

MORGANTOWN 02: Monongalia Spectator

01: The Monongalia Spectator (1815-1819)

The second newspaper published in Morgantown was, like the first, representative of the ongoing competition with nearby Clarksburg over control of commerce in the Monongahela Valley in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. But its premature demise was the result of a falling out between its owners, rather than the financial issues that doomed most journals in the trans-Appalachian west in that era.

Between 1800 and 1820, the Monongahela Valley towns of Morgantown and Clarksburg hosted a series of newspapers that alternated as the primary mercantile advertiser in the region. *The Monongalia Spectator* was the third journal in that series, as well as the second one issued in Morgantown. When the *Spectator* first issued in September 1815, the town had lacked a weekly advertiser for five years; the first – *The Monongalia Gazette* – expired in August 1810, a casualty of financial distress, shortly after the appearance of Clarksburg's first weekly – *The Bye Stander* – that July. Over the next half-decade, the *Bye Stander* served as the mercantile advertiser for both market towns. But the paper's Federalist perspective and its ties to James Pindall (1783-1825), the town's leading Federalist, undermined its viability during and after the War of 1812; by the summer of 1816, the weekly's proprietors, the brothers Forbes (053) and Alexander (052) Britton, faced imminent bankruptcy from unpaid bills and uncollected debts, which compelled the closing of the *Bye-Stander*.

That closing was encouraged, in part, by the appearance of the *Monongalia Spectator*, just as that of the *Monongalia Gazette* had been induced by the arrival of the *Bye-Stander*. The Morgantown papers had been vehicles for the area's Republican Congressman, John George Jackson (1777-1825), while the Clarksburg weekly was one for the Federalist Pindall. The *Gazette* helped carry Jackson to four terms in Congress before the war; the *Bye Stander*, in turn, carried Pindall to one term there as Jackson's successor; Pindall's opposition to "Mr. Madison's War" brought Jackson back to Congress in March 1813, despite the efforts of the *Bye Stander*. Still Jackson declined to stand for reelection in 1816 after serving two more terms, a decision that was likely a part of the considerations that summer for initiating the *Spectator*, knowing that the *Bye Stander* would support Pindall. But Pindall's unopposed victory could not save that paper that supported him.

The *Monongalia Spectator* now became the region's only mercantile advertiser. Yet even as the masthead bore the provocative motto "Willing to Praise—But not afraid to Blame," the weekly soon became a voice for the common concerns of both Federalists and Republicans in the Monongahela Valley. It advocated for the August 1816 meeting called the Staunton Convention, in which Jackson and Pindall served together after being unanimously elected without opposition. The central issues then were inequities between east and west over apportionment and taxation; westerners believed that more equitable representation in the General Assembly would secure legislation that addressed western problems, such as the deficiency of circulating currency effecting farmer and merchant alike.

The currency issue was one of particular concern to merchants like Ralph Berkshire (032)

and Nicholas B. Madera (276), the unnamed fiscal partners who sustained the *Spectator's* printer, William McGranahan (288), in the firm of McGranahan & Company. Berkshire was a dry-goods merchant and pottery manufacturer who served as a justice on the Harrison County court, while Madera was a builder and tavern-keeper who served on the town's Common Council; both had resided in Morgantown since at least 1800. McGranahan, in contrast, was an outsider; the son of Scots-Irish immigrants who had settled in western Pennsylvania (Berkshire's birthplace) after the Revolutionary War, he was a journeyman printer working in Philadelphia when Berkshire and Madera came calling; like many young tradesmen of his era, McGranahan leapt at the opportunity for trade independence.

From the start, the *Spectator* published articles concerning the effects of laws passed by eastern representatives on western citizens. In the summer of 1816, saw several such items appearing in their pages. One described a woman who, when threatened with the seizure of her household property after the sheriff refused payment of "the Tax in Western paper," chased the sheriff off with her shotgun. The editors noted:

"...that the populace, male and female, are so exasperated at the conduct of the government in compelling the payment of taxes in Richmond paper or species, both of which, by the by, have made their exit from this part of the state, that they are determined at the risk of their lives to prevent their collection; numbers solemnly avow their intention to take the life of any man that will attempt to enforce, what they call the unjust, impolitic, and wicked measures of our Eastern Law-givers."

The next week, they offered a seriocomic report on a payment made to them in coinage:

"Strange as it may appear, the editor of this paper yesterday received a four-pence-halfpenny in SPECIE! Where the little urchin has kept himself this twelve months past would take a conjuror to tell; but from his emaciated and rugged appearance, a person might suppose he was forced to leave his hiding place by bad usage, as he appears to have been very roughly handled."

That fall, they published an anecdote about the counterfeiting activities of "a gentleman of Harrison County" whose exploits were widely known among the servants of the area, both free and enslaved, so leading to one "Burnt, a negro man" to offer to pay the counterfeiter for services rendered with his own product.

With counterfeiting and armed resistance resulting from the state's post-war tax measures, the Assembly took up the issue in the 1816-17 session. Their deliberations resulted in the creation of the North-Western Bank of Virginia. Yet the *Spectator* continued to report that the new bank still did not have popular support in the west, being deemed insufficiently capitalized to make any difference in the region. The underfunding was probably a result of eastern opinions that the western counties – particularly the county towns of Morgantown, Clarksburg, Wellsburg, and Wheeling – were too small and insignificant to justify chartering a bank. In November 1816, the *Spectator* made a point of listing all of the public institutions and private manufacturing companies who called Morgantown home in an unsuccessful attempt to counter such perceptions.

What apparently made a larger impression on legislators was the continued resistance to

the Assembly's lawmaking. In May 1817, the *Spectator* reported that a movement was afoot for Monongalia County to secede from Virginia and be "attached to Pennsylvania, or some contiguous state, where the laws are equally and equitably dispensed," and editorialized in favor of the proposition, arguing that:

"Western Virginia is ruled with a rod of iron, and unless we can obtain change in some manner, our castigation will be so severe that we will not be able to bear it. ... Some of the laws of this state are so severe and so hard to comply with that for the last four years there had been no person to collect taxes in this county; consequently we can have no public improvements, such as bridges, &c. even the Courthouse had to be covered by private subscription rather than see it fall to decay."

At the same time, the process of gathering funds for the new bank through subscriptions was suspended after a boycott staged against such subscriptions spread across the western counties. In the wake of the suspension, the counterfeiting of private-bank notes multiplied dramatically, so undermining the solvency of the banks effected.

Changes, albeit it minor ones, were enacted at the 1817-18 Assembly session. That outcome suggests that the *Monongalia Spectator* had at least some influence in Richmond, probably most readily via the numerous reprintings of its articles in Alexandria and Norfolk papers.

Still, scarce currency in the Monongahela Valley constituted a direct threat to the survival of the *Spectator*, just as it had for the *Monongalia Gazette* and the *Clarksburg Bye Stander* previously. So in early 1818, Madera and Berkshire began a campaign to acquire one of Virginia's three licenses to publish the laws of Congress for their newspaper. Any journal receiving such a license received a substantial subsidy, as those laws were printed at the established rates for advertising in the designated journal. James Pindall, still the area's Congressional representative, became the means to that end; he agreed to their request to lobby then U.S Secretary of State John Quincy Adams for such a license in the absence of a suitable Clarksburg paper. The three proprietors of the *Spectator* were no doubt elated when Adams awarded their paper such a plum in late 1818.

Prospects for a long continuation of their weekly journal now seemed assured. The federal subsidy secured the firm's fiscal stability for the moment, just as its job-printing apparently increased. But in spring 1819, the merchant-financiers had a falling out with their printer. Legend reports that:

"Regularly, once a week, on the day that the paper was struck off, McGranahan called on 'Uncle Nick' [Madera] for money to buy whiskey to thin the printing ink. ... it was cheerfully furnished, until one day 'Uncle Nick' concluded to visit the office, and see how things were getting on, when his righteous soul was greatly vexed within him, to find his working partner lying under the printing press dead drunk."

Accordingly, Madera and Berkshire terminated their partnership with McGranahan almost immediately, or so the legend goes. Whether this story is true or not, the printer did leave Morgantown abruptly in late May 1819. His proffered valedictory address was republished widely throughout the country, especially in small country papers who faced the same trials as had the *Spectator*:

"To my friends I wish every joy and comfort this can afford; peace and plenty, health and long life; made their declining years be crowned with roses divested of every thorn. To my enemies (if I have any) I wish better hearts and better judgment, repentance before death, and a happy Eternity. To my creditors I wish patience, and to my debtors full purses and a willingness to pay me. To the young ladies I wish the judgments to choose, affections unalterable, and husbands of their own choosing. Two young men I wish fortitude to bear disappointments, friends to support their pretensions, and, when they wish to get married, no opposition but the hearts of the females they wish to espouse. Two farmers I wish good crops and good prices. To the merchants, I wish quick sales and good money; and to bankers better credit. To politicians, a careful perusal of the Constitution, the Laws, and Marshall's Life of Washington. To mechanics, plenty of custom, and the money down. And finally to the world I wish *peace*; and to PRINTERS, good friends, and plenty of money, and this they will most probably have, if subscribers do their duty!"

McGranahan's departure put the *Spectator* into suspension, at least until Berkshire and Madera could find another tradesman to replace him. But the merchants soon found that terminating their contract with McGranahan ended the life of the *Spectator* as well.

The death of the *Bye Stander* in 1815 led to the introduction of a Republican replacement in Clarksburg shortly after Morgantown's *Spectator* appeared. Over the ensuing years, that journal became a tool for John G. Jackson's network in the valley, so compelling Pindall to shift his focus back to Morgantown – which explains his willingness to pursue the federal license for Berkshire and Madera in 1818. But now McGranahan turned to Pindall in his own right; relocating to Clarksburg, he started a new journal that August – the ironically-titled *Independent Virginian* – one that supported Pindall against the *Republican Compiler* issued by Gideon Butler (067). From this new setting, McGranahan wrote to Adams informing him of the Morgantown firm's dissolution, his relocation, and his readiness to continue serving Congress. Adams evidently agreed to McGranahan's plan, as when the Congress next met, its laws were published in Clarksburg and not in Morgantown. It turned out that the license granted to publish the laws was held by McGranahan, as the titular head of the company, and not by Madera or Berkshire. Still, the two merchants did not go down without a fight; they enlisted John G. Jackson, now the U.S. District Court judge in Clarksburg, to contest the printer's continuation as the law publisher in Virginia's western region; Jackson relied on character assassination in his letter to Adams, attacking McGranahan's virtue, suggesting that the "dead drunk" legend is a true account. But Jackson's appeal fell on deaf ears, as Pindall now served as the district's congressman with McGranahan's paper in his pocket.

The lost license was the last straw for Madera and Berkshire. Absent a practical printer, and with the economic crisis of 1819 then setting in, the Morgantown merchants were faced a *fait accompli* – their *Spectator* was dead and they could not do much about it.

Sources: LCCN No. 86-092164; Brigham I: 1173; Norona & Shetler 1305; Core, *Monongalia Story*; Wiley, *Monongalia*; Callahan, *Morgantown*; Haymond, *Harrison County*; notices in Washington [DC], Baltimore, Alexandria, Winchester, Norfolk, and Washington, Pennsylvania papers (1815-1819); Papers of Dept. of Sec. of State (National Archive RG 59.2).