

## STAUNTON 05: Staunton Eagle

01a: Staunton Eagle (1807-1811)

01b: Der Deutsche Virginier Adler (1808-1809)

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The most successful Republican newspaper published in Staunton before 1820 was the fifth journal issued there. That success was built, in part, on the efforts of its bilingual founder to bridge the cultural divide between English- and German-speakers in the central Valley area. Yet, this weekly did not survive the departure of its proprietor when he moved west in early 1811 to take up a similar bilingual business in Ohio.

The *Staunton Eagle* was the first journalistic venture conducted by Jacob D. Dietrich (135). He was a Philadelphia-trained bookbinder and bookseller who conducted dry-goods stores in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, and Hagerstown, Maryland, in the decade before he came to Staunton; in those locales, he built businesses incorporating his trade skills as a sideline, leading to arrangements with two presses in Hagerstown – that of the well-known German-language publisher Johan Gruber and of English-language printer John P. Thompson – to distribute imprints that both he and they published to the widely-dispersed communities along the Great Wagon Road to the south; after opening a new branch store in Winchester in 1804 to facilitate that work, Dietrich acquired his own press so as to increase the number of titles available through his network, reaching further south into Virginia in the process. But in parting with Gruber and Thompson, he faced dogged competition from his former collaborators (as well as from Mathias Bartgis (024) in nearby Frederick, among others) that tested his plan, causing him to reassess his choice of Hagerstown as a base for his business.

### Origins

In the winter of 1806-07, Dietrich was apparently approached by some of his patrons in the central Valley area about relocating his business to Staunton. One group, from the region's German-speaking communities, wanted a commercial alternative to the new and strictly Pietist press of the Henkel family in New Market; those patrons had lost access to such a German-language press when John Wise (455), born as Johann Weiss, retired from the print trade in August 1803, turning his once bilingual office to an English-language one; another group wanted a Republican newspaper in the area to counteract the influence of the town's existing Federalist journal, the *Candid Review and Staunton Weekly Register* of William G. Lyford (272). While he had never published a paper previously, Dietrich clearly saw the offer as a potentially profitable opportunity; Lyford's *Review* was foundering financially then, as a result of his patrons' unpaid debts, and Dietrich's new friends offered to back publication of his new journal in both English and German editions. So encouraged, Dietrich relocated his successful bookstore and job-press to Staunton in the late spring of 1807, and then began publication of his new English-language *Staunton Eagle* on July 24th; the German-language edition would issue the following January.

At the outset, Dietrich struck a pose that was both humble and forthright. After noting that most of the introductory addresses offered by editors at the start of new "periodical prints"

were "extravagancies ... pretending to more than any editor could reasonably be expected to perform," Dietrich suggested that the community would determine his weekly's course:

"The establishment of this paper, upon principles of public utility, having been attended with great expense, the editor cannot help indulging the idea, that, as it will be his constant endeavor to render it useful, instructive and interesting, it will merit the attention and encouragement of a generous public, whose patronage, tho' ardently solicited, he wishes not to be continued to him a moment longer than he shall deserve it."

Still, he made it clear that his *Eagle* was a journal that supported the policies and ideals of the Republican party, even as he eschewed the "unwarrantable lengths [of] virulence of party spirit" as were then expressed by most journalists of his day.

"Born under a republican form of government, the editor professes himself to be a republican, in the fullest extent of that word. — A friend to the Constitution of his country — what ever weight his paper may have in the community, shall be steadily exercised in support of that constitution, in all its original strength and beauty."

Dietrich adopted a rather long and wordy motto for his paper, though apparently knowing that its recognized source would reinforce his journal's Republican reputation, as well as his dedication to protecting the individual rights guaranteed by the Constitution:

"Here shall the Press the People's rights maintain,  
Unawed by influence and unbribed by gain;  
Here Patriot Truth her glorious Precepts draw,  
Pledged to Religion, Liberty, and Law."

His chosen text was an appropriation of that used by the *Salem Register* in Massachusetts, attributed to future Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story (1779-1845), a contributor to that paper while he practiced law there; that journal was the only Jeffersonian journal issued in Essex County, and its founder was prosecuted for libel in 1805 at the behest of U.S. Senator Timothy Pickering, the Salem resident who had served as Secretary of State under John Adams, which led to that journalist's death while incarcerated. That event was undoubtedly remembered by many Americans at that time, as were similar outcomes in cases Pickering had pursued under the Alien & Sedition Acts while serving in Adams's administration. Thus Dietrich's use of that specific verse as his motto was a clear jab at Federalists generally, and Pickering specifically, making his *Staunton Eagle* a target for "federal prints" everywhere.

The move south had an immediate impact, as Lyford was forced to close his *Review* shortly after Dietrich started his *Eagle*. Lyford would reorganize and relaunch his Federalist weekly as the *Staunton Political Censor* in May 1808. But by then, he was faced by two competitors, as Dietrich had commenced publishing his promised German-language paper, *Der Deutsche Virginier Adler*, (*The German Virginia Eagle*), in January 1808.

Nevertheless, Lyford's *Political Censor* survived, largely because his paper was supported by the overwhelmingly-Federalist merchant class of Augusta County; consequently, Dietrich's *Eagle* carried significantly less advertising than did its competitor, and suffered financially from that disparity. At the end of his paper's first volume, in the summer of 1808, Dietrich

published a unique notice, asking that his patrons to settle their accounts:

"We are at a momentous crisis at present, and in proportion as affairs become serious and important, exertions will be made to inform the public mind. But notwithstanding these flattering prospects of the *Eagle*, strange to tell! The state of its Treasury is very low indeed — to be candid; there is but not a Dollar in it this very day, owing to the delinquency of others, it has been lately exhausted to purchase materials for carrying on the war during the present year such as Paper, Ink, Balls, Pelts, Cases, Galleies, Mallets, Shooting-sticks and sheep-feet, with a long list of et-ceteras; and so hard run has the Secretary of the Treasury been, that he was forced to adopt the system of Loans, and it is with reluctance we ever wish to have cause to recur to such ruinous measures."

The novelty of this appeal led to its being reprinted in many Republican newspapers in the country. But for Dietrich, publishing that notice appears to have generated the result that he desired, as the *Eagle* continued uninterrupted through all of 1809.

### **Challenges**

Yet the *Deutsche Virginier Adler* was not so fortunate. Ethnic Germans in the central Valley region were more willing to shed their native tongue than were those in the northern Valley or Pennsylvania, and so chose to read one of Staunton's two English journals rather than the *Adler*, if they read a newspaper at all. As a result, Dietrich's German weekly drained off the hard-earned profits of his English paper for much of its life, endangering the survival of both journals. So in late 1809, Dietrich reluctantly closed the *Adler*. Part of that decision was probably related to the difficulty in his retaining journeymen who spoke and read German; within three months of starting publication of the *Adler*, Dietrich can be seen advertising in distant newspapers for compositors who could work in that language, suggesting that he was unable to draw tradesmen from the German presses in Maryland and Pennsylvania, possibly because of animosities with Gruber and Bartgis that lingered after he emerged as a competitor after 1804. Indeed, the numbering of the paper's only surviving issue points to repeated suspensions in the *Adler's* publication over the course of its lifetime.

Still, other reasons may have contributed to the demise of the *Adler*. In the fall of 1809, Dietrich was given a license to publish the laws enacted by Congress in the *Staunton Eagle*; this was a substantial subsidy for any newspaper then, with three journals being designated in each state to reprint the "slip laws" produced by the government printer in Washington in that paper at its standing advertising rate; yet the task also was an obligation that limited advertising and editorial content in the paper, and dominated the work in each designated office while Congress was in session; Dietrich held this coveted license for both sessions of the Eleventh Congress (November 1809 to May 1811), and so may have found that the work required was incompatible with the demands of two weekly papers.

Meanwhile, the paper mill on nearby Mossy Creek went bankrupt in early 1810, purportedly because Lyford had not paid anything on his account there since coming to Staunton in 1805. With three weeklies depending on its production in 1809, and the mill's capacity shrinking as its funds withered, it may have made sense to Dietrich to reduce the quantity

of paper that he required each week in order to sustain his supplier. Still, that bankruptcy obliged Dietrich to suspend publication of his *Eagle* for much of the first half of 1810 (from about February 14 to June 20), producing just an occasional advertising sheet over that time and then three weekly issues in April prior to the adjournment of Congress, so fulfilling his responsibilities there. Subsequently, Dietrich's paper supply was not a concern, showing that he secured a more reliable source in the interim; at the same time, Lyford's continued indebtedness compelled him to sell his weekly, now called the *Republican Farmer*, to Isaac Collett (100) and leave Staunton forever.

Still, Dietrich faced other challenges in keeping his *Staunton Eagle* alive. Most problematic, it seems, were efforts made by local Federalists in the spring of 1809 to either suppress his paper legally or intimidate him into silence bodily. In May, he published a series of stories detailing how supporters of Jacob Swoope, a Staunton merchant just elected to Congress as a Federalist, had either bought the votes of Augusta freeholders or paid them not to vote at all. The testimony of one such voter, Waynesboro blacksmith Peter Hanger, resulted in the indictment of the Rev. John McCue "for a violation of the law in bribing a freeholder to vote the federal ticket," meaning Swoope. Within an hour of that report being published in the *Eagle*, the minister's son, Dr. William McCue, appeared in Dietrich's office – then housed in his residence – demanding to know whether he had written the report; the author, one R. R. Maxwell, was present and admitted his role, leading the physician to assault him; the two fell to the floor in a scuffle, before being separated by others, with McCue leaving the scene in haste; moments later, Moses McCue, his uncle and then an Augusta County deputy sheriff, entered the office with handful of associates, telling Maxwell that his nephew was within his rights in assaulting him, telling this "friendless stranger" he "should have learned *Virginia play*" before making such libels. He then turned his attention to Dietrich, saying,

"...he should have consulted him previous to publishing the article—declared his intention to whip him—[and] wished to ascertain the amount of damages, as he would pay the money and flog him afterwards. In this way Mosey [i.e. Moses] or rather, *Captain Bobadill* ["the boastful, cowardly soldier in Ben Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour*" (*Oxford Companion to English Literature*)], with four or five recruits, kept possession of the printing-office nearly an hour, when the Captain, holding up his head and looking to the right, made a few strides across the floor a-la-militaire, and walked out. Thus terminated this base, cowardly and pre-concerted attack."

Dietrich reacted to this unlawful affront to his person and journal by having McCue arrested and brought before the mayor, Chapman Johnson (1779-1849), himself a Republican. When told that he would have to post bond in the matter, a defiant McCue,

"refused ... to give security, proposed getting a gentleman of the bar to interpret this intricate point, i.e. whether McCue [,] who had entered the house of the Editor and threatened him with violence [,] became obnoxious to the law? However difficult it might have been for the comprehensive understanding of Mosey to reconcile this knotty point, our patriotic Mayor did not hesitate — he informed the Deputy that security must be given, or he must go to prison; finding that the Mayor was neither to be persuaded nor intimidated, Mosey *the deputy* and *his deputies* gave security."

Lyford, of course, promptly came to the defense of the McCues, claiming that the event that led to the minister's indictment was just a bet, not a bribe, and so the prosecution was thus a Republican ploy to taint Swoope's election; not surprisingly, Federalist journals elsewhere repeated that explanation in their pages, so muddying the waters on that score. As it seems that court records for both the bribery and invasion charges do not survive, the outcome of this affair is uncertain; but local sentiment concerning the behavior of these supposedly "honorable" men no doubt helped to defeat Swoope in the next Congressional election.

Dietrich was unawed by such attempts to quiet his criticisms of the Federalists. Yet his most convenient target was often Lyford himself. Emblematic of such remarks was the account of a muster of the town's militia that he published shortly after Swoope's election; it appears that Lyford had a drinking problem on top of his financial ones, as he was found passed out in a muddy wood after having imbibed heavily with his compatriots; he was carried away to a nearby house, where it took two days for him to recover and return to his printing office. Dietrich noted this ill-timed event only after Lyford had taken exception to a short report on that muster day that appeared in the *Eagle*; so Dietrich offered a "more detailed account of his military maneuvers" the following week in an article that bestowed the title of "Cock Robin" on Lyford.

## **Departures**

Following Lyford's departure from Staunton in about May 1810, Dietrich was faced with a more financially-stable competitor in Isaac Collett. He came to Augusta County from the *Winchester Gazette* office of Federalist publishers Richard Bowen (045) and William Heiskell (211); when Heiskell acquired that office from Bowen's estate in 1809, it became plain that Collett would not soon rise to being an independent tradesman there, and he began looking to other locales for such an opportunity; with relatives of the Winchester Heiskells settled in Augusta, there was a suitable group of potential backers there who could assist Collett in his quest; so it appears that some of Staunton's Federalists, including the merchant-brothers Peter and John Heiskell, enabled the sale of the *Republican Farmer* from Lyford to Collett in order to set their troubled mercantile advertiser on a more sound financial footing. The change established a paper that proved a continuing challenge to Dietrich's *Eagle*, and so it survived, through several iterations, until the First World War.

At the same time, there was a considerable group of settlers in southeastern Ohio who had relocated from Augusta County; they would soon press Dietrich to join them. In May 1810, they helped support the founding of the *Ohio Eagle* in the Fairfield County seat of Lancaster. That town is situated on what was known as Zane's Trace, halfway between Zanesville, then the state's largest interior market-town, and Chillicothe, then Ohio's state capital; with the new National Road to the west being routed through Zanesville, those towns sited along Zane's Trace were destined (or so it seemed) to become important trade centers on that older route that connected the new road with the Ohio River – just as Staunton was on the Great Wagon Road in the Valley. Hence, a local advertising sheet was considered essential to Lancaster's commercial future; yet, the *Ohio Eagle* struggled through its first year in print, seemingly the result of inept management and the absence of a German-language edition that could reach the dominant-ethnic population of that area. Nineteenth-century histories

of Fairfield County report that Dietrich was approached in the winter of 1810-11 by his old Virginia friends about coming to Lancaster to save their *Ohio Eagle*, and perhaps offer a German-language edition as he had before in Staunton.

Dietrich responded to the suggestion in a typically entrepreneurial way; rather than seeing the situation as offering a choice between Staunton and Lancaster, he set out to add their *Ohio Eagle* to his existing Virginia business. Recognizing that his presence in Ohio was vital in making that new venture work, Dietrich began planning for managing his Staunton office *in absentia*. On March 5, 1811, he started advertising in the *National Intelligencer* for:

"A Journeyman Printer ... capable and willing to work at Case and Press, one who is a good workman, sober and industrious, may have generous wages and a constant berth. ... None need apply but as such as mat answer the above description."

As we now know that Dietrich was about to move to Ohio, this announcement – published during an ongoing session of Congress, and so intended to reach the many tradesmen then in the city – reveals that he had hoped to retain ownership of the *Staunton Eagle* while he personally conducted the *Ohio Eagle*, thereby creating a fiscal symbiosis between the two papers, one stable and one troubled. However, the response he received from this seven-week-long campaign evidently did not match his hopes. Sometime before April 13, 1811, Dietrich abandoned this plan and moved his entire office to Lancaster. Before leaving town, though, it appears that he sold his subscription list to James Williamson (448), a merchant and land-speculator then engaged in long-drawn-out litigation with the Heiskell brothers; Williamson immediately bought the well-worn press that Lyford had left behind in the hands of his brother-in-law, George Mitchell, and set out to find a tradesman to operate it for him. So on that April day, Williamson presented a new Republican journal to readers in the central Valley called the *Spirit of the Press*. That appearance provides an effective "not after" end date for the *Staunton Eagle*, even as the latest surviving number of the paper now known is that issued on October 27, 1810, some six months before.

The subsequent history of Republican journalism in Staunton is one of short-lived, ill-fated newspapers, including Williamson's *Spirit of the Press*. In contrast, Dietrich went on to a long career as a journalist, bookseller, postmaster, jurist, and politician in Lancaster before dying there in late 1838.

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Sources: LCCN nos. 84-024622 & 85-026854; Brigham II: 1154; Waddell, *Annals of Augusta County*; Dolmetsch, *German Press of Shenandoah Valley*; Cazden, *German Booktrade in America*; Scott, *Fairfield County, Ohio*; notices in *Staunton Eagle* (1807-10), *Winchester Gazette* (1808-11) and *National Intelligencer* (1811).