

## SHEPHERDSTOWN 06: Virginia Monitor

### 01: The Virginia Monitor (1820-1824)

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The last newspaper issued in Shepherdstown before 1821 was the fourth in a series of late-Federalist journals that apparently employed the press that printed its three predecessors. Like all of the papers in this series, it was a weekly mercantile advertiser, though in this case it was a journal with familial connections to one of the region's leading opposition papers, and so lived in the shadow of that publication.

*The Virginia Monitor* was first published on September 21, 1820, just three weeks after the apparent demise of preceding *Informer and Weekly Advertiser* of Thomas Trice (418). That weekly survived for slightly more than a year, succeeding three preceding attempts to offer a Federalist alternative to Jefferson 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 G. W. Sappington (370) started publishing the *Informer* in August 1819; sometime in the next year, Trice acquired the *Informer* from Sappington but was unable to sustain the effort for long, leading to this fourth challenger to Williams's *Repository*.

It appears that the printing office brought to Shepherdstown by Snider was at the center of these transactions, remaining a working job-press from 1816 onward; the intervals between the publication periods of each of the *Monitor's* predecessors are so short that such brevity would require an extant press for the succeeding paper to employ. In this case, it seems that Trice found a cooperative buyer for his struggling business in the nearby Hagerstown, Maryland, office of the *Torch Light*, then that town's primary Federalist sheet; its publisher, William D. Bell (1793-1841), evidently sent his brothers to Shepherdstown to take control of Trice's office. Edward Bell (029) was the titular proprietor, with the youngest Bell brother, Samuel (031), printing the *Monitor* for Edward, and perhaps for William as well. In doing so, the Bells saved the press that was founded by Snider four years earlier, just as Sappington had attempted to do just the year before.

Not surprisingly, the *Monitor* retained the Federalist perspective of its predecessors, just as the Hagerstown *Torch Light* maintained. But nothing else can be said about its content or influence, as the only surviving issues of this journal today come from the summer of 1823, about a year after Edward Bell sold the newspaper. The only thing that can be said with any certainty is that Samuel Bell died while in his brother's employ on September 23, 1821; three days before his death, Nathaniel Mitchell (1796-1884) a Baltimore-trained printer, was reported to have joined the *Monitor's* staff. Mitchell's name adorns the colophon of the surviving numbers from 1823 (June 4, July 16, and August 6), leading several authorities to date the start of the *Monitor* to October 23, 1822, based on the volume numbering seen in

those few issues. But that October 1822 date probably marks the beginning of Mitchell's sole ownership of the weekly and so his adoption of a new number scheme conforming to his proprietorship. How long Mitchell continued the *Monitor* is uncertain, given the absence of any surviving numbers from the period after August 1823; Mitchell family histories report that he continued the *Monitor* well into 1824 before relocating to Chestertown, Maryland, where he started a new weekly; that paper – *The Chestertown Telegraph* – began publishing on October 21, 1824, indicating Mitchell had ceased issuing this Shepherdstown journal shortly before that date.

That end date is supported by the fact that John Alburdis (004), the founder of the long-lived *Martinsburg Gazette*, came out of retirement in late 1824 to commence publishing another Federalist (now Adamsite) paper in Shepherdstown. Indeed, it may be that the availability of an existing press and staff in the town made Alburdis's decision an easy one, especially with the new proprietor of his Martinsburg paper now at odds with his political views. So it seems Alburdis's *Shepherdstown Gazette*, later entitled *The Journal*, was a direct descendant of the *American Eagle*, the *Potomack Register*, the *Informer and Weekly Advertiser*, and the *Virginia Monitor*, though the connection came by way of the press producing those papers, rather than by a transfer of their ownership from proprietor to proprietor.

The *Virginia Monitor* proved to be the first in a series of journals that were either conducted or edited by Nathaniel Mitchell. After closing the *Chestertown Telegraph* in 1830, he joined Delaware's *State Journal* in Wilmington in 1832, then the *Western Palladium* of New Lisbon, Ohio, in 1835, and the *Springfield [Ohio] Republic* in 1854, before removing to California in 1857 to assist his son, John Leland Tabb Mitchell (1823-79), in conducting the *Placer Herald*; Mitchell died there in February 1884, some sixty years after leaving Shepherdstown.

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Sources: LCCN No. 87-060319; Brigham II: 1175; Norona & Shetler 1377; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Musser, *Shepherdstown*; notice in *National Intelligencer* (1820); and Mitchell obituary in *The American Stationer* (March 1884).