

SHEPHERDSTOWN 04: Potomack Register

01: Potomack Register (1819)

The fourth newspaper issued in Shepherdstown before 1820 was clearly a successor to the third, as well as the second in a series that apparently employed the press that produced that predecessor. Like all the papers in this series, it was a weekly mercantile advertiser with a Federalist foundation; but it also appears to have supported the political ambitions of one of its proprietors, and so ceased publication following his defeat at the polls in 1819.

The *Potomack Register* made its first appearance on April 15, 1819. It was published by the firm of Robinson & Harper who, over the preceding twelve months, had jointly published the *American Eagle*, a Federalist-oriented mercantile advertiser that had been founded by John N. Snider (392) in early 1816. The staging of this appearance indicates that Robinson (361) and Harper (202) had closed the *American Eagle* at the end of its third volume in March 1819, and then launched their new journal a month later.

This evolution evidently reflects a recasting of their weekly to disassociate the newspaper from its past as the *Eagle*, a course that suggests that the anonymous Robinson involved in this venture was Israel Robinson (1773-1828), a considerable Berkeley County merchant-planter; in the spring of 1819, he was pursuing 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 acquired an interest in the *American Eagle* to gain election to those sessions. But now Robinson faced a difficult reelection campaign from his opposition to the democratization efforts unleashed by the Staunton Convention of 1816. Consequently, it would have made sense for the partners to break 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, even as its proprietors or backers remained unchanged, as here.

Just how long publication of this new weekly continued is uncertain, as no numbers of the paper are known to have survived; its existence has been recorded only as a result of the ongoing reporting of the *National Intelligencer*, which told its readers of the particulars of every new journal that was received in its Washington office; in its April 24, 1819 issue, the paper noted the start of: "The Potomack Register, Va. weekly, by Robinson & Harper at two dollars per annum. The first No. issued on the 15th inst." Still, Robinson was defeated that spring, with the *Register* closing sometime before the next Federalist journal published in Shepherdstown – *The Informer* – appeared that August.

That 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 Harper – Robinson's trade partner – sold the press in 1819 to Thomas Trice (418) of the *Informer*, who sold it in 1821 to Nathaniel Mitchell of the

Virginia Monitor; such an inference is supported by the fact that 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. Moreover, each of those three printers served as sole proprietors of those succeeding papers when their non-trade partners quit their concerns.

The demise of the *Potomack Register* brought an end to Robinson's journalistic career; but for partner Harper it seems that his years in Shepherdstown were only the start of long one. As Snider came to Virginia from the Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, office of George Kenton Harper, it is likely that the Harper that acquired Snider's *American Eagle* was Kenton Harper (203), later the proprietor of the long-lived Staunton Spectator. So for him the end of his two-year association with Robinson in conducting two Shepherdstown journals was just a step along the path to his becoming an independent tradesman, as was the case with many printers of his generation in their early years.

Sources: Not found by U.S. Newspaper Project, so no record in LC catalogue; Brigham II: 1174-75; Norona & Shetler 1375; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Musser, *Shepherdstown*; and notice in *National Intelligencer* (1819).