

## MARTINSBURG 01: Potomak Guardian

- 01: The Potowmac Guardian and Berkeley Advertiser (1791-1795)
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The first newspaper issued in Martinsburg was one transplanted from Winchester by way of Shepherdstown. It was also a journal published by a well-known printer from Boston who found his Revolutionary-era principles were far too radical for the conservative elites of the northern Valley, men who then ruined his paper by way of both battery and privation.

The *Potomak Guardian* was the creation of Nathaniel Willis (449), a Boston-trained printer who had been the youngest participant at the Boston Tea Party in December 1773. During the Revolutionary War, Willis conducted the legendary *Independent Chronicle* there, before founding a more politicized paper in 1784, the *American Herald*; that paper quickly became one of several Massachusetts journals targeted by merchants there, via their supporters in the state legislature, for opposing the debt-collection laws they favored, laws that led to the August 1786 revolt called Shay's Rebellion. As that crisis grew, the legislature enacted taxes on any paid content placed in the state's newspapers in an effort to suppress essays that were critical of those debtor laws. Rather than submit to such "oppressive" taxes, Willis sold his paper and his home and left Boston for the "unsettled West" of the southern interior.

Eventually, Willis landed in Winchester, Virginia, as part of the printing network of Matthias Bartgis (024), the Frederick, Maryland, publishing entrepreneur. Together, they published the *Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* from late 1787 through late 1789. Willis and Bartgis parted ways in the winter of 1789-90, with Willis then setting up a new office intent on starting a third journal in Winchester that did not reflect either Bartgis's Germanic roots or the British origins of Richard Bowen (045) and his *Virginia Centinel or The Winchester Mercury*. Accordingly, *Willis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* was first issued on March 20, 1790, just ten weeks after his parting from Bartgis.

Still, Willis clearly understood that offering a third weekly in a locale that seems to have had difficulty in supporting two at that time was a problematic proposition. So after six months of challenging his established competitors, Willis moved his office some thirty miles to the northeast and reopened shop in Shepherdstown. There he resumed publishing his paper in November 1790 as *The Potowmac Guardian and Berkeley Advertiser*. This move may appear curious, but Shepherdstown was then in the middle of a heated competition for hosting the site of the new national capital city. Hence, this was a case of Willis cutting his losses and moving on, throwing his lot in with those leaders in eastern Berkeley County seeking that design, rather than staying in Winchester and seeing his business slowly die. Such was also the case when he removed his business to Martinsburg in the winter of 1791-92, once the Washington administration chose the site the capital city now occupies at the mouth of the Anacostia River; there his *Potowmac Guardian* became that town's first and only paper.

The Martinsburg variant of *The Potowmac Guardian* was first issued in early spring 1792, seemingly after a six-week suspension akin to that Willis effected in moving to Shepherdstown the year before. The move evinces a recognition that Berkeley County's Potomac River port towns – Harper's Ferry and Shepherdstown – were now destined to economic and political subordination to the county seat of Martinsburg; situated on the Great Wagon Road that facilitated travel down the center of the valley to Tennessee and beyond, Martinsburg was fast becoming a greater catalyst to commerce in Berkeley than were the river ports, and so a better setting for publishing a mercantile advertiser, as Willis's paper was at its root. That understanding meant that the *Guardian* prospered there and went unchallenged for the next seven years. As a result, Willis became a part of the fabric of the northern valley over those years, sustained by a new wife, Mary Cartmell, a daughter of a large family with roots in the earliest settlements in the region. Their boys all appear to have assisted their father in his office, though only one of them went on to a journalism career – Nathaniel Willis Jr. (450), later publisher of the noted *Eastern Argus* in Maine.

Willis, however, found himself increasingly in conflict over the course of the 1790s with the merchants who helped sustain his paper by their advertising. In general terms, the dispute was a part of the growing national divisions between Federalists and Republicans in this era; but Willis's specific problems resulted from items published in his *Guardian* that questioned the competence and character of local Federalists – a repetition of the problems that he experienced in Boston. His Martinsburg weekly reflected the same anti-authoritarian zeal he had learned from the Sons of Liberty before the Revolution, only now it was expressed in the context of the increasing authoritarianism of Federalist officials both in Philadelphia and Richmond. His estrangement from his mercantile patrons came initially when his criticisms of the military expedition launched against the Whiskey Rebellion in the nearby counties of western Pennsylvania found space in his pages in 1794; the censures Willis published grew in intensity with the succession of events from the election of John Adams in 1796, to the Jay Treaty with Britain in 1797, before reaching a peak with passage of the Alien & Sedition Acts in the summer of 1798 and the subsequent passage of the Virginia Resolution by the General Assembly that December.

Those published commentaries beget growing anger among Martinsburg's merchants, who were the principal Federalists in the area and who were also dependent on Willis's weekly for the advertising they needed to sustain their businesses. Eventually anger became action. At first, Willis found his property vandalized occasionally, most notably when trees on wood lots that he owned on Dry Run were cut down in August 1797, so depriving him of firewood for the coming winter. When such hardships did not alter his editorial course, advertisers began taking their business to Bowen in Winchester, so forcing Willis to bring in Nathaniel Baldwin (018) as a financial partner for about six months in early 1798 to allow him to retire some short-term notes then due. But in advance of the spring 1799 elections for delegates to the General Assembly, the clandestine attacks became visible and violent.

In early March 1799, Willis published a "letter" from a Berkeley Republican who insinuated that local Federalists had impeded the passage of Jeffersonian newspapers and pamphlets through the county's post offices, and that the suppression had been aided and abetted by Magnus Tate, an incumbent Federalist delegate from Berkeley County then campaigning for

reelection. The morning after the communication ran in the *Guardian*, Tate appeared in his office in the company of William Riddle, a justice on the Berkeley County Court, demanding that Willis identify the writer of the offending piece, clearly intent on filing charges of libel against its author, as was then the practice under the Sedition Act. But Willis stymied their efforts by refusing their demands and dismissing them from his presence. Unfortunately for Willis, the two men returned that afternoon and physically assaulted him; evidently, he was saved from a fatal beating by the intervention of Armstrong Charlton (088), a journeyman printer then working for him.

Neither assailant was prosecuted for the deed, but other Federalist leaders in Martinsburg moved immediately to assure the demise of the *Guardian* and so remove Willis from their midst without further violence. Within a week or so, they had convinced John Alburtis (004), a young printer in the *Guardian* office, who was then completing his training under Willis, to publish a competing paper backed with sizable financial subsidies from local merchants. His *Berkeley Intelligencer* issued its first number on April 3, 1799, so allowing those merchants to completely cease advertising in the *Guardian*. The solid foundation that Willis had built for his *Guardian* over the preceding decade dissolved rapidly in the ensuing weeks. He also suffered financially from the late-night vandalization of his Martinsburg home that August while his family was away. By fall, his financial situation had become untenable and Willis was searching for a way out of his dilemma.

Willis found the answer to his plight close at hand in Armstrong Charlton. He was an English émigré, a refugee from the silencing of "radical" voices in British press offices in the mid-1790s, who was now ready to resume his career as a journalist in Martinsburg. Willis turned the *Guardian* over to Charlton's control at the end of October 1799, telling readers that his successor was in "every way qualified for the arduous undertaking" as he held impeccable democratic principles. While the ownership change likely cheered local Federalists initially, the longer-term effect was that Willis had empowered someone whose editorial views were more problematic for the county's Federalists that had been those of Willis before.

Charlton made those views inescapable by renaming his paper the *Republican Atlas* in April 1800 and by helping to bring Tate's service in the General Assembly to an end through his pointed commentaries during that year's elections. But he was still faced with revenues lost from advertisers defecting to the new *Berkeley Intelligencer*, which threatened his ability to support the presidential campaign of Thomas Jefferson that summer and fall. So he took on printer William Brown (058) as a partner at the time that he renamed the weekly.

Charlton's choice was problematic. While a trained printer capable of assisting him, Brown was also a brother of Matthew Brown (057), a fervent Federalist editor then conducting the *Federal Gazette* in Baltimore, and held political views agreeable with his brother's. Thus the *Atlas* remained a Republican journal, even as it was now published by the firm of Charlton & Brown. But that association would last only a year. Sometime between May and September 1801, the partners essentially reversed roles, with Charlton printing the *Atlas* for "William Brown & Co." The reversal apparently evinces Brown's intent to transform the weekly into a Federalist one, with Charlton planning to move on from Martinsburg.

The identity of Brown's unnamed partners remains an unknown, but the group quite likely

included his brother, who was expanding his interests beyond Baltimore at that time. Still, the presence of the locally owned and controlled *Berkeley Intelligencer* clearly stymied his efforts. Brown closed the *Atlas* before the end of the year, in November it seems, and then moved his press office to nearby Charlestown, county seat of the recently-formed Jefferson County; there he tried unsuccessfully for the next six years to establish a journal-of-record for the new county before giving way to a Republican project headed by Ferdinando Fairfax (160) in the winter of 1807-08.

Meanwhile, Charlton departed Martinsburg, never to return. Willis also left Virginia, settling in Chillicothe in the Northwest Territory (now Ohio) by the spring of 1800, where he took control of a newspaper conducted by a dying friend from his Boston days, and so became a key figure in Ohio's early history as a state. Willis's removal left John Alburtis as essentially his successor in Martinsburg, albeit via a palace coup conducted by those same merchants who once convinced Willis to move the *Potomak Guardian* there.

While the story of Nathaniel Willis and his *Potomak Guardian* is singular in the history of Virginia printing, it shows a tactic repeated elsewhere at this time by Federalist politicians who tried to stifle dissent against their policies by creating competitors for the Republican journals that led and reported that dissent. So it seems that Willis's anti-authoritarian bent was an appropriate response to the fateful experiences in his eventful life.

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Sources: LCCN nos. 84-038399, 84-038398, & 84-038397; Brigham II: 1172; Norona & Shetler 1284 & 1285; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Cartmell, *Shenandoah Pioneers*; Vaughn, *American Journalism*; Hudson, *Journalism*; items in *Potomak Guardian* (1791-1800).