

## NORFOLK 07: Norfolk Herald

- 01: The Herald, and Norfolk and Portsmouth Advertiser (1794-1795)
  - 02: The Herald (1795)
  - 03: Norfolk Herald (1795-1796)
  - 04: The Norfolk Herald & Public Advertiser (1796-1798)
  - 05: Norfolk Herald (1798-1800)
  - 06: Norfolk Herald and Daily Advertiser (1800)
  - 07: Norfolk Herald (1800-1805)
  - 08: O'Connor's Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald (1805-1813)
  - 09: The Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald (1813)
  - 10: Norfolk Herald (1813-1815)
  - 11: The Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald (1815-1833)
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The longest-lived newspaper issued in antebellum Norfolk was the seventh one originating there. Its founding in 1794 was the result of an acrimonious split between the proprietors of the town's foremost mercantile advertiser, a journal that this paper eventually supplanted. Its 1861 demise was caused by military action there at the time of its last proprietor's death.

Generally known as simply the *Norfolk Herald*, the paper actually carried more than a dozen variations of that title on its masthead over a nearly seventy-year life. It was founded by an English expatriate named Charles Willett (445); trained in London, he had fled Britain in late 1791 as reform-minded printers and publishers began to be persecuted for their critiques of the British government, especially its reactionary attitudes toward the French Revolution. Willett landed in Norfolk in early 1792 and began organizing a competitor to the port's only paper, the *Virginia Chronicle*; that weekly advertiser was increasingly unable to meet the demand for advertising in the port, and the printer was determined to exploit the short-fall. He found a willing financier and editor in Virginian William Davis (127); within weeks, the new concern of Willett & Davis issued the first number of its weekly *American Gazette, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser* on July 18, 1792. The venture proved a discerning one that gained quick acceptance in the Virginia tidewater. But over the next two years, the partners became estranged politically, with Willett finding himself in the Republican camp as a result of his liberal attitudes, and Davis in the Federalist one because of his traditionalist ones. Eventually, the two parted company. It appears that in late July 1794, at about the time of the completion of the *Gazette's* second volume, Davis forced Willett out of the firm, taking control of the office's tools and the *Gazette's* subscriber list.

### The Founding Era

Once so dispossessed, Willett decided that the appropriate way to deal with Davis and his

Federalist friends was to start a competing journal.

"The Subscriber having been Conductor of the Vehicle of Information — under the Patronage of the Public, for nearly 2 Years, and having by a misfortune, of which they are already informed, been deprived for a short Time, of the Means of continuing his Endeavors; and emulous still to deserve their future Encouragement, takes this Method of informing them, that notwithstanding the Hardship of the Circumstances under which he was oppressed, he has again procured a complete Set of Materials, with which he intends prosecuting the Printing Business as usual."

That competitor – *The Herald, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser* – appeared on August 13, 1794, less than a month after Davis had been pushed out of the *Gazette* office.

The resultant competition between the two partisan papers brought about the death of the *Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle*; that paper attempted to follow a middle course, and so offer an alternative to both; but Willett's *Herald* found support among the area's larger advertisers, while Davis's *Gazette* secured the town government's patronage; hence the predecessor to both papers closed in December 1794. Yet that closing was also induced by the defection to the *Norfolk Herald* of one of its founders, Daniel Baxter (027); recognizing the ultimate futility of competing with the new *Herald* and the older *Gazette*, Baxter sold his interest in the *Chronicle* in late October 1794 and went to work for Willett as manger of his press office; he would remain there until shortly before his death in 1836.

Baxter's defection was apparently an attempt to reinforce Willett's fiscal footings, with the journeyman eventually becoming a partner in the *Norfolk Herald*. But the demise of the *Chronicle* seven weeks later left Baxter's finances in shambles. But as luck would have it, Willett unexpectedly found an old friend standing at his doorstep shortly thereafter. James O'Connor (317) was an Irish émigré who had worked for some time with Willett in London; on his arrival in Norfolk in late 1794, he sought work in the town's press offices. That search began badly when the first office he visited, probably that of Davis, brought an assessment that he was an untrained amateur unworthy of consideration because his "appearance and address [was] that of a gentleman." But his next stop was at Willett's office, where the two promptly recognized each other from their London days. After the *Herald's* successful start, Willett was then contemplating an increase in his paper's frequency from twice-weekly to thrice-weekly, so pressing Davis's *Gazette* even further. He found that O'Connor was willing to invest his hard-earned savings in that effort. So in July 1795, their initial relationship as master and journeyman became an equal partnership; a month later, the *Herald* became a thrice-weekly production of the new firm of Willett & O'Connor.

Their press office quickly became the main printing business in town, even though the only non-newspaper imprints that they produced were almanacs. Instead, it was the catalysts for commerce they provided that fueled their successful partnership: a newspaper and blank forms. As Davis tended to neglect that part of the printing business – thinking his political perspective would keep the port's merchants advertising in his *Gazette* alone – it was not difficult for the *Herald* to press its circulation advantage to sustain a journal that offered partisan views differing from those of their advertisers; consequently, the *Gazette* was obliged to close in late 1797 when the Quasi-War with France caused a precipitous decline

in maritime trade in the port. With the slaying of Davis's paper, Willett & O'Connor now offered Norfolk's only mercantile advertiser – clearly a case of turnabout being fair play.

The *Norfolk Herald* was, from its start, a publication clearly sympathetic to Jefferson and his Republican supporters. It openly opposed the election of John Adams as president in 1796, the Jay Treaty with Great Britain in 1797, and the Alien & Sedition Acts of 1798; they also reported regularly on British interference with maritime trade in the Atlantic, Norfolk's vital life-blood, particularly boardings of American-flagged vessels that ended in impressments. In doing so, Willett and O'Connor often drew the ire of the primary Federalist journalists in Philadelphia, the national capital: John Fenno (1751-98) of the *Gazette of the United States* and William Cobbett (1763-1835) of *Porcupine's Gazette*. At the root of their censures was the fact that neither Willett nor O'Connor were native-born Americans; they were both radical free-thinkers – "two kneaded clods" in Cobbett's words – who were fugitives from lawful authorities in England and Ireland; their immigrant status made them suspect, as were all foreign-born Republican journalists, seen as seditious threats to good order in the United States. In the end, however, the *Norfolk Herald* proved to be more mildly Republican in its outlook than were two competing papers that emerged after the death of the *Gazette*: the *Epitome of the Times* of Augustus C. Jordan (244) in 1798, and *The Commercial Register* of William W. Worsley (462) and Meriwether Jones (242) in 1802. Consequently, the *Herald* became a trusted source nationally over its first decade for news about maritime activity in the Caribbean and South Atlantic, areas where the port-town's foreign commerce was then concentrated.

With the increase in publication pace in August 1795, the *Herald* assumed a frequency that it maintained generally until 1840. There were just three brief departures from that pace before the War of 1812; the first was a reduction to a twice-weekly rate for a month in the early spring of 1800 when a fire in their office destroyed many of the supplies they needed to maintain that pace; the other two were separate, short-lived attempts in December 1800 and December 1801 to make the *Herald* into a daily paper, Norfolk's first. The brevity of all those deviations evinces the partner's understanding that their paper was ideally a thrice weekly journal, one whose reach and profitability could be expanded only by a weekly edition for "the country," which first appeared in September 1797.

### **Transitions**

Yet 1804 brought an end to this profitable joint enterprise. Over the course of that year, Willett slowly withdrew from the day-to-day operation of the office as his health began to fail; the wasting illness that set in was not defined with any detail, but his level of activity in the *Herald* declined steadily over that year. So at the end of 1804, Willett decided to retire, selling his interest in the office to O'Connor, who became sole proprietor. By late 1806, he was confined to bed, possibly not even in town; when he died in August 1807, only brief notices of his passing appeared in journals of East Coast cities, a terseness reflecting the crush of news then pouring into newspaper offices in the wake of the Chesapeake/Leopard affair that spring and the ongoing Burr conspiracy trial, so depriving posterity of a fuller account of Willett's life, as was seen in accounts of O'Connor's passing twelve years later.

During his tenure as proprietor of the *Norfolk Herald*, James O'Connor's greatest challenge was conducting the paper through the disruptions of the War of 1812. They were also years when he had to learn to live life without the wife who came with him to Norfolk, following her death in June 1811. By early 1813, recurring supply problems became acute, compelling O'Connor to reduce his publication schedule to twice-weekly; then in August 1813, he was obliged to reduce the dimensions of the *Herald's* pages, complete with a smaller masthead carrying the simple title of *Norfolk Herald* in place of the lengthier ones he had employed in the years before the war. It was not until late March 1815 that the *Herald* returned to its former pace and scale.

As O'Connor navigated these dangerous waters, he was also faced by a new challenge from the Federalist journalist, William Davis. In 1805, Davis emerged from retirement to assume the editorial chair of the year-old *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger* of John Cowper (110). The publisher was a maritime merchant trader whose business had been ravaged by French predations of his vessels off Haiti in 1798; with the bankruptcy of Cowper family's trading company imminent in 1804, he decided to start an anti-administration paper that he hoped would turn public opinion in his favor and so reap funds for the bankrupt business; his first editor, George Lewis Gray (188), left Norfolk after just a year seeking larger opportunities elsewhere, inducing Cowper to bring Davis out of retirement to take his place. Cowper and Davis would produce an anti-Republican, anti-French newspaper together until September 1816. Over those years, Davis made frequent sport of articles in O'Connor's *Herald* without mentioning the rival paper's name; one of the few exceptions to that rule came in February 1812, when Davis objected vehemently to publication of a letter to the *Herald* charging that he and the *Publick Ledger* were fomenting insurrection against the Republican-dominated state government in anticipation of a war with Great Britain, and so provide an enemy aid and comfort with the port's amenities. Whether true or not, Davis's editorial perspective went against the popular grain during the war, ensuring the demise of the *Ledger* shortly after its end, and forcing Davis into retirement for a second time.

The war years were also ones when O'Connor and Baxter were training two young printers who later became major publishing figures in their own rights. The first was Charles Keemle (246); he was an orphan bound out to the *Herald* office in about 1806 at age nine; Keemle left O'Connor's employ in mid-1816 to start a job-press with Samuel Dillworth (138), who came to Norfolk from Petersburg; the following winter, the pair relocated their business to Vincennes, Indiana, to serve the political circle of Jonathan Jennings (1784-1834), the new state's first governor; a year later, Keemle moved on to St. Louis, where he became that city's foremost journalist between 1820 and 1850.

O'Connor's second war-time aide ultimately became his successor. Thomas G. Broughton (055) was a native of Princess Anne County who was brought into the *Herald* office as an apprentice during the last years of Willett's participation; hence, he was senior to Keemle, and likely assisted in his training. By 1808, at the age of twenty-two, he was described in a wedding announcement as an editor of the *Herald*, indicating that he had now superseded Baxter in the office's hierarchy. After the War of 1812, O'Connor increasingly delegated the supervision of his office and journal to Broughton when, like his friend Willett before him, his health began to decline. Anticipating an eventual succession upon his death, O'Connor

made the young Broughton his business partner in February 1817.

O'Connor's largess proved a controversial act when he died in July 1819. The *Herald's* new cross-town rival, the *American Beacon*, reprinted Broughton's long tribute to his partner's life in full, adding a preface evincing the general sense of loss in Norfolk on the publisher's passing:

"A residence of long-standing, a pursuit which made him generally known, and an urbanity of manners which can ciliated popular favor, which caused the death of Mr. O'Connor to be long regarded as a serious loss for our society. He possessed an eminent degree of characteristic benevolence of his countrymen, and his hand was ever ready to dispense to the sons and daughters of affliction that solace which their various distresses required. Faithful and zealous in the discharge of his duties as a public Journalists, he continued to the latest hour of his existence, firmly devoted to the principles which he had early espoused, and in support of which he had long braved the fury of governmental persecution in his native country, from which he finally took refuge in this asylum of liberty."

But the tributes quickly passed. Following the issue of July 16, 1819, not quite two weeks after O'Connor's death, his nephew and administrator of his estate, Patrick Corrigan, seized control of the premises of the *Herald* with a group of armed men. The family believed that they owned the *Herald*, and not the "junior editor" who had possessed O'Connor's "entire confidence [from] full communion" with his partner. Legally, they were wrong, but that did not stop them from taking control of the office and preventing Broughton from using it. On July 20th, Broughton wrote to the editors of the primary mercantile advertisers in the major port cities along the eastern seaboard explaining the reasons for the involuntary suspension of the *Herald*, asking them to publish his letter as a notice of his intention to regain control of the office in the courts.

"The suspension of the Herald, has doubtless been a subject of surprise to you as well as a pain to myself ... it has certainly not been owing to any fault of mine, but solely to the rash and illegal act of a man who ought to have been the last in the world to become an enemy of the paper. In a few words, Mr. Patrick Corrigan ... has tho't proper to make an entry into that office, and still holds possession with force of arms. His conduct, however, will soon be brought before proper authority, and doubtless receive the reward it deserves ... In the meantime, this suspension I hope will be of short continuance, and at any rate, will not be very long. I am already making arrangements to renew publication of the Herald in a few days, or a few weeks at furthest. The partnership of our late firm having been dissolved by the death of my partner, it is my intention ... [to continue] the paper in my own name. This is a right which the law of my country gives me, and which I shall neither yield to violence, nor, I trust, forfeit to misconduct."

The next day, Corrigan countered with an advertisement in Norfolk's *American Beacon* that offered the *Herald* office for sale; the editors evidently told Broughton of Corrigan's plans before his notice appeared, giving Broughton the chance to place a notice directly under Corrigan's warning that he would use the courts to recover anything Corrigan sold illegally.

## The Broughton Era

Within a week of Corrigan's raid, Broughton had regained physical control of the office after having Corrigan arrested for a breach of the peace. But by then he had already ordered a complete press office to replace the seized one; so Broughton now used the unexpected hiatus to recast the *Herald*, as well as reorganize the business of which he was now the sole owner. That press arrived in Norfolk on August 16th, and Broughton resumed publication on August 23rd. That same day, he issued a new country edition on a twice-weekly pace, a demonstration of the reorganized office's increased capacity.

The *Genius of Liberty* in Leesburg was particularly impressed with the result:

"The *Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald* has arisen like the Phoenix, from the ashes of the old, in a new form, in a new dress, with new strength, with new vigor. — Its publication had been suspended in consequence of some difficulties arising between Mr. Broughton and the heirs of Mr. O'Connor, formerly partners in the establishment. The paper is now continued by Mr. Broughton in a much improved and enlarged form. Mr. B says 'A period of 40 days has elapsed since the last publication of the Herald — the period of a regular quarantine. I trust it is now not only rid of its *plague*, but that it will give satisfactory evidence to the public of the soundness and vigor of its constitution.'"

And indeed, Broughton was soon rid of the "plague." In February 1820, the Norfolk Borough Hustings Court released Corrigan from a bond guaranteeing his appearance to answer "for a breach of the peace at the instance of Thomas G. Broughton." The release shows that a settlement had been reached between the parties, though certainly not one to Corrigan's liking; he was also ordered to pay all legal costs associated with the affair, signifying that the court judged him to be the party at fault here. In March, Broughton placed a notice in the *Beacon* offering "All the Printing Materials belonging to the late concern of O'Connor and Broughton" for sale; at the end of that notice, Corrigan offered for sale a much smaller set of shop-worn tools "belonging to the estate of James O'Connor, deceased." With that sale, the O'Connor family's connections to the Virginia print trade came to an end. Broughton, however, continued to conduct the *Herald* until a week or so before his death in 1861. From the 1830s onward, he was aided in that effort by at least two of his six sons, Thomas Gibson Broughton (1813-66) and Richard Gatewood Broughton (1820-68).

For the first half of Broughton's tenure, the *Herald* continued as a thrice-weekly journal with a twice-weekly country edition, evincing his choice not to compete with the daily frequency of the *American Beacon*. That choice was likely a result of a consensus shared by the papers' proprietors in promoting local commercial development; the *Beacon* backed that common interest by concentrating on shipping news and commercial advertising, and not politics; the *Herald*, meanwhile, evolved from being a supporter of Madison and Monroe to one that supported anti-Jackson Virginians, such as governors James Pleasants and John Tyler, and the American System of Henry Clay; that evolution brought the Broughtons into the broader national circles of the Whig Party, particularly with the election of 1840. So with Norfolk's principal papers representing a local consensus, opposition newspapers were short-lived

ventures, with only two Democratic papers attempted there before 1840.

In 1840, the *Herald* became a daily newspaper, probably because of increasing demand for advertising space, but also likely as part of an effort to support the Whig ticket that fall, one carrying John Tyler as the vice-presidential candidate. In advance of that increase in pace, the Broughtons increased the pace of their country edition to thrice-weekly, so occupying their press on a daily basis before the daily paper finally issued. This was an arrangement that experienced only one interruption before the Civil War, when a yellow fever epidemic in Norfolk devastated the town's printing offices – either by death or desertion – in 1855. Yet this second half of Broughton's tenure was one where both the *Herald* and the *Beacon* successfully surmounted challenges by at least eight competing daily papers, nearly all of them Democratic; the only journal that found firm footing was the *Daily Southern Argus*, established in early 1848. So as Norfolk entered the 1850s, it was served by three dailies, one Whig, one Democratic, and one non-partisan; it was served by those same three papers when the Civil War erupted in April 1861, despite the numerous short-lived alternatives that appeared during that decade.

During the 1850s, though, it appears that Broughton's *Herald* lost influence statewide by embracing its Whig perspective, even as that outlook remained sympathetic to the views held by many in Norfolk. The growing sectional crisis brought an end to the national Whig alliance in 1855-56, so leaving Southern Whig journals to forge a new identity on their own. The *Herald*, like other Whig papers published in Virginia, held a pro-slavery, anti-secession stance, asserting that the port town's economic future was best served by remaining in the Union. For that reason, Broughton endorsed the Constitutional Union candidates – John Bell of Tennessee for President; Edward Everett of Massachusetts for Vice President – in the 1860 election, and opposed secession during the Virginia Convention of April 1861. As the last number of the *Herald* known extant antedates that convention, it is uncertain how the Broughtons reacted to the secession vote, but the fact that they continued their paper into the ensuing summer indicates that they probably adopted the "Virginia first" approach seen in other former-Whig papers in the state and waited to see what transpired next.

Most authorities propose that the *Herald* ceased publication shortly after that last extant number (April 1, 1861) was issued, primarily a result of military operations that commenced there that May. But indirect evidence points to a date in August 1861, with the cessation resulting from a combination of factors. The establishment of Confederate batteries on the approaches to the shared Elizabeth River harbor of Norfolk and Portsmouth meant that the city itself was not occupied by federal troops until the start of the Peninsula Campaign in May 1862. However, the port was blockaded by federal naval vessels from May 1861, which made transportation of food and supplies into Norfolk increasingly difficult. In mid-August, the Broughtons announced that they had been compelled to suspend publication of their daily paper "in consequence of not obtaining paper to continue it." Then on August 24th, Thomas Greene Broughton, the *Herald's* seventy-five-year-old owner, died at his home in Norfolk. The combination of the blockade, the current suspension, and the death of the *pater familias* made it impracticable to resume publication of the *Norfolk Herald* until local conditions improved, despite a clearly defined succession this time. Yet when that situation finally arose in 1865, there were other Civil-War-era newspapers in place that prevented its

resurrection. Thus, the *Norfolk Herald* can be said to have died with its last proprietor, a fate common to many papers in antebellum America.

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Sources: LCCN nos. 85-025820, 85-025821, 85-025822, 85-025823, 85-205829, 85-025824, 85-025831, 85-025827, 85-025836, 85-054330, 86-071772, 84-024672, 94-059438, 84-024672; 84-024673; Brigham II: 1126-1128; Cappon 939; Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*; Wertenbaker, *Norfolk*; notices in Norfolk's *American Gazette* (1792-1797), *Norfolk Herald* (1794-1861), *Publick Ledger* (104-1816), and *American Beacon* (1815-1861), as well as the [Philadelphia] *Gazette of the United States* (1794-1800), the [Washington] *National Intelligencer* (1804-18510), and the [Leesburg] *Genius of Liberty* (1819).