

NEW MARKET 01: Virginische Volksberichter

01: Der Virginische Volksberichter und Neumarket Wochenschrift (1807-1809)

The first and only paper published in New Market before 1840 was the last one in Virginia intended to be printed wholly in German. That weekly was also designed as a non-partisan journal, one advancing the ministry of a family of Lutheran evangelicals who long conducted the only press in that town.

The history of the Henkel Press in New Market is one of an enduring venture inextricably linked to both German-American culture and confessional Lutheranism. It was established in 1806 by Ambrose Henkel (214), the then twenty-year-old second son of Rev. Paul Henkel (217); his father had brought his growing family to Virginia from North Carolina in 1784 to serve vacant Lutheran pulpits in Shenandoah County; eventually, the entire Henkel family worked on Ambrose's press producing a variety of religious and linguistic imprints: religious ones promoting the family's theological perspective, and linguistic ones encouraging the use of German by their followers and prospective adherents. In its first thirty years of operation, the press issued a steady stream of titles associated with the evangelical ministry of Rev. Paul and five of his six sons. Three generations of the family were drawn into the business; yet they supplied an ever-declining demand for German-language imprints in those ensuing decades, as German-speakers assimilated the English-language culture around them; still, the business survived until 1925, when it was sold to a bilingual competitor.

In the twelve decade life of the Henkel Press, the family produced only one newspaper, and that effort came shortly after their office was established. Being situated half-way between Staunton and Winchester, New Market was a growing commercial center whose merchants were dependent on papers in those larger towns for advertising their goods and services; moreover, that part of the Shenandoah Valley was peopled by German-speakers who were largely incapable of reading the English-language papers issued to the north and south of New Market. A bilingual newspaper was published in Staunton in 1790, but that effort was merely an appendage to a Winchester paper, and so did not satisfactorily serve the central valley; it issued just a few months. So with an unserved market around them and a distinct socio-linguistic advantage, the family decided to issue a weekly that was unique in Virginia.

In October 1807, "Ambrosius Henkel und Co." issued a demonstration issue that carried a lengthy prospectus statement describing their venture. The proposed journal was given the title of *Der Virginische Volksberichter und Neumarket Wochenschrift*. Translations of that name vary, with the most literal one being "The Virginia People's Journal and New Market Weekly Newsletter," though the family's self-published history offers a title of "The Virginia Popular Instructor and New Market Weekly News."

As printer, Ambrose was understandably the lead figure in this project, but more important were the paper's editor, his father Paul, and its financier, his elder brother Solomon Henkel (218), a local physician and apothecary who was also the postmaster in New Market. Where Ambrose brought his trade skills to the paper, Solomon's post gave their paper easy access to the national distribution web and exchange papers from across the country. Yet father

Paul's editorial role was the foundation upon which the whole project was built; he imbued the weekly with his own socio-cultural authority. In the prospectus, he wrote that the paper would be, first and foremost, non-partisan in its outlook; he offered an unvarnished opinion that the partisan conflict dominating the competing Federalist and Republican journals then issued in Staunton and Winchester endangered the civic harmony needed to sustain the young republic. And rather than add to that discord, the Henkels would publish a weekly that contained only disinterested news reports and morally-uplifting essays. What was left unsaid there was that the paper would have a perspective consistent with the values of his conservative Lutheran ministry.

Despite this unusual approach, or perhaps because of it, the first number of *Der Virginische Volksberichter* did not issue until December 16, 1807, three months after the prospectus was issued. The interval appears to have two causes: a new, competing German-language paper in Staunton, and a lack of fiscal commitment from among his projected audience.

It may have been that the prospect of a German-language political paper nearby instigated the *Volksberichter* in the first place. In late-spring 1807, Jacob D. Dietrich (135), a bilingual publisher from Hagerstown, Maryland, relocated to Augusta County and began publishing a new English-language, Republican-aligned weekly – the *Staunton Eagle* – in mid-July; from the start, Dietrich promised that he would publish a German-language edition of the *Eagle* each week as soon as he had acquired sufficient subscribers for the effort; he fulfilled that promise on November 5, 1807 with *Der Deutsche Virginier Adler*, just one month after the Henkels' issued their prospectus. Ultimately, Dietrich's *Adler* both preceded and survived the *Volksberichter*, suggesting that it drew off some of the Henkels' potential subscribers, though how many cannot be determined.

Yet the surviving business records of the *Volksberichter* reveal larger difficulties than those posed by Dietrich. The prospectus stated that publication would start once 300 subscribers had been found. The remarkably intact subscriber roll shows that 385 persons were served each week. Only 95 of them were served by the postal system managed locally by Solomon Henkel; the other 290 received their papers by way of private deliveries that the Henkels had to arrange independently; moreover, most of the delivery points represented members of the local social and economic elite, who guaranteed the subscription cost for their cash-starved neighbors, a pledge that evidently covered about one-fourth of the *Volksberichter's* entire subscription list. The financial burden of those guarantees eventually compelled the guarantors to withdraw payment for something their neighbors clearly failed to appreciate, no matter how useful they may have thought the newspaper would be to those individuals. Faced with this declining support, the Henkels were obliged to close their paper after just 78 weekly issues on June 14, 1809. Dietrich's *Adler* followed suit sometime that fall.

The reasons of subscribers' reluctance to pay for the *Volksberichter* are still unclear. It may be that its non-partisan stance was unpopular in a highly-politicized era, or that it was seen as an attempt to coerce religious conformity. Or, more likely, non-payment was a result of subscribers' inability to make cash payments during a long period of scarce currency. Yet whatever the case, it is interesting to note that after the *Volksberichter* expired, only 41 of the paper's subscribers ever received another one through Solomon Henkel's post office in

New Market. The fact that more did not do so speaks to the place of newspapers in their lives: they did not necessarily require or desire them.

Sources: LCCN No. 86-071655; Brigham II: 1122; Henkel family papers at University of Virginia, James Madison University, College of William & Mary, and Library of Virginia; Henkel Memorial (1910).