

NORFOLK 11: American Beacon

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The *American Beacon* was the eleventh and last newspaper issued in Norfolk prior to 1820. Like its predecessors, it was primarily a mercantile advertiser, but offered an explicitly non-partisan outlook in doing so. Successive proprietors maintained such a "neutral" perspective until 1851, when the daily became an openly Whig journal and suffered from that affiliation during the sectional crisis of the 1850s.

At the end of the War of 1812, the port of Norfolk hosted two thrice-weekly papers – the moderately Republican *Norfolk Herald* of James O'Connor (317) and the ardently Federalist *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger* of John Cowper (110) and William Davis (127). The two issued on alternating days (Monday-Wednesday-Friday & Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday), so creating a daily outlet for time-sensitive advertising and maritime notices. Yet the *Publick Ledger* was fast losing support as a result of the waning influence of such "defeatist" papers generally in the country, despite a decade of service as the journal of record of the port's maritime activities. That situation suggested an opportunity existed in Norfolk to publish a new daily mercantile advertiser there, if that journal could insulate itself from the partisan newspaper wars that had now undermined the *Ledger*.

Beginnings

The Richmond-based *Daily Compiler* (later the *Commercial Compiler*) was the model for this new Norfolk paper, as well as the origin of two of its proprietors. That paper was started by the one-time Williamsburg schoolmaster Leroy Anderson (011) in May 1813; at the end of 1814, Anderson took on his brother-in-law, William C. Shields (381), then a journeyman in the *Compiler* office, as his partner. The marriage-relatives conducted the highly successful non-partisan daily for the next year. Then in August 1815, Anderson retired from journalism and returned to his Richmond school. Shields became partner to the *Compiler's* new editor, Louis Hue Girardin (180), a friend of Anderson's and formerly a professor at the College of William & Mary; this effortless transition established a foundation for the *Compiler* that allowed it to survive until 1844.

The quick success of the Richmond *Compiler* was intimately understood by Hamilton Shields

(380), the Norfolk-resident brother of the *Compiler's* proprietor. The Shields brothers were apparently convinced to relocate to Virginia in about 1810 to take up opportunities tied to Leroy Anderson – Hamilton as a schoolmaster in Smithfield and William as a journeyman-printer in the Richmond office that would eventually print the *Compiler*. Hamilton Shields had accrued a considerable reputation during the war in command of Virginia militia units assigned to the defense of Norfolk; now he determined to use that reputation to publish a daily journal in the port town that would adopt the non-partisan approach of his brother's Richmond paper. Early in 1815, he persuaded journeyman-printer Samuel Shepherd (379), who was apparently a part of the *Compiler* office, to come to Norfolk as his trade-partner in this new venture. The pair published a prospectus in the *Norfolk Herald* on April 7th, one in which Shields made clear his affinity for the town and its prospects:

"A residence in Norfolk, of nearly 2 years, by one of the subscribers, and the *urbanity* for which from his earliest recollection, its inhabitants had been distinguished, have strongly attracted him towards it as a *permanent* abode. He thinks himself fortunate, that in pursuing this inclination, he is enabled to offer to the patronage of its Citizens, and establishment, which he confidently believes, would long since have been acceptable to them; in which the revival of its Commercial prosperity, *under the most flattering auspices*, must render almost indispensable. The establishment alluded to is that of A DAILY NEWSPAPER, which, while it offers to the Merchant and Tradesman a medium of daily communication with the public, will keep them constantly apprised of the earliest foreign and domestic intelligence, that may affect their *interest*, or amuse their *vacant hours*."

The proposed *American Beacon and Commercial Diary* would soon become Norfolk's first successful daily newspaper. The *Norfolk Herald* had briefly attempted such a publication twice before the war, only to be stymied by a diminishing of advertising occasioned by the British and French predations on Atlantic trade during the Napoleonic Wars. With the peace, Shields & Shepherd asserted that "the necessity of a Daily paper to Norfolk, must be too obvious to need any argument to impress it." All that was required of them, they felt, was to avoid partisan entanglements, indicating that their subscribers should

"...feel assured, no friend to the prosperity of the United States, (to what party so ever he may be attached,) will find anything objectionable; and none can be more expressive of the *principles* which they propose shall govern them. Deprecating an alliance with *foreign powers*, is dangerous to Republican liberty; and convinced that there is too much truth in the assertion, that "in all *party* proceedings, neither reason nor justice can be expected from *either* side; and very seldom strict morality in the *means* employed to serve the *favorite* cause;" they will sedulously endeavor to maintain a course, equally unsullied by that party virulence, which, presented a *distorted view* of every thing affecting the political concerns of the country, tends to *mislead* the virtuous Citizen; and that degree of *apathy*, which, by a criminal inattention to the public welfare, engenders danger from the intrigues of the *designing*."

The subscription effort was evidently well received, though it was still another four months before the first number of the *American Beacon* appeared on August 7th. The partners were

apologetic for the delay in that number, offering a brief explanation for the wait:

"We are more particularly indebted to our Patrons, for the exercise of a degree of patience towards us, not often extended it to the candidate for public patronage. We allude to their steadfast adherence to us, under a delay so protracted, as justly to excite doubts as to the earnestness of our professions.—This delay was ascribable solely, to the person contracted to furnish our *Press* and its appurtenances. If opportunity could have expedited them we should long since have been in operation."

Shields served as editor of the new daily, while Shepherd conducted the press office; he was assisted in that operation by Henry Ashburn (015), then a twenty-year-old journeyman from nearby North Carolina. The attitude and commitment the trio brought to the journal was evinced by its motto: *Labore et Constantia* [Labor & Perseverance]. This structure worked successfully for all three men until early 1816, when Ashburn's room was burglarized and all of the profits he had realized from his association with Shields & Shepherd (a pile of bank certificates kept in a trunk) were stolen. Finding their journeyman suddenly destitute, the journalists advertised a reward for anyone finding and arresting the perpetrator in every edition for the next three months, to no avail. So Shields & Shepherd decided to restructure the business in April 1816 to make Ashburn a partner in the printing office as compensation for his lost savings, so acknowledging his vital contribution to their successful newspaper.

This triumvirate continued to conduct the *American Beacon* until August 1816 when William C. Shields essentially traded places and residences with Samuel Shepherd. The timing of the change corresponded with the end of the daily's first volume, and was clearly instigated and negotiated by the Shields brothers. That May, the Richmond firm of Girardin & Shields was dissolved, with their *Daily Compiler* being sold to a new concern headed by Philip DuVal (155) and Daniel Trueheart (420); that August, William Shields brought his proceeds from the sale to Norfolk and bought Shepherd's interest in the *Beacon*, becoming a partner to brother Hamilton; in turn, Shepherd's sale of his share in the *Beacon* allowed him to return to Richmond, where he opened a job-printing firm that continued until 1835 in conjunction with Thomas Ritchie (360), in whose office DuVal and Trueheart had worked previously.

To complete the exchange, the brothers brought in another Richmond journeyman-printer, Seymour P. Charlton (089), as a partner in the *American Beacon*; he had trained in the office of Augustine Davis (119), Shepherd's father-in-law, evincing the small print-trade circle from which the Shields brothers now drew. In his brief valedictory address, Shepherd endorsed his successor from an intimate knowledge of his capabilities:

"In retiring from the Establishment, and committing the department over which he has heretofore presided to *Mr. Charlton*, the subscriber congratulates himself that it rather gains than loses by the change; the practical experience of this gentleman for several years, in the best offices in the State, have eminently qualified him to discharge its duties."

The infusion of capital from this reorganization also allowed the new partnership to acquire Ashburn's interest in the printing office, so further compensating him, even as he continued to work in the *Beacon* office.

After two years under this arrangement, the firm of Shields, Charlton & Co. undertook an enlargement of their paper with the first number of their third volume on August 7, 1818.

"Emboldened by the spirit of improvement which is every day becoming more generally diffused throughout the Borough; anxious to merit the favor with which their fellow-citizens have looked towards them, and believing that the advantages of their establishment to the public and its respectability abroad, will be considerably promoted by the step, they have ventured to enlarge their sheet, from a medium to a super-royal size, *without advancing the price of subscriptions or advertising.*"

Still, this enlargement was undertaken with some trepidation given the apparent problem of non-paying readers. After noting the monetary benefit on the expansion to subscribers, the partners chided "borrowers" by speaking of the small cost of actually subscribing.

"Nor could any time be more opportune for our *borrowing readers* to do justice to us, and believe those to whom they had been so long indebted for the gratuitous enjoyment of our labors—for certainly no one of these gentlemen who bears in mind that he can have the privilege of reading a daily paper *for less than two cents a day*, will hesitate to cancel an obligation which is reluctantly contracted on the part of him who pays for the paper, but who is deprived by this detestable practice of *borrowing*, of the privilege of reading it."

Ten days later, they added a masthead type-ornament between the words "*American*" and "*Beacon*" creating the new title of *American Commercial Beacon*; it was a practice adopted almost simultaneously by DuVal & Trueheart for their *Richmond Compiler*, reflecting the continuing connection between the two newspapers. The Norfolk daily retained this title form until July 1827.

Transitions

The grind of producing a daily paper often took a toll on the health of its proprietors, and the *Beacon* was no exception. At the end of 1819, a declining Charlton retired from the firm; he died the next September. In departing, Charlton sold his one-third share in the *Beacon* to Henry Ashburn, the paper's long-serving printer. The Shields brothers praised their former partner in their notice of the proprietary change on January 1, 1820; yet that notice offered a longer encomium for Ashburn:

"...from the vigour and elasticity of the new member, our system may be confidently expected to derive a regenerative and helpful influence, productive of good fruits ... An experience of more than four years, during which he has been an intimate of our families, and an active, zealous, and persevering participant of our daily toils, authorizes us to declare, that he possesses a skill in his profession rarely attained, an assiduity which knows no fatigue, and disposition which delights an exertion where either the advantage or convenience of the employer is to be promoted, or his taste gratified. ... A grateful sense of the exertions of Mr. Ashburn, (far outstripping the requisitions of duty,) to promote the interests of our late firm, has prompted this candid expose of his pretensions to the public favour..."

As with journal offices elsewhere, the *American Beacon* office offered goods and services not directly related to its newspaper or job printing. In 1819, the business was hamstrung by the sale of lottery tickets. Earlier that year, the winning tickets in one lottery were ones that had been sold at the Beacon office. The new ownership group was forced to decline selling tickets for any subsequent lotteries when their office was deluged by a flood of mail (both postage paid and not) from people seeking to buy tickets from Shields, Ashburn & Co., so interfering with their more remunerative ventures. One of those ventures was their April 1820 acquisition of the Steam-Boat Hotel Reading Room that adjoined Norfolk's Post Office; such reading rooms were the life-blood of port towns in the early-Republic era, providing access to a wide variety of commercial intelligence and essential knowledge of those places that were part of that town's maritime trade; an association with such libraries by local daily papers like the *Beacon* was common then as it also provided content for those voracious journals. This purchase, along with the partner's new affiliation with its prolific manager, William G. Lyford (272), made their *Beacon* into the primary source for both maritime and naval intelligence for all American newspapers in the 1820s.

The *American Beacon* also soon became an entirely family business when Ashburn married one of Leroy Anderson's daughters, and so his partners' niece, in April 1822. Consequently, the *Beacon* was connected to the Shields-Anderson family until 1836. Ashburn represented that link for the entirety of this period, as both Shields brothers retired from journalism during this interval. William C. Shields was the first to withdraw from the firm at the end of June 1823, when he returned to Richmond and invested his earnings in new mercantile pursuits; he sold his one-third share in the concern to his familial partners, transforming the publishing firm into the simple two-man partnership of Shields & Ashburn on July 1st. Even so, Hamilton Shields was ever less of a presence in the *Beacon* office as he now became a civic and political figure of some importance in Norfolk, a result of the many relationships he had cultivated among business and naval figures in the port; yet even as most associated the paper with Shields, Ashburn was in fact the *Beacon's* every-day manager. And through those years, the *Beacon* remained the non-partisan sheet it had set out to be in 1816, despite the partisan conflicts of the Jacksonian era.

This remained the mode of operating the *Beacon* until September 1834, when Shields finally decided to retire from journalism, as his brother had, and pursue his other interests alone. He sold his share of the *Beacon* to Hugh Blair Grigsby (1806-1881), an essayist of note who had represented Norfolk in the 1829-30 Virginia Convention. From October 1, 1834, Grigsby served as the editor of the *Beacon*, meaning that he became a key figure in the passing of the daily paper out of the Shields-Anderson family in 1837. At the outset, the Norfolk native was clearly heir to the Shields brothers' journalistic mantel, with the thirty-eight-year-old Ashburn mentoring the twenty-six-year-old Grigsby in the trade following their departure. But just two years into their alliance, Ashburn fell ill and died unexpectedly in September 1836. His wife's uncle, the Williamsburg/Yorktown merchant Robert Anderson (1781-1859), was left to sort out the disposition of Ashburn's estate and the *American Beacon* office; the settlement he crafted was put into effect at the end of 1837; Grigsby continued to conduct the business as Ashburn & Grigsby until December 30, 1837, with the estate accruing its share of the profits over that time; then on January 1, 1838, Grigsby took full control of the

Beacon after buying Ashburn's share from his estate; the purchase was financed by William Douglas Bagnall (1803-67), whose brother, Henry Boswell Bagnall (1809-54), was then employed in the *Beacon* office, together with journeyman Thomas F. Boothby (d. 1815-55). Those three men were the unnamed partners in the new concern of Hugh Blair Grigsby & Company.

When he sold his interest in the *Beacon* to Grigsby in 1834, Hamilton Shields had assured the paper's readers that he had done so "under the pledge that it should hereafter be conducted upon the *same principles* as had previously ... [as] a vehicle of general information, and uninfluenced by party men or party measures." Yet Grigsby was perceived as part of an apparent politicization of the paper that became evident after that transition. In April 1835, the Richmond *Whig* of John Hampden Pleasants (330) classified Grigsby's *Beacon* as being a Democratic one supporting Martin Van Buren in a commentary that ridiculed the *Lynchburg Democrat* for identifying his daily as a Whig journal. That particular assessment is telling, as it represents the blurring of party boundaries at the end of Jackson's presidency, making an avowedly neutral paper like the *Beacon* appear partisan to those opposed to commentaries published therein. Such ambiguity seems to have led the Van Buren administration to withdraw the *Beacon's* long-held license to publish the laws of Congress from Grigsby and assign that highly-prized sinecure to the *Commercial Chronicle*, an avowedly Democratic paper in adjacent Portsmouth.

Politicization

The loss of that significant federal subsidy, as well as the political pressures attending the 1840 elections, seems to have contributed to Grigsby's decision to abandon journalism that fall. His decision would be an inexplicable one if the *Beacon* were then a Whig journal, as some supposed it to be, given the growing prospect of the victory of William Henry Harrison and John Tyler, both Whig sons of Virginia, that November. But it seems that Grigsby was trying to live up to the pledge Shields had obtained in 1834, and that the editor now found it increasingly unfeasible. Consequently, Grigsby sold the *Beacon* to William E. Cunningham (1803-55) following the issue of September 30, 1840, reportedly for the substantial sum of \$60,000. Cunningham retained Bagnall and Boothby, and eventually would come to regret their association with the firm of William E. Cunningham & Company.

(NB: Some references to Cunningham report his middle initial as "F" – a result of indistinct type-impressions in the few surviving issues of the *Beacon* from his tenure.)

Almost immediately, Cunningham ran afoul of journalistic conventions, by copying original articles from corresponding newspapers either without attribution or with a misattribution. The *Baltimore Sun*, an influential journal with close ties to William G. Lyford, the Shields brothers' one-time associate, was particularly incensed about one such incident in February 1841, and made it plain in print:

"We are gratified at an exchange with our contemporary, and are grieved that circumstances should occur which *may* render "non-intercourse" necessary. Again we say copy from us if you please, as long as you please, and as much as you please, and we may care little whether credit is given to *us* or not; but do not give to others

that which belongs to us."

But what seems to have been considered Cunningham's most dishonorable practice among his contemporaries was his use of a "neutral" journal to present a partisan perspective as an unbiased one. Indeed, the *Norfolk Herald*, the *Beacon's* primary local competition, later reported that Cunningham had "since the reorganization of the party in '32, been a firm and consistent Whig."

That deception may be the reason behind multiple attempts during Cunningham's tenure to set fire to the *Beacon's* office. One such attempt succeeded on the night of November 27, 1847, destroying the press and its accoutrements. The loss of the *Beacon* office quickly brought into question the actual ownership of the long-lived daily. Immediately after the fire, Bagnall and Boothby attempted to take control of the *Beacon*; they arranged with John Hill Hewitt (1801-90), former editor of the *Baltimore Clipper* and later a famed Confederate poet and playwright, to have the *Beacon* printed in that town under his guidance, and then have the finished daily sent overnight by steamer to Norfolk for distribution by the paper's regular carriers, with the next day's content then being sent north on the return passage; Bagnall and Boothby were able to publish their first issue this way on December 1st, just four days after the fire. But Cunningham countered their ploy by engaging the press office of the *Virginia Temperance Advocate* in Norfolk, a weekly that was then in the throes of a financial collapse after just six months of publication; this mutual desperation thus allowed Cunningham to defeat his partners' coup attempt by issuing a Norfolk-printed *Beacon* on November 30th, the day before the first Bagnall & Boothby version appeared.

The dearth of surviving issues from this period makes it difficult to determine how long this internecine conflict continued. What is clear is that Cunningham prevailed in fairly short order, with Bagnall and Boothby ultimately selling him their interests in the *Beacon*. It may be that Cunningham bought the *Advocate* press to replace his lost one, as that journal is not known to have issued after the *Beacon* fire; if so, he could have printed his version more cheaply than Bagnall & Boothby could theirs. It is also very likely the *Beacon's* advertisers preferred the immediacy embodied in the locally-produced edition, so limiting support for a Baltimore-printed one and making that version unworkable.

In the wake of this dispute, Cunningham was plainly faced with considerable debts. So with the issue of October 1, 1848, the first of his ninth volume, he refinanced his business by adding Richard Gatewood Jr. (1817-55) as partner in the *Beacon*. Such a reorganization was not only impelled by his indebtedness, but also by the growing competition to what had once been the only daily paper there. The *Norfolk Herald* had adopted that frequency in August 1840, just before Grigsby sold the *Beacon* to Cunningham. Since that date, two other daily papers had emerged as well. The first was the *Daily Courier*, begun as a thrice-weekly paper in January 1841 by William C. Shields, the *Beacon's* old proprietor, in response to this daily's retreat from its "neutral" heritage under Cunningham; the second was the *Southern Argus*, started in January 1848 during the turmoil over the *Beacon's* ownership. Each of those competitors offered differing perspectives: the *Herald* presented its long-held centrist position, the *Courier* exhibited the non-partisan outlook seen in the *Beacon* while under the Shields brothers, and the *Argus* claimed the vacant Jacksonian position among the town's

papers.

In this setting, it was increasingly problematic for Cunningham & Gatewood to maintain the fiction of the *Beacon's* political neutrality and retain the patronage of advertisers who were themselves ever more politicized. That challenging situation was further complicated by the introduction of another "neutral" competitor in January 1851: the *Daily News* published by editor Charles H. Beale (1817-55) and printer Thomas F. Boothby, late of the *Beacon*. So with the issue of November 4, 1851, the partners left all pretense to neutrality behind and proclaimed the *American Beacon* to be a partisan journal, complete with a simplification of title to end any continuing belief in its former mercantile employments. That declaration coincided with the rise of a political alliance in Virginia between Whigs disaffected by the anti-slavery sentiments among their Northern brethren and ardent nativists who supported the American (Know Nothing) Party. So while Cunningham & Gatewood asserted that their *Beacon* was a Whig journal, in actuality their daily was the voice of anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic manufacturers and merchants in Norfolk. Cunningham went so far to write that the flood of immigrants that came to America after the European Revolutions of the 1840s were the "scum of other countries who would rather beg than work, and rather steal than beg." It was a popular prejudice that the local faction now supporting the *Beacon* capitalized upon to gain control of the city government in early 1854.

Disruptions and Demise

This success induced Cunningham & Gatewood in January 1854 to reinstate the commercial focus in the *Beacon's* title that they had abandoned in 1851. The partners also now offered a feature unmatched by their competitors: three editions of the *Beacon* – a daily, a thrice-weekly country edition, and a weekly national paper. But this revived prominence would be short-lived.

In July 1855, yellow fever erupted in Norfolk. In the early days of the epidemic, the Know-Nothing-dominated city government did nothing to battle the disease, deciding that it was a problem effecting only the immigrants and the Catholics in the town's poorest districts and so a convenient solution to their perceived problem. Hence, all of Norfolk's newspapers did not report on the outbreak until it began to kill prominent native-born citizens, preferring instead to condemn papers in other port cities that reported on the spread of the disease for publishing falsehoods in their journals. But soon enough, the presses issuing those same newspapers began to be effected by the epidemic, some disastrously so.

The ensuing flight of the town's anonymous press operators compromised production in all five of the port's newspaper offices until after the first frost in mid-October. The *Southern Argus* was the most fortunate, even as it went into six-week suspension as a result of an inability to produce a paper, and so offered the most complete account of an epidemic that may have killed as many as one-third of the town's population of 6000. The *Norfolk Herald* was also relatively unharmed, though the disease did claim one of its proprietor's sons. However, the other three papers were largely destroyed by the epidemic. James H. Finch, the new proprietor of the Shields family's *Courier* and late foreman of the *Southern Argus* office, was among the first print-trade figures to die of the fever. (Its founder Shields was

also carried off by the disease shortly after he fled Norfolk in September.) Finch was soon followed by Beale and Boothby, the proprietors of the *Daily News*, so ending that journal's existence. Yet ironically, the sheet that was most supportive of the negligent and ineffective city government was ruined by the disease – Cunningham died of the disease on September 3rd, and Gatewood followed him on September 8th.

As the last surviving number of the *American Beacon* now known dates to June 1855, the fate of this long-lived daily can only be discerned from references to the paper elsewhere. Initially, the *Beacon* went into suspension on its proprietors' deaths; the *Beacon* office was sold at auction on March 27, 1856, by the administrators of their estates; in the intervening months, no mention of the *Beacon* has been found in other journals, suggesting that it did not again issue until after the office was sold. Thereafter, the ownership of the *Beacon* is uncertain. In his bibliography of Virginia newspapers, Lester Cappon suggests that Boothby may have had a hand in the post-1856 publication, but he died in the outbreak along with Cunningham and Gatewood; Cappon also reported that a firm known as Bisbie & Hathaway was involved for some time; however, John R. Hathaway (1820-94) was one of the founding partners of the new post-epidemic "neutral" daily advertiser – the *Norfolk Day Book* – which started in October 1857, and so not likely to have been part of the *Beacon's* restoration.

That recovery was hampered by another fire that destroyed the *Beacon's* printing office on November 11, 1856; the paper's press had been targeted by arsonists almost annually from 1852 on, with the last previous attempt coming in June 1855; this successful effort indicates that the *Beacon's* new proprietors espoused the same views of Cunningham and Gatewood and so found themselves at odds with their predecessors' enemies. Little else can be said of the *Beacon* in the post-fire era, as references to the daily in other American papers diminish rapidly after the declaration of partisan purpose in 1851.

The *American Beacon* evidently ceased publication in late 1858. The latest reference found is one citing the issue of August 8, 1858. But more importantly, the journal and its unknown proprietors are not listed the Norfolk's 1859 city directory, which was issued early that year. That particular directory was a part of the town's post-epidemic recovery effort, which the *Southern Argus* reported as being "slow, too slow." It listed the four newspapers published there then, including the two new ones that had appeared after the epidemic. Accordingly, the absence of a listing for the *American Beacon* seems decisive proof of the daily's demise shortly before that carefully detailed record was published.

Sources: LCCN no. 95-067610, 95-067610, 84-024723, 84-024509, 84-024724, 86-071774, 86-071775, & 92-061764; Brigham II: 1122-1123; Cappon 914; Hubbard on Richmond; Tucker, *Norfolk Abstracts*; Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*; Forrest, *Pestilence*; Norfolk Register of Deaths, 1855; Tyler, *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography*; *Dictionary of American Biography*; *The Norfolk Directory for 1851-1852*; *Southern Business Directory* (1854); *Vickery's Directory for the City of Norfolk for 1859*; notices in the *American Beacon* (1815-55), the *Norfolk Herald* (1815-1851), the *Richmond Enquirer* (1815-51), the *Alexandria Gazette* (1820-58), the *Richmond Whig* (1824-55), the *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser* (1825-55), the *Baltimore Sun* (1837-55), and the [Baltimore] *American and Commercial Daily Advertiser* (1847).