

SHEPHERDSTOWN 01: Potowmac Guardian

01: The Potowmac Guardian and Berkeley Advertiser (1790-1792)

The first newspaper issued in Berkeley County was one that came to Shepherdstown from Winchester and which was then removed to Martinsburg after little more than a year there. That brief residence reflected the acumen of its accomplished proprietor and his ability to adjust to changeable circumstances.

Shepherdstown gained its first weekly as a result of the ambitions of its publisher, Nathaniel Willis (449). He was a practical printer, bred to his craft in the Boston office of Edes & Gill, proprietors of the *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, perhaps the most radical newspaper published in America in the 1760s and 1770s. Consequently, Willis earned the distinction of being the youngest person having a hand in the Boston Tea Party of 1773 at age eighteen, in the company of his mentor Benjamin Edes. During the war years, he associated with fellow Boston journeyman Edward E. Powars to publish the *Independent Chronicle* (first called the *New England Chronicle*), known for its vocal opposition to the anti-populist predispositions of the region's Federalists, such as John Adams and Timothy Pickering. In 1786, Willis found his livelihood as a journalist and printer threatened by a tax on paid content in newspapers, a tax prompted by the growing number of published criticisms of policies promulgated by the state government that occasioned Shays Rebellion that fall. Rather than be "shackled in this State," Willis sold his home and business and left Boston to pursue less-problematic opportunities in the "unsettled West" of the southern interior.

Eventually, Willis landed in Winchester, Virginia. There he succeeded Henry Willcocks (444) as partner to Matthias Bartgis (024) – the Frederick, Maryland, publishing entrepreneur – as a proprietor of that town's first weekly, the *Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser*. His predecessor left the concern in the spring of 1788 to join Richard Bowen (045) in producing a competing *Virginia Centinel or The Winchester Mercury*, a purely English-language paper, unlike Bartgis's German-sprinkled journal. Willis evidently recognized that Bartgis's bilingual *Gazette* was not a viable entity in the face of the *Centinel's* challenge, and left that concern as well when his contract with Bartgis expired at the end of 1789. He then set out to start a third paper in Winchester, one representing the interests of the area's agrarian population, rather than the local merchants supporting Bowen's journal. *Willis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* issued its first number on March 20, 1790, ten weeks after his parting from Bartgis. Yet the experienced journalist clearly understood that offering a third paper in a locale that seemed to have had difficulty in supporting two at that time was a problematic proposition. Thus, after six months of challenging his established competitors, Willis moved his office some thirty miles to the northeast and set up shop in Shepherdstown. There he resumed publishing his weekly paper in early November with the title of *The Potowmac Guardian and Berkeley Advertiser*.

His choice of Shepherdstown appears curious, given its smaller size than Winchester, even considering the competition in that town. But items from the *Potowmac Guardian* reprinted

elsewhere during the first month Willis operated in this new venue indicate that the move was tied to concurrent considerations of where to locate the new national capital city. The so-called "Residence Act" of July 1790 authorized a presidential commission to find a site "on the river Potomack, at some place between the mouths of the Eastern Branch and the Connogochegue," which would then acquire 10-square-miles of land on both sides of the river and build the necessary buildings before December 1800. This stretch of river runs from Alexandria, Virginia, to Williamsport, Maryland, including the Shepherdstown area. In November 1790, a notice Willis published early that month – perhaps in his first number there – was reprinted in distant newspapers, wherein leading citizens from Shepherdstown, Charlestown, and Martinsburg asked their neighbors for contributions to a fund that could be used to buy such a site in eastern Berkeley County which, in turn, would be given to the federal government under the provisions of the Residence Act. Such an outcome seems to have been more than speculative in the fall of 1790, given the state of the commissioners' deliberations at that time; if so then Willis's relocation was clearly an attempt to establish his business as the leading press in the new capital, as did happen with other printers once the site of the District of Columbia was certain. By March 1791, however, Washington had settled on a site at the southern end of the prescribed stretch of the river, which brought an end to that advocacy campaign.

In consequence of this setback, it appears that Willis decided that the spurned river-port of Shepherdstown was not a viable locale for his newspaper and job-press; rather, it was clear that Martinsburg, the Berkeley County seat, was destined to become the area's commercial center as a result of its location on the Great Wagon Road; that road facilitated travel down the center of the Valley of Virginia to Tennessee and beyond, making that town a greater catalyst to the region's commerce than were the older river-port towns of Shepherdstown and Harper's Ferry. So sometime between December 27, 1791 and April 3, 1792, he moved his journal and office again, this time to Martinsburg. Over the ensuing eight years, Willis conducted the only paper issued in that market town, and profited from the venture until his anti-authoritarian attitudes encouraged local Federalists to persuade his shop foreman, John Alburtis (004) to start a competing journal, which promptly ruined Willis financially. In 1800, he left Martinsburg for Cincinnati where he joined another expatriate Boston printer, Edmund Freeman, in publishing the journal of record for the Northwest Territory.

Still, in the year that Willis labored in Shepherdstown, his *Potowmac Guardian* became an important source for news of the ongoing military campaigns against the Shawnee in the Ohio country. Indeed, his weekly seems to have published the first reports of the defeat of Governor/General Arthur St. Clair at the Battle of Wabash in November 1791. And after its removal to Martinsburg, the *Guardian* frequently published the initial reports of the actions undertaken by St. Clair's successor, Gen. Anthony "Mad Anthony" Wayne, which concluded with the cessions of native lands under the Treaty of Greenville in August 1795.

Sources: LCCN No. 84-038410 & 84-038399; Brigham II: 1174; Norona & Shetler 1284; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; notices in several Philadelphia and Winchester newspapers, as well as the *Potowmac Guardian* itself (1788-1800).