

STAUNTON 01: Western Star

01: The Staunton Gazette or Weekly Western Star (1790)

The first newspaper published in Staunton was an adjunct to the first two papers issued in Winchester. But as it was essentially an advertising sheet designed to expand the reach of Frederick County merchants into Augusta County, it evidently did not serve its envisioned readers well and so expired in very short order.

The Staunton Gazette or Weekly Western Star was uncommon in that it was a publication issued jointly by two rival journalists. The prime mover in this project seems to have been Matthias Bartgis (024), a Philadelphia-trained publishing entrepreneur based in Frederick, Maryland, who had set his sights on conducting a chain of printing offices with newspapers along the Great Road to the west that stretched from eastern Pennsylvania to southwestern Virginia. The first such combine appeared in Frederick in 1785 with his *Maryland Chronicle*, with a German-language edition, *Bartgis's Marylandische Zeitung*, soon following it; the second office appeared in Winchester in July 1787 with the *Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser*, issued in partnership with Henry Willcocks (444); and the third arose in York, Pennsylvania, in October 1787 with the *Pennsylvania Chronicle* there.

Bartgis evidently planned to open another such operation in Staunton in early 1788 – one which would have issued *The Virginia Chronicle or the Western Intelligencer* – but he was forced to abandon the project from a lack of local support and the loss of his Winchester partner. Willcocks left the *Gazette* after about six months with Bartgis, to assist Richard Bowen (045), an English schoolmaster who had briefly published the first Baltimore daily, to offer a rival paper in April 1788: *The Virginia Centinel or the Winchester Mercury*. Though Willcocks left town later that year to found another paper competing with Bartgis's York one, Bowen's *Centinel* soon became the principal mercantile advertiser in the northern Shenandoah Valley, even as Bartgis brought in the well-known Boston publisher Nathaniel Willis (449) to replace Willcocks. Over the next two years, Bowen and Bartgis often targeted each other's journal as being unrepresentative of the needs and interests of residents of the Shenandoah Valley, with Willis taking the brunt of Bowen's attacks from his residence in the Frederick County seat. Most representative of their disputatious relationship was the clash between them that filled each paper in the summer of 1789 when Bartgis began circulating proposals for a German-language *Virginische Zeitung* in Winchester. After nearly six months of barbed comments, a Bowen contributor penned an *ad hominin* attack on the character of both Bartgis and Willis, leading Bartgis to end the exchange in his *Gazette* with an appeal to Bowen to do the same in his *Centinel*.

The timing of this dénouement is interesting, as within very few weeks Bartgis and Bowen had agreed to jointly publish a new weekly in Staunton. That concurrence suggests that the two had "buried the hatchet" by dividing the expense of issuing a weekly in Augusta County to their mutual fiscal benefit. The only number of *The Staunton Gazette or Weekly Western Star* to survive into the present day (February 5, 1790) reveals that the venture was one in

which Winchester merchants advertised their goods to Staunton readers, with those notices most likely being reprints of those in both the *Gazette* and the *Centinel*. The few surviving numbers of those papers, however, do not allow a confirmation of that supposition, nor do they present a definitive timeline for the Staunton paper's publication. But it is evident that subscription notices for the weekly were published in Bartgis's *Virginia Gazette* on January 30 and March 20, 1790, ones which indicate that it was being published at those times.

Interestingly, the second of those notices was printed on the same day that the first number of a third Winchester weekly was issued. Willis had parted company from Bartgis at the end of 1789, probably before the Staunton paper began publication, and on March 20, 1790, he issued the new *Willis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser*, ten weeks after leaving Bartgis. Thus it seems that Willis had nothing to do with the first *Staunton Gazette*; it also appears that he thought Bartgis an ineffective advocate for the non-mercantile interests of the northern Valley, as his new journal now attempted to be, as evinced by Bartgis's focus on buttressing those of the Germanic minority in the area. So by March 1790, Bartgis faced competition for English-language readers in Frederick County at the same time that he was publishing a weekly for Augusta County readers with Bowen, with whom he also contended for advertising revenue in Winchester. This amalgam of conflicting imperatives evidently led first to the demise of his German-language paper, most likely upon Willis's departure, and then the end of the *Staunton Gazette*, probably shortly after Willis's new paper appeared. Definitive dates for the closures, however, are uncertain given the want of surviving issues.

It would be three years before another weekly was issued in Staunton. But that successor had the benefit of being a local production with local backers, unlike the Bartgis & Bowen weekly, and so survived for more than a decade.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-026867; Brigham II: 1155; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Wust, "Bartgis' Newspapers in Virginia" and "Matthias Bartgis"; Dolmetsch, *German Press of Valley*; Morton, *Winchester*; and notices in the *Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* (1786-1790).