

SHEPHERDSTOWN 03: American Eagle

01: The American Eagle and Shepherd's-town Weekly Advertiser (1816-1817)

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After two short-lived journals were published in Shepherdstown in the 1790s, it was nearly twenty years before a third was attempted. Yet that paper was the first in a series of four that were apparently issued from the same press, under differing proprietorships, over the ensuing decade, filling unmet demand for mercantile advertising in the river-port town.

In the 1790s, Shepherdstown proved a difficult locale for publishing a newspaper. While many expected the town would become a major river port, it served only as a ferry landing until the War of 1812. Hence, it lagged behind Martinsburg, fifteen miles to the west, as the principal northern Valley market town through its links to the carrying trade passing along the Great Wagon Road to and from Philadelphia; instead it became a short-cut for those dealing with Baltimore merchants. The town fell further into the journalistic shadows when Charlestown, ten miles to the south, became the seat of Jefferson County when the eastern end of Berkeley County was separated in 1801. Accordingly, Martinsburg and Charlestown both hosted that papers were the journal-of-record in each county, requiring a prospective newspaper in Shepherdstown to rely heavily on mercantile advertising, which proved to be inadequate for two journals at that time.

After the War of 1812, however, the situation there was changing. The town had developed as a small manufacturing center by then, as well as a trans-shipment point for goods passing to the east and west. Now needing a local job-press, Shepherdstown's merchants evidently induced a young printer from Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, to set up a printing office in the town in late 1815; John Nelson Snider (392) then offered that mercantile community a new advertising outlet the following February: *The American Eagle and Shepherd's-town Weekly Advertiser*. It was the first paper issued in the town since late 1797, when the brief life of the *Impartial Observer* of Philip Rootes (362) and Charles Blagrove (036) ended.

Given Snider's origin, as well as his journal's commercial purpose, it is not surprising that the new weekly embraced a Federalist perspective. He had been trained by George Kenton Harper (1778-1858), publisher of the *Franklin Repository*, then the leading Federalist voice in central Pennsylvania. Furthermore, the only newspaper issued in Jefferson County at that time – the *Farmers' Repository* in Charlestown– was a fervent Republican sheet that did not represent either the business interests of Shepherdstown's merchants or their political views; that reality made an opposition journal a desirable publication among those like-minded residents.

The few surviving issues of the *American Eagle*, however, make it difficult to track either its content or ownership with any accuracy. Still, Snider's weekly can often be seen in other newspapers, particularly Republican ones that took exception with his commentaries. While he asserted that his paper was a "democratic" one, his most frequent editorial targets were editors in the Democratic-Republican realm. Moreover, he made sport of the candidacy of

James Monroe for the presidency in 1816 with comic anecdotes that were widely reprinted in Federalist papers elsewhere.

In early 1817, Snider traded words with Samuel B.T. Caldwell (074), the editor of the newly-established *Genius of Liberty* in nearby Leesburg; a New England native, Caldwell became a journalist out of a concern for the limited suffrage he found among the citizenry of Virginia. Although only Caldwell's side of the dispute has survived, it is clear that Snider objected to the deviation from Southern principles in essays he published previously in the *Republican Constellation* of Jonathan Foster (168) in Winchester, asserting that the same apostasy would be the focus of his new Leesburg weekly; Snider then evidently continued his assault by casting aspersions on Caldwell's loyalty to his Massachusetts friends, citing them as the cause of his deviance. Caldwell's two-column response took Snider to task for his "fountain of sophistry" which emitted "false premises" to arrive at "false conclusions" and so delude his readers; suggesting that the "incapable" Snider was merely a front for "secret masters," He closed with the Biblical injunction that Federalist should "go and sin no more." Caldwell hoped he would never have to address the content of Snider's *Eagle* again, but a new exchange of blows came in March, followed by silence.

As the last known issue of the *American Eagle* under Snider's name is that for February 25, 1817, so the abrupt termination of this March exchange was probably tied the journalist's departure from Shepherdstown. The next known surviving number is that for July 3, 1817, issued by the succeeding concern of Maxwell & Harper; the timing suggests Snider left the town after the first volume was closed in March 1817, so explaining the end of his dispute with Caldwell. His successors – Maxwell (283) and Harper (202) – have not been identified explicitly, but the Harper name indicates that Snider turned over the operation of his office and journal to a relative of his Chambersburg mentor, who then formed a partnership with a local financier and/or editor; and this Harper remained with the paper and press when Maxwell withdrew from the venture sometime before the next surviving number issued on January 7, 1819. Given the apparent change in the *Eagle's* ownership at the end of its first volume, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Maxwell agreed to join Harper for a single year (March 1817 to March 1818) and that he sold his interest in the paper to an equally anonymous financier and/or editor named Robinson (361) at the end of the second volume.

Robinson & Harper seem to have worked on a year-to-year basis as well; the only number of their *Eagle* that has survived is that issued on January 7, 1819; then in April 1819, the pair began publishing a new weekly there – the *Potomack Register*; this timing indicates that Robinson & Harper closed the *American Eagle* at the end of its third volume in March 1819, and launched their new journal a month later. This progression becomes significant when one considers who this Robinson may have been. In March 1819, Israel Robinson (1773-1828), a substantial Berkeley County merchant-planter, was seeking reelection to the House of Delegates after serving in the 1817 and 1818 Assemblies as a Federalist. So it seems that he was someone who employed this opposition paper to gain election to those sessions. But in the spring of 1819, Robinson was facing a difficult reelection campaign in Republican Jefferson County over his opposition to the democratization efforts unleashed by the 1816 Staunton Convention. Thus it would have made practical sense for the partners to sever their association with the *Eagle's* past by starting the new *Register*, as such a reshuffling was

then a common practice for partisan papers with tarnished reputations. Still, Robinson was defeated that spring, with the *Register* closing sometime before the next Federalist journal published in Shepherdstown – *The Informer* – appeared that August.

This succession implies that the series of Shepherdstown newspapers issued in the decade after the War of 1812 were produced on the press that Snider brought to the town in 1815 to print his *American Eagle*. The non-concurrent publication dates of the journals suggest that the office had an existence independent from those newspapers, but that each was the principal imprint produced on that press; it seems that the printing office was transferred to Harper when Snider left in 1817, and that Harper sold it in 1819 to Thomas Trice (418) of the *Informer*, who sold it in 1821 to Nathaniel Mitchell of the *Virginia Monitor*; such a view is supported by the fact that the *Register's* Robinson, the *Informer's* George W. Sappington (370) and the *Monitor's* Edward Bell (029) were editors with only a passing knowledge of the trade, even as Bell, a physician, came from a family of printers. Moreover, each of those three printers served as sole proprietors of those succeeding papers when their non-trade partners quit their concerns.

This succession also suggests that the key tradesman in the initial changes was one Kenton Harper (203), a son of Snider's old master. As it appears that his father had helped Snider move to Shepherdstown, it would follow that he would then set up his eldest trained son as successor to his one-time apprentice when Snider's one-year agreement with him expired. But such a supposition is speculative, as Harper is not seen as an identifiably-independent tradesman until December 1823, when he acquired the Staunton office and press of the *Republican Farmer*, published by Isaac Collett (100), and recast that aging paper as the *Staunton Spectator*, which he continued to publish until at least 1848.

Still, this conjectural history of the *American Eagle* is credible, despite the lack of surviving issues and the absence of any overt identification of its proprietors. Given its established purpose as mercantile advertiser, it makes perfect sense that after having survived for three years in Shepherdstown, its closure in early 1819 would have led to attempts to offer substitutes for that vital function, so leading from the *Informer* to the *Monitor* and probably others beyond. Moreover, the volume of commerce in the town by this time would have readily supported a job-press, even if the owners of that press could not sustain a weekly for more than a year or two at a time. Even so, a definitive history of the *American Eagle* and its successors depends on evidence yet undiscovered.

Sources: LCCN nos. 85-059807 & 85-059770; Brigham II: 1173-74; Norona & Shetler 1368; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Musser, *Shepherdstown*; notices in [Charlestown] *Farmers' Repository* (1816-23), [Chambersburg PA] *Democratic Republican* (1816), [Leesburg] *Genius of Liberty* (1817), *Alexandria Gazette* (1817), [Frederick MD] *Bartgis's Republican Gazette* (1819), *Carlisle [PA] Republican* (1820), and the *National Intelligencer* (1817-1823).