

SHEPHERDSTOWN 05: The Informer

01: The Informer and Weekly Advertiser (1819-1820)

The fifth newspaper issued in Shepherdstown before 1820 was the third in a series of late-Federalist journals that apparently employed the press that produced its predecessors. Like all the papers in this series, it was a weekly mercantile advertiser, although in this case a relatively short-lived one, expiring about a year after its start.

The Informer and Weekly Advertiser made its first appearance on August 5, 1819. It was published by G. W. Sappington & Co., a concern known only from a notice three weeks later announcing the paper's initiation in the *National Intelligencer*. The only surviving number of this weekly is that issued on July 12, 1820 by Thomas Trice (418), as no. 45 of its first and only volume. This spare evidence reveals this journal began publication after the demise of the *Potomack Register* of Robinson & Harper earlier in 1819; that sometime before the July 1820 number, publication was suspended for five weeks, perhaps during the transition from Sappington to Trice; and that it ended its run before Shepherdstown's next paper appeared on September 21, 1820.

Still, this bare framework, taken in conjunction with the papers that came before and after the *Informer*, indicates a short-lived attempt to sustain a mercantile advertiser in the port town in a series extending back to 1816. This paper's precursors were efforts to produce an alternative to the county's established journal-of-record, the Republican-aligned *Farmer's Repository*, published by Richard Williams (447) at Charlestown. The first challenge was the *American Eagle*, initially conducted (1816-17) by John N. Snider (392), and then (1817-19) by the succeeding firms of Maxwell (283) & Harper (202) and Robinson (361) & Harper; the latter pairing closed the *American Eagle* in spring 1819 to recast it as the *Potomack Register*, but that iteration was also dead by the time George Washington Sappington (370) started the *Informer* in August 1819. That timing suggests that Sappington, then just nineteen or twenty years-old, drew on older, well-known supporters locally to acquire the Robinson & Harper press office in order to attempt this third challenger to Williams's *Repository*.

From subsequent events, it is clear that Sappington was the editorial partner in this firm, as he was not trained as a printer, and that Trice was his printing partner, most likely from the start. Rather, Sappington was an hotelier, managing hotels in Jefferson County for much of his life, and who was later a leading figure among the county's Whig faction as a result of his wide commercial connections. His absence from the *Informer's* ownership just ten months later suggests that Sappington had formed the company as a stop-gap measure when the *Register* expired, and that his commitment to the venture extended to a limited six- or nine-month term, a period which should have been sufficient for Trice to develop a base of both subscribers and investors. But as a result of either financial issues or Trice becoming sole proprietor, the *Informer* did not issue for some five weeks along the way.

Whatever the case, ten weeks after Trice issued the only number to survive to the present, a new weekly advertiser, *The Virginia Monitor*, started publication in Shepherdstown. That

journal was tied to the chief Federalist paper in nearby Hagerstown, Maryland – *The Torch Light* – published by William Duffield Bell (1793-1841); he seems to have sent his brothers to Shepherdstown to take control of Trice's office; younger brother Edward (029) conducted the *Monitor*, while baby brother Samuel (031) printed the weekly. The introduction of this succeeding paper implies that Trice closed his *Informer* at the end of its first volume, about August 30, 1820, and transferred his press to the Bells in the ensuing three weeks. Thus, this established family business saved the struggling Federalist press founded by John N. Snider four years earlier, just as Sappington had attempted the year before. Yet the cost of that redemption was the demise of *The Informer and Weekly Advertiser*.

Sources: Not found by U.S. Newspaper Project, so no record in LC catalogue; Brigham II: 1174; Norona & Shetler 1371; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Musser, *Shepherdstown*; Bushong, *Jefferson County*; Scharf, *Western Maryland*; and notices in *National Intelligencer* (1819-20).