

STAUNTON 02: Staunton Gazette

- 01: The Staunton Spy (1793-1795)
 - 02: The Virginia Gazette (1795-1796)
 - 03: The Staunton Gazette (1796-1797)
 - 04: The Virginia Gazette and Staunton Weekly Advertiser (1797-1798)
 - 05: The Phenix (1798-1804)
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The second newspaper issued in Staunton was actually printed there, unlike its predecessor, which had been produced in Winchester. Its decade-long survival was tied to the success of the office in which it was printed. Accordingly, this weekly advertiser's demise resulted from the appearance of new press offices nearby, as much as from the publication of competing journals by those presses, which drew business away from this Staunton concern.

In the decade after the Revolutionary War ended, the impetus for starting newspapers in Virginia came from demand for advertising outlets among merchants and professionals in that particular location. In 1790, the publishers of the two mercantile weeklies then issued in Winchester formed a cooperative venture that was designed to extend the reach of their advertisers into the central Valley from their northern base. But that journal – *The Staunton Gazette or Weekly Western Star* – survived for just three months, brought down by a lack of support from Augusta County merchants and journalistic rivalry in Winchester itself.

By the winter of 1792-93, though, community leaders in Staunton had come to realize that a continued dependence on Winchester newspapers kept their market-town in the shadow of that northern Valley entrepôt, so limiting the town's potential growth; a local journal that could be used to promote Staunton's merchants and professionals was required to secure the town's future prosperity. Accordingly, a small group of anonymous financiers induced journeyman printer William Throckmorton (415) to relocate to Staunton to conduct such a paper for them, as well as a job-press that could facilitate the town's commerce. It seems that Throckmorton came originally from the Winchester area, was trained as a printer in Richmond, and worked as a journeyman in Alexandria, before moving to Staunton to take up this opportunity at trade independence. These conjoined interests meant that the firm of Throckmorton & Company issued the first number of *The Staunton Spy* in February 1793.

The *Spy* evidently became a profitable enterprise in fairly short order, as Throckmorton was able to acquire his unnamed partners' shares over the following year. The first acquisition came in October 1793 when his multiple "& Company" associates were reduced to a single partner named Chapman (087); he might have been a Revolutionary War veteran named Jacob C. Chapman (1755-1845), who was then an influential Augusta County merchant and later a leader of local Federalists; that supposition is buttressed by the fact that the weekly was, from its start, an advocate for that partisan outlook, establishing the precedent that the town's principal paper would be the voice of "Old Federal Augusta." Then in February 1795, at the end of its second volume, Throckmorton was able to purchase Chapman's interest in the paper and continue its publication, apparently without backers. With this

second transition, Throckmorton retitled his weekly *The Virginia Gazette*, thereby asserting a claim to the legitimate authority of its content, as did many other Virginia newspapers of that era.

Despite this apparent success, Throckmorton sold his business before the end of its third volume and left Staunton; the buyer was Robert Douthat (147), another well-to-do Augusta County merchant. The reasons for the sale are unknown, but the fact that Douthat quickly brought in a bilingual German printer – John Wise (455), also called Johann Weiss – to print the *Gazette* for him suggests either that a major financial crisis resulting from the earlier change or a dispute with his mercantile patrons had compelled the sale. That sale evidently came in January 1796, as the earliest surviving number of the journal as printed by "John Wise for Robert Douthat" indicates that their proprietorship began on January 22, 1796.

Douthat proved to be a transitional figure in the paper's life, helping to sustain Wise until he could conduct the journal on his own. Wise had been trained in the Frederick, Maryland, office of Matthias Bartgis (024), one of the proprietors of the short-lived *Staunton Gazette* in 1790; it seems that Bartgis recommended Wise to Douthat when news of Throckmorton's imminent departure became known. Wise took control of the printing office from the start, while Douthat retained an interest in the *Gazette* until at least December 1796; at that time, Wise brought in a new partner named Adams (001) to assist in acquiring Douthat's interest; Wise would then gain full control of the paper in April 1797 by purchasing Adams' minority share then. Again, who Adams was is uncertain, given that his forename was never reported in print; it is possible that he was William Adams, an Irish "visitor" from Belfast attending meetings of Staunton's Masonic Lodge in early 1797, where Wise and Douthat were leading figures; if so, then it is also likely that he was merely a transient presence in town.

By purchasing Adams's interest in the *Gazette*, Wise became sole proprietor of the paper and would remain so until August 1803. When Adams joined him, the publisher had started down the path to giving the journal a recognizable geographic identity by renaming it the *Staunton Gazette*; on Adams's departure, he again recast its title as *The Virginia Gazette and Staunton Weekly Advertiser*; the changes represent a recognition among most Virginia journalists that identifying their paper with its locale was more important than was making a contested claim to the validity of its content in this era of violently-partisan journalism.

Yet the decline in Atlantic trade that developed over the year after Adams left, a result of the Quasi-War with France, brought economic hardship to the Valley; Wise felt its effects in his patrons' inability to pay for his services, meaning that he could not pay his suppliers and creditors either. Remarkably, his business journals have survived into the present day – now in the special collections of the University of Virginia – and present a considerable record of bartering in this period, particularly for leather, mostly cattle hides, which could be used by bookbinders; he traded them with his distant suppliers in lieu of cash payments for ink, paper, type, and unbound books. Similarly, Wise took flour on account, becoming a trader in that desirable commodity in order to draw cash into his office from distant buyers.

Despite such practices, Wise struggled, and was forced to suspend publication of his weekly in order to reorganize his business in the summer of 1798. The suspension was a common tactic used by publishers under pressure financially, to close a struggling paper and start

another in its place, thereby separating the two publications into distinct business entities that were customers of a single printing office. Some authorities report the succeeding paper as a new publication, but Wise's business records indicate that the accounts from the first journal were continued under the second, clearly connecting the two publications.

Wise's hiatus lasted about two months, ending on September 5, 1798, with the appearance of a restyled *The Phenix*, overtly embracing the metaphor of being a new entity rising out of the ashes of the old. Wise's efforts were obviously successful, as the *Phenix* continued in his hands for the next five years, interrupted only by shortages of paper and not of funds. Yet the scarcity of surviving issues of his reordered weekly – just seven in all – also suggests that he reduced the weekly number of his print-runs in order to lower costs; it also appears that he shrank the weekly's size from a royal sheet to a crown one (from 20" to 16" in length). Both changes would have helped to lower his paper's influence just as partisan competitors emerged in both Staunton and nearby Lexington. But more importantly for Wise himself, the reorganization gave him the wherewithal to enter into business as a mail contractor, an ancillary activity that eventually superseded his publishing venture. In 1799, he acquired the contract for carrying the mails from Staunton to Lewisburg in Greenbrier County, and over the ensuing decade, that route became the main one over the Alleghenies that fed into the mail routes south of the Ohio River into Kentucky. Now holding such a vital and profitable commission, Wise decided to quit journalism in the summer of 1803.

In August 1803, Wise took Ira Woodruff (458) into partnership in his weekly advertiser; like Wise, Woodruff seems to have trained in Maryland, but in Baltimore rather than Frederick; he may have already been working for Wise when the publisher sold him a half-interest in the *Phenix*; the first number issued by the partnership was apparently that for August 24, 1803. Then sometime in October, as seen in Wise's business journal, Woodruff acquired the newspaper in its entirety, including the press office. Yet Woodruff remained owner of *The Phenix* for just one year, as he experienced financial problems within months, apparently repeating Throckmorton's experience as sole owner in 1795-96. The latest surviving number of his *Phenix* is the one issued on September 5, 1804; subsequently, he ceased publication of the paper, probably in October at the end of his first and only volume/year, leaving the largest Shenandoah Valley town south of Winchester without a mercantile advertiser.

That void made Woodruff's subscriber list and office salable commodities; so in December 1804, he sold both to William G. Lyford (272), a New England Federalist who had worked in Lexington publishing the *Virginia Telegraphe* with Samuel Walkup (426); that alliance ended about the same time that Woodruff ceased publishing the *Phenix*, so making Staunton the earliest and nearest relocation option for Lyford. Thus, he began publishing his new *Candid Review and Staunton Weekly Register* on January 4, 1805, about a month after acquiring the residue of the Throckmorton/Wise/Woodruff operation; the *Candid Review* was a journal with an avowedly Federalist outlook, one befitting "Old Federal Augusta." This successor to the *Phenix* was a more stable journal than its predecessor, and so one that continued in various guises until the First World War.

Sources: LCCN nos. 83-026157, 88-061221, 98-068067, & 85-026866; Brigham II: 1156-1158; Waddell, *Annals of Augusta County*; Brown, *Freemasonry*; Chalkley, *Chronicles*; Wise, "Business Ledger, 1796-1802" (UVA).