

STAUNTON 07: Spirit of the Press

01: The Spirit of the Press (1811)

The single extant copy of the seventh newspaper issued in Staunton before 1820 leaves this journal an enigmatic entity. However, records from the Augusta County Chancery Court and the city's Hustings Court evince a convoluted story that ties the paper to both its immediate predecessor and successor, each of which survived longer than did this weekly.

The Spirit of the Press was published by one James Williamson (448) beginning about April 13, 1811. The only number known extant is that issued on May 18, 1811, which presents several of the laws recently passed by Congress, published "by authority," meaning that his paper had been granted a license to do so by the U.S. Secretary of State, James Monroe.

Before April 1811, that license had been granted to Jacob D. Dietrich (135), publisher of the *Staunton Eagle*; but earlier that spring, Dietrich moved to Lancaster, Ohio, to resurrect the dying *Ohio Eagle* there. As Congress was then still in session, it seems Dietrich transferred his license to Williamson as he left Staunton, so assuring that the laws of that session would be fully publicized in the western counties of Virginia as that responsibility required. Hence, it also appears that Dietrich sold his subscriber list to Williamson before closing his *Staunton Eagle*, and that his existing supporters found the financial subsidy embodied in Dietrich's license sufficient to instill some confidence in the viability of Williamson's succeeding paper, at least in the short term.

The carry-over between the two journals is also evinced by the fact that each was the sole Republican newspaper in "Old Federal Augusta" County during its lifetime. Each competed with the established *Republican Farmer* of Isaac Collett (100), and so each depended heavily on that license for advertising revenues that Federalist merchants in the area denied them. Consequently, the survival of a single issue of Williamson's *Spirit of the Press* has been seen as evidence for a short-lived weekly that expired when that session of Congress adjourned shortly thereafter.

Legal records, however, paint a more complex portrait of the rise and fall of Williamson's brief journalistic career. By 1811, Williamson had already compiled a substantial history of litigation in the city and county courts over his real-estate speculations in Staunton in just three years there; he evidently engaged in such speculative activity as an accessory to his business as clothing retailer, which frequently put him at odds with Staunton merchant John Heiskell, a leading Federalist there, who later served as a county court justice, and who was married to a sister of Williamson's wife. Thus, Williamson was an outsider with Republican proclivities in a place that favored the ventures of local Federalists over such interlopers.

When Dietrich made it known in the winter of 1810-11 that he planned to relocate to Ohio, Williamson resolved to offer a Republican paper capable of countering the influence of the dominant Federalist weekly there, just as Dietrich's *Staunton Eagle* had done during its four-year run. Though he easily acquired Dietrich's subscriber list and federal license, Williamson still lacked the skills and tools needed to produce a newspaper, especially as Dietrich took

his bilingual press office with him. Yet the ill-fortune of another printer made an alternative set of tools available to him. Collett had acquired the *Republican Farmer* from its founder, William G. Lyford (272) a year earlier when Lyford's fragile business collapsed; the native New-Englander left Staunton shortly thereafter, leaving his press office behind as security for debts that he still owed in the area; by October 1810, those obligations had been retired at last, and Lyford's brother-in-law, George Mitchell, advertised the office for sale:

"It consists of a Press, two different Founts of Small Pica, a Fount of English, and a Fount of French Cannon, with Cases, Chases, &c. &c. sufficient to publish a weekly newspaper. It will be sold upon reasonable term and long credit given, on purchaser giving bond with approved security."

Mitchell was able to complete the sale of Lyford's press in early February 1811 by taking a promissory note from Williamson for \$200, one secured by local Republican leaders John McDowell and Morgan Morris. It may have been that Williamson intended at that time to simply use the press to continue the publication of the *Staunton Eagle*, as Dietrich was soon advertising for the services of a reliable journeyman in the *National Intelligencer*; but when such a tradesman did not present himself in Staunton, Dietrich closed his weekly and moved on to Ohio.

Williamson now procured trained help to produce an entirely new journal – *The Spirit of the Press* – to replace Dietrich's deceased one. That tradesman was Charles B. Rhoades (353). On April 29, 1811, Rhoades signed a contract with Williamson,

"...for the term of twelve months as a printer, in conducting a news-paper ... called "The Spirit of the Press"—for this service [Williamson provided] ... boarding, washing and lodging during the continuance of the contract, and to pay him wages at the rate of four dollars and fifty cents per week payable at the end of each month."

The new weekly they published bore a masthead motto proclaiming that "The Democratic cause we will maintain, unawed by Fear, and unburied by Gain." And in his introductory address, Williamson eschewed the usual grandiose pledges of such declarations, claiming that he had

"...nothing to boast of but an honest desire to promote the true interests of his country. This he believes will be best done by the detection and exposure of falsehood, and the dissemination of truth and correct principles. He has nothing to promise but a faithful endeavor to discharge this important duty."

Despite this optimistic and confident start, it appears that Rhoades failed to abide by the terms of his contract with Williamson over the ensuing weeks, leading one Federalist paper in Philadelphia to describe the *Spirit of the Press* as "a dirty little 'democratic' paper dish-cloth, eked forth sometimes weekly, sometimes once in a fortnight ..." So to sweeten his deal with Rhoades, Williamson offered an additional dollar per week if the printer would adhere strictly to the contract until it expired in April 1812.

Rhoades, however, walked away from Williamson's employ in November 1811, immediately filing suit against his employer in the Staunton's Hustings Court, claiming that he was due that additional dollar during the course of the year, rather than at the end of the contract as

Williamson asserted, and so had been defrauded by him in the amount of "fifty-four dollars and ninety-two cents." Rhoades carried the day at trial and Williamson was obliged to sign a promissory note for the disputed sum, even as he promptly appealed the judgment to the Superior Court of Appeals.

The effect on the *Spirit of the Press* was that it ceased publication at about the time that Rhoades left its office – November 15, 1811. But it was not the end of the printer's work in Staunton. Once the court had ruled in his favor, Rhoades secured the use of that now idle press – evidently through the offices of Williamson's security, John McDowell and Morgan Morris – and began publishing a new Republican paper called *The People's Friend* starting in September 1812. That newspaper followed the *Spirit* into oblivion in late 1813, most likely because of Rhoades's death.

Such an outcome is inferred from Williamson's continuing litigation. In May 1813, Rhoades sold the unpaid note that Williamson had tendered in conformance to the 1812 judgement against him at a marked discount (\$10); the buyer, one Seth Norton, then attempted to use the note to purchase a carriage body from Williamson, leading to a new suit over whether either man had defrauded the other in that transaction; while Rhoades was the financier at the root of this new dispute, he does not appear in the case record when trial was held on this matter in February 1814, suggesting that he died sometime between the trial date and October 2, 1813, when the last known number of his paper issued. Williamson lost this case as well and was assessed substantial costs. (Interestingly, Williamson had been arrested for non-payment of the note to Rhoades before his encounter with Norton; he was bailed on that score and restricted to a set boundary in Staunton; after filing his appeal, he felt he was no longer bound by the conditions of his bail, and violated the set boundary in his dealings with Norton, and so was ordered jailed, without possible bond, until both the Norton and Rhoades cases were resolved.)

After the Norton case ended, McDowell and Morris sued for the right to sell Williamson's press at auction, after having had to pay Mitchell for Williamson's non-payment of the note he had given to buy Lyford's office three years before. Then, later that year, John Heiskell and his wife filed suit against Williamson seeking to recover monies that they thought due them from the settlement of Williamson's wife's estate, adding insult to injury. It seems that Williamson lost on all counts; McDowell and Morris were allowed the proceeds from the sale of the press in January 1815; meanwhile, Williamson removed to nearby Harrisonburg, effectively fleeing the jurisdiction of the Augusta County Court of which Heiskell was now a member, leaving uncertain the outcome of that subsequent case.

Sources: LCCN nos. 83-026159 & 94-059353; Brigham II: 1157; Waddell, *Annals of Augusta County*; *Williamson v. Norton* (1814-004) and *Heiskell v. Williamson* (1816-050) in Augusta County Chancery Court Records; *McDowell & Morris v. Williamson* in Staunton Hustings Court Records; and notices in the *Staunton Eagle* (1810), and [Philadelphia] *Tickler* (1811), as well as *The Spirit of the Press* (1811).