

STAUNTON 03: Political Mirror

01: Political Mirror, or The Scourge of Aristocracy (1800)

02: Political Mirror (1800-1802)

The first overtly partisan newspaper published in Staunton was the third to be issued there. It was a paper introduced as part of a broader periodical initiative in the state, conducted in support of the presidential campaign of Thomas Jefferson and other Republican candidates in the elections of 1800. That initial purpose, however, made the journal an unsustainable venture in its deeply Federalist setting, and so expired after less than three years in print.

The mercantile nature of American newspapers in the years after the Revolution meant that in the mid-1790s they largely became Federalist organs, journals reflecting the interests and perspectives of the merchants advertising in them. That prevalence was manifest during the debates over the Jay Treaty in 1795 and the presidential election of 1796; most of those papers then reported vast support for the Federalist side in those contests, when sizeable numbers of Americans opposed both the treaty and its champion, John Adams. As a result, Republicans across the country began setting up partisan papers intended to counter such one-sided reporting; that activity led, in turn, to the Federalist-controlled Congress passing the Alien & Sedition Acts in 1798 in an overt attempt to suppress the agitated criticisms of Adams and his administration published in those new journals.

In Virginia, an effort emerged in 1799 to build a network of such Republican newspapers in the state to counter the influence of the long-established Federalist journals in Alexandria, Fredericksburg, Richmond, Petersburg, Winchester, and Staunton. Guided by the political circle around the incumbent vice-president, Thomas Jefferson, the effort focused initially on the forthcoming presidential contest between Adams and Jefferson. That group persuaded James Lyon (274), the twenty-three year-old son of Vermont congressman Matthew Lyon, to move to Richmond to manage the effort; the son was then in danger of being prosecuted under the Alien & Sedition Acts for issuing anti-administration materials from his father's Fair Haven press, including the campaign pamphlet that landed the congressman in jail for "seditious libel" in 1798. In due course, Lyon edited a nationally-circulated magazine and three local weekly newspapers in Virginia, all published in conjunction with a printer who was the resident proprietor for that periodical, all in support of Jefferson's campaign.

The *Political Mirror or The Scourge of Aristocracy* was the partisan sheet that Lyon published in Staunton. He dispatched John McArthur (285), his sixteen-year-old maternal cousin, to Augusta County to conduct the new office that would produce the weekly; McArthur was also a "fugitive from justice" in Vermont, after having girdled the trees in an orchard owned by the Federalist judge who had imprisoned his uncle. Lyon also engaged Richmond printer John Courtney Jr. (109), the twenty-three-year-old son of the revered pastor of the capital's Baptist Church, as McArthur's partner in the printing office.

The manifest combination of these Vermont "Jacobins" with the non-conforming Baptists of Virginia brought this project grief before the *Political Mirror* was ever issued. According to a

report carried in the *Examiner* (then Virginia's journal-of-record, published by public printer Meriwether Jones (242), who was also a partner in Lyon's Richmond newspaper), Augusta County's Federalists moved to prevent its publication. After being "assailed with great fury by a stupid Aristocratical printer" – meaning John Wise (455), publisher of *The Phenix*, the Federalist mercantile advertiser there – an attempt was made to suppress the paper:

"A number of justices of the peace, and others met, and cited Mr. Courtney to appear before them, under authority of the Sedition Act. — He refused to comply, as they had no jurisdiction under that statute. They next threatened to burn the office; but they desisted on account of the widow's house, which was adjoining to it. — This was the state of the business when the last accounts were received from Staunton."

Such violent mob action was not unknown to Jones, as just the summer before his *Examiner* office was similarly threatened and survived only by the intervention of a volunteer militia unit dominated by Republicans; so it seems that a like assault on the new Jeffersonian press in "Old Federal Augusta" was more than a paranoid fiction.

Despite such local opposition, the *Political Mirror* issued its first number about January 28, 1800, "printed by M'Arthur & Courtney" for "James Lyon & Co." The paper's masthead bore an ornament portraying the head of Lady Liberty in profile with the subtitle "or The Scourge of Aristocracy" in a banner that wrapped around her image; beneath that ornamented title was the emphatic motto "Man knows no master, save creating Heaven, or such as choice and common good ordain," reflecting Republicans' opposition to Federalists' authoritarian policies, such as the Alien & Sedition Acts.

Still, little can be said about the journal's content with any certainty, as only one number of the paper has survived from its first sixteen months in print, and that number (June 3, 1800) is comprised entirely of reprinted articles, except for its advertisements. The use of material from other Republican newspapers seemingly points to the fact that Lyon's interest in the publishing initiative that brought him south was waning then, and his original contributions were in decline. Later that year, he withdrew from all of his jointly-published journals in the state, after relocating the one that he owned outright to the District of Columbia in July.

As the next surviving number of the *Mirror* is the May 5, 1801 issue, wherein McArthur is reported as its sole proprietor, the date when the kinsmen parted company is uncertain. It may have been shortly after that preceding survivor issued, as Courtney returned to work in Richmond soon after marrying there in May 1800. But that separation most likely came late in January 1801, at the end of the paper's first volume, as that May 1801 issue indicates that the second volume began April 14th, twelve weeks after a continuous run should have started a second volume on January 27th. So it appears that publication was suspended for twelve weeks at that time, probably to allow McArthur to reorder the business as his own, rather than as one contracted to produce his cousin's journal.

What is clear is that McArthur was persuaded to continue the *Mirror* by being granted one of the three licenses given Virginia newspapers to publish the laws enacted by Congress at the paper's customary advertising rates. In April 1801, Staunton lawyer John Monroe (1749-1837), a kinsman of then Governor James Monroe and head of Augusta County's Republican Committee, was appointed U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Virginia; he promptly

recommended McArthur for the license allotted for a paper in the state's western counties; the printer was granted such by Secretary of State James Madison shortly thereafter. That profitable assignment apparently convinced McArthur to moderate somewhat his paper's partisan identity, as that May 1801 issue also carries a modified title ornament in which the earlier subtitle "or The Scourge of Aristocracy" has been removed. The remaining surviving issues of the paper all employ that altered ornament.

However, that coveted contract failed to sustain the *Political Mirror* beyond the 1st session of the 7th Congress; after he had completed publication of that session's laws, McArthur wrote to Madison on October 6, 1802, asking for a prompt payment of monies due him in order to settle his debts:

"My situation is such as to require every dollar that I can get hold of; in short, it has compelled me to give up the publication of my paper, (though it would have been continued until this time, had I not been disappointed in the receipt of paper). I intend leaving Staunton as soon as my affairs can be arranged, therefore I should be extremely obliged to you if you will forward ... the amount for publishing the laws."

Hence, it appears that the *Political Mirror* ceased publication sometime in September 1802, a full year after the last surviving number of the paper known today was issued. It was not the last Republican paper published in Staunton, however, but its successors suffered from similar financial problems in challenging the established mercantile advertiser that served "Old Federal Augusta."

Sources: LCCN no. 83-026153; Brigham II: 1156; Hubbard on Richmond; Smith & Rann, *History of Rutland County, Vermont*; *Examiner* commentary reprinted in [Boston] *Constitutional Telegraphe* March 8, 1800; Papers of Department of Secretary of State (National Archives RG 59.2); Papers of Thomas Jefferson & of James Madison, online at *archives.gov*; and [Staunton] *Political Mirror* (1800-1801).