

SHEPHERDSTOWN 02: Impartial Observer

01: Impartial Observer, or Shepherd's-town, Charles-town, & County Advertiser (1797)

The second newspaper issued in Shepherdstown was a short-lived venture offered by two Jeffersonian lawyers who apparently attempted to offset the influence of the Federalist-oriented weekly advertisers in nearby Winchester, Hagerstown, and Frederick. Their effort succumbed to those competitors, evidently in less than six months.

With the emergence of partisan journalism in the 1790s, nearly all of the newspapers in the country carried content of uncertain origin and questionable veracity, items that were then reprinted as authoritative accounts of persons and events, often in an attempt to debase the individual involved or denigrate their party. Thus, efforts were made by some editors to offer journals that scrutinized such content from a supposedly disinterested perspective in search of fact and certainty. The most visible of these efforts were papers that adopted a title of *Impartial Observer*, as did ten American journals before the War of 1812.

The Shepherdstown offering was the first of three Virginia papers that bore such a title. As reflected in its sub-title, this weekly was an advertising vehicle as much as it was the carrier of "correct" news reports. The first newspaper issued in this Potomac River port had been removed to Martinsburg in the winter of 1791-92 as a result of that town's precedence as the commercial and governmental center of Berkeley County. Yet as the 1790s progressed, the ferry at Shepherdstown provided teamsters with a shorter route to the east for those exporting the produce of "the great southwest," making much of "the whole population of the town ... interested in keeping boarders or in managing wagon yards and warehouses to accommodate the traffic," as one historian reports. By 1797, this altered situation evidently made the idea of publishing another weekly advertiser there a reasonable one.

The two individuals who determined to fill this long-standing void were both transplants to the area. Philip Rootes (362) was a real-estate and probate lawyer from Petersburg who had conducted the short-lived *Virginia Star* there in 1795. His partner in the venture was Charles Blagrove (036), a lawyer from Richmond who speculated extensively in the land-warrants issued to veterans of the Revolutionary War. The partners evidently shared an affinity for Jefferson's agrarian ideology and its imperative of a distribution of land to middling farmers. Consequently, the Shepherdstown area, with its growing population and its proximity to the routes used by those migrating to the west, seemed a viable setting for a paper supporting such ideals, especially with the advertising potential embodied in the town's commerce. Thus, the new firm of Rootes & Blagrove issued the first number of their *Impartial Observer or, Shepherd's-town, Charles-town, & County Advertiser* on June 28, 1797.

The new journal, however, appeared at a moment when John Adams was at the height of his popularity, while that of Jefferson and his partisans was waning, largely a result of then declining relations with Revolutionary France, to which Jefferson was linked in the popular imagination. So it seems that the weekly was issued only in short print runs, as evinced by the survival of just two numbers of the paper, those for September 13th (I:12) and October

11th (I:16). With an established alternative being published in Martinsburg – the *Potowmac Guardian* of Nathaniel Willis (449), formerly issued in Shepherdstown – Federalist-leaning advertisers likely would not change their affiliation, nor would many inhabitants be able to afford the price of a subscription in a period with a contracting currency. Consequently, the paper ceased publication in fairly short order, perhaps as early as the surviving October number, but more likely at the end of a six-month run, so fulfilling the first half of a year-long subscription that would have been paid in advance.

Following the demise of the *Impartial Observer*, both of its proprietors left Shepherdstown. Rootes moved his practice to Winchester, and then to Fredericksburg, before apparently dying in Georgia in 1804. Blagrove returned to Richmond, where eventually he was named Registrar of Virginia's Land Office, an office he still held at his death in 1814.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-059774; Brigham II: 1111; Norona & Shetler 1370; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Callahan, *West Virginia*; Musser, *Shepherdstown*.