because the publisher did not live long enough to act on any assessment of its value. Publication of his journal ceased with the issue of May 20, 1820, apparently the result of his sudden illness; ten days later, Snider died in Lexington, not yet twenty-three years of age. Unsurprisingly, the *Lexington News-Letter* died with him.

It would be another three years before a succeeding newspaper arose in Lexington to fill the void left by Snider's untimely passing. But the arrival of the *Rockbridge Intelligencer*, issued in 1823 by Valentine M. Mason (282), began an era in which the Rockbridge County seat never again lacked for a local paper.

Sources: LCCN nos. 99-066867 & 99-066855; Brigham II: 1118; various notices in [Charlestown VA] *Farmers' Repository* (1816-20), [Chambersburg PA] *Democratic Republican* (1816), [Leesburg VA] *Genius of Liberty* (1817), *Alexandria* [VA] *Gazette* (1817), [Frederick MD] *Bartgis's Republican Gazette* (1819), *Carlisle* [PA] *Republican* (1820), and [Georgetown DC] *National Messenger* (June 19, 1820).