

LYNCHBURG 03: Lynchburg Star

01: Lynchburg Star (1805-1814)

The third newspaper issued in Lynchburg was a true successor to the second. It was printed on the same press as that predecessor, although it adopted a Republican perspective rather than the Federalist one seen in the town's previous journals. The weekly well reflected the particular interests of its founder, and so it expired when he retired from journalism.

Dr. James Graham (183) was one of many physicians in the early Republic era who followed a journalistic sideline to their medical practice. His motivations in pursuing such a course appear to be two fold. The weeklies that preceded his paper – the *Lynchburg and Farmer's Gazette* (1793-1796) and the *Lynchburg Gazette* (1797-1805) – were avowedly Federalist in their attitudes, while Graham was a Jeffersonian who saw a marked disparity between the politics of the merchants supporting those papers and farmers in that neighborhood. But more importantly, Graham was a rationalist, what would later be termed "a scientist," who was offended by the irrationality of the religious fervor unleashed in the Lynchburg area by Lorenzo Dow (148) the summer of 1804. So when an opportunity arose in the spring of 1805 to challenge both perspectives, Graham seized it.

The *Lynchburg Gazette* had been issued there since June 1797, but the unexpected death in February 1805 of its most recent proprietor, John Weaver (433), left that journal's fate in question. In the short term, his brother Matthew (543) continued its publication, as the firm of M. W. Weaver & Brothers, until the printer's estate could be settled that fall. In August, Weaver's heavily mortgaged press office was sold at auction to Graham; he allowed the Weaver brothers to continue using that press until such time that he marshaled a sufficient number of subscribers to publish a new weekly with that press, the *Lynchburg Star*.

From late August until mid-November, Graham had the prospectus for his proposed journal published weekly in the best-known Republican paper in the country – the *Aurora General Advertiser* in Philadelphia – in support of that effort. That placement made it clear that he was determined to offer a Republican paper and not a Federalist one like his predecessors. Yet he did not use the words "republican" or "democratic" in his announcement, preferring to make plain his idea of a "judiciously conducted newspaper" instead:

"The instruction of youth excepted, there is not in human society a station more important than that of the editor of a news-paper. But to invest him fully with the weight, influence, and importance, that the station demands, the editor must be possessed of extensive information, just discernment, much liberality, and a nice discrimination of character and circumstances.

"Of the magnitude and importance of the undertaking, we are well aware. We fully know the force of caprice—the inanity of professions—the instability of friendship—and how versatile is public opinion—but we as well know that mankind, if entertained, instructed, and even chastened occasionally, will liberally require the virtuous effort."

It took Graham the better part of two months to gather the number of subscriptions that he

required, which allowed the *Lynchburg Gazette* to continue well into September 1805. It had finally ceased publication by late October, as Graham issued the first number of his new weekly on October 31st. That initial issue began a publication run that extended at least into May 1814, a notable duration given the Federalist sentiments of the town's mercantile community that Graham now depended upon for advertising revenue.

Early on in that run, Graham proclaimed that his *Lynchburg Star* would be "unawed, and unaided, by either Monk, or Minister" so that it could provide "a fair, honest, and impartial narration of facts and circumstances" as the appropriate way to "improve and promote the condition and happiness of mankind." That comment came in the context of another season of camp-meeting revivals, ones that were now key features in the area's Methodist ministry led by Dr. Samuel K. Jennings (236), a cross-town contemporary. So while it is evident that Graham's primary readership lay in the Republican hinterland around Lynchburg, it is also clear that he was also critical of irrational practice, so potentially alienating that readership.

That inclination shows that Graham could deviate from Republican norms often enough that he did not completely estrange himself from local Federalists. In the spring of 1810, he published remarks supporting a suggested reform of the Virginia legislature that would reduce the number of representatives in the Assembly, a plan deemed undemocratic by the state's Republican leadership. That same year, he supported the establishment of a branch of the Bank of Virginia in Lynchburg when those same leaders were trying to scale back that institution because its policies favored manufacturing and merchants, and not farmers. That support was not because Graham sought favor among the merchant class there, but rather because that bank was then the only chartered one in the state, and so the only vehicle for infusing capital into the region's economy; so when the Assembly created the Farmers' Bank of Virginia, he was one who promptly invested in numerous shares of that bank's stock.

As the only continuous run of the *Star* that survives is from May 8, 1806 to April 23, 1807, what little that can be discerned about Graham's weekly for the rest of its more-than-eight-year-long life comes from articles reprinted in other American journals of that era. Through all of its existence, items from the *Star* appeared in papers from Vermont to South Carolina to Louisiana. While usually amusing anecdotes, the more widely-reprinted articles detailed criminal activity, with murders and counterfeiters the most common topics. The last known of those stories concerned a severe weather outbreak in the Lynchburg area in April 1814. That record reveals that Graham's weekly continued long after the date of his paper's latest surviving issue for January 8, 1812. Indeed, the War of 1812 made the *Lynchburg Star* into a standard source for accounts of war-time events in the trans-Appalachian west, particularly among Republican papers in the North. Hence, it is clearly evident that the *Star* continued in print into at least the spring of 1814.

The closing of the *Lynchburg Star* appears to have been tied to events in Graham's personal life rather than to any business of political concern. During the War of 1812, his wife died, leaving him with just an unmarried daughter for companionship; her declining health appears to have contributed to his decision to close his *Lynchburg Star* in the spring or summer of 1814. He was also facing an increasingly popular competitor in the *Lynchburg Press* which first appeared in 1809 employing the sectarian pen of Jennings. So the aging

Graham gave up the fight and closed his *Star* forever. Other Republican papers would try to follow in Graham's footsteps only to find far shorter lives than the *Star's*.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-025609; Brigham II: 1121; Campbell County Will Books; Cabell, *Sketches of Lynchburg*; Potter & Potter, *Lynchburg*; Asbury, *Lynchburg*.