

MORGANTOWN 01: Monongalia Gazette

01: The Monongalia Gazette and Morgantown Advertiser (1804-1806)

02: The Monongalia Gazette (1806-1810)

The first newspaper issued in Morgantown was representative of the ongoing competition with nearby Clarksburg over control of commerce in the Monongahela Valley in the opening decades of the nineteenth century, as well as representing those town's efforts to break the economic hold of adjacent Pittsburgh on the valley. It also evinces the political competition between the area's Federalists and Republicans in the era of the War of 1812.

As its title aptly exhibits, *The Monongalia Gazette and Morgantown Advertiser* was founded as a mercantile advertising sheet. From 1786 onward, the town depended on the *Pittsburgh Gazette* for local advertising, while speculators then selling land in the area used the various Alexandria and Winchester papers that appeared after 1784. But as those locales grew in size, and with the merchants there commanding the limited space available in those town's papers, Morgantown's merchants and tradesmen determined that their town's economic growth depended on their bringing a press and printers to Monongalia County. So an effort was launched in 1803 to do just that, one apparently led by the area's new representative in Congress, John George Jackson (1777-1825). His attendance at Congress that year evidently put the Jeffersonian lawyer in touch with the Philadelphia-based print-trade network that staffed many of the new capital's presses. By late 1803, two printers from Philadelphia had agreed to move to Morgantown to set up a press office and then publish a weekly paper.

On January 7, 1804, Joseph Campbell (078) and Forbes Britton (053) issued the first number of the *Monongalia Gazette*, which seems to have found quick success, at least initially. Local histories report that Campbell was an Irish immigrant who was trained in the print trade in Philadelphia; from that account, it appears that he came to America in his teen-age years, either before or during the Irish Rebellion of 1798. In Philadelphia, he met Britton, the son of a well-to-do merchant family there, who was also training in the print trade at that time. The two young journeymen (then 23 and 19 respectively) were seeking an opportunity such as Morgantown provided and so made the trek west with a press. Their new weekly was predominately advertising notices, revealing the pent-up demand for such in the Valley; thus very little original journalism emanated from its pages, as evinced by the absence of items from their paper in journals printed elsewhere in the country.

Without surviving copies of the Campbell & Britton variant of the *Monongalia Gazette*, and lacking reflected evidence of its content, an assessment of its political stance is essentially conjectural. As a mercantile advertiser, it was likely at least mildly Federalist; but the weekly was also engaged by Jackson in circulating material among local Republicans. However, the patronage George provided apparently proved a double-edged sword for the partners. By November 1805, Britton had become a part of the circle around James Pindall (1783-1825), a Federalist lawyer from nearby Clarksburg, by marrying Pindall's sister; shortly thereafter, Britton removed to Clarksburg where he soon established a job-printing office in support of Pindall's plans to make that town into the commercial center of the Monongahela Valley, so

competing with Campbell, Jackson, and Morgantown. Consequently, the firm that issued Morgantown's first newspaper was dissolved in the winter of 1805-06, probably at the end of the journal's second volume in January 1806.

Campbell made a similar commitment to Morgantown by marrying the daughter of one of the town's chief merchants in February 1806. Yet while Campbell continued on alone with the support of the community, his proprietorship faced the recurring issues faced by most printer-publishers in the American interior at that time: distant suppliers demanding cash in payment, local patrons lacking the cash needed for subscriptions and advertisements, and a wholly unreliable transportation web for both supplies and output. The Embargo Act of late 1807 only added to the challenges to Virginia's smaller printing offices in 1808 and 1809. By the spring of 1810, Campbell was feeling the effect of those ongoing challenges; his *Gazette* was losing money as subscriptions went unpaid in this cash-starved region; meanwhile, the rapid growth of Pittsburgh following the Louisiana Purchase drew much job-printing work in the area away from his press. As Campbell considered ways to cut his losses and to pursue non-printing opportunities now available in the town, he came across a willing buyer for his office. So he sold press and paper in about March 1810 and retired from the trade forever.

The buyer was John Osborne Laidley (258), the youngest son of Thomas Laidley, one of the early merchant-settlers of Morgantown. His family was one with clear political ambitions; the father was a Federalist delegate in the Assembly before the Jeffersonian ascendancy of 1798 and had been displaced in that upheaval. Buying the *Gazette* offered the prospect of a political rebirth by shaping public opinion in the area through its pages, and so contest the primacy of Jackson and his partisan supporters. So the Laidleys – father and son – took the weekly into their care. But by August 1810, they had come to understand the weekly's dire financial condition and so closed the town's first paper before losing any more money.

The closing ushered in an era of alternating priority between journals issued in Morgantown and Clarksburg. Being aware that Campbell's *Monongalia Gazette* was straitened financially, brothers-in-law Britton and Pindall decided to open Clarksburg's first newspaper, evidently expecting an advertising void created by the impending death of that weekly; their paper (*The Bye Stander*) started publication of July 28, 1810, an appearance that seems to have determined the fate of the now Laidley-controlled *Gazette*. Not only did this new journal advance the effort to make Clarksburg the region's commercial center over Morgantown, it also gave Pindall the means to check the ambitions of the Federalist Laidleys, as well as to keep Jackson and the Republicans on the defensive. After having claimed the more reliable revenue of merchant advertising, the Clarksburg *Bye Stander* prevented another paper from being issued in Morgantown until after the War of 1812. When such a competing paper did appear, it doomed the Britton and Pindall weekly that had slain the *Monongalia Gazette*.

Sources: LCCN No. 84-037883; Brigham II: 1173; Norona & Shetler 1302; Callahan, *Morgantown*; Haymond, *Harrison County*; Wiley, *Monongalia County*; Core, *Monongalia*; *Prominent Families of Virginia*.