

STAUNTON 08: People's Friend

01: The People's Friend (1812-1813)

The eighth newspaper issued in Staunton before 1820 was a Republican journal built on the remains of its immediate partisan predecessors. Yet while it survived for more than a year, there was no one willing to continue publishing the paper in this Federalist stronghold after the apparent death of its founder.

As Staunton was the seat of "Old Federal Augusta" County, publication of any Republican journal there was problematic before the Jackson era. Jacob D. Dietrich (135) had been the most successful of those attempting such before 1820, publishing the *Staunton Eagle* there for the four years between 1807 and 1811; however, Dietrich was convinced to relocate to Lancaster, Ohio, in early 1811 to resurrect the dying *Ohio Eagle* there, thus leaving the town without a viable alternative to the *Republican Farmer* of Federalist Isaac Collett (100).

James Williamson (448), a retail merchant and land-speculator in Staunton, attempted to fill that void by offering a new weekly, *The Spirit of the Press*, in April 1811. However, that venture was fraught with problems from the start. He had acquired the assets he needed to conduct the new paper with a series of promissory notes, most importantly one tendered to buy the press once used by William G. Lyford (272) to publish the *Republican Farmer* before he sold that paper to Collett in mid-1810. Lacking the training to use that press properly, Williamson was obliged to hire an experienced journeyman to conduct his new office, one Charles B. Rhoades (353). The two men agreed to a one-year contract in late April 1811, but Rhoades walked away from the project in mid-November, filing suit against Williamson to recover wages he claimed had been withheld by his employer. His departure brought an abrupt end to the life of the *Spirit of the Press*.

In May 1812, Rhoades prevailed in his case against Williamson in Staunton's Hustings Court, forcing the merchant to tender a new promissory note securing the judgement against him. Apparently, Rhoades was then approached by the local Republicans who had pledged their security for the note that Williamson had signed to buy Lyford's press – John McDowell and Morgan Morris – about publishing another Republican weekly in Staunton, as they now had claim on that press as a result of Williamson not redeeming his signed note. After a summer of negotiations and planning, Rhoades issued his *The People's Friend* on September 21, 1812 – ten months after his parting from Williamson.

Little can be said about the content of Rhoades's journal, as just three numbers of his weekly are now known extant, all from 1813. Yet the sheet was clearly a Republican vehicle, given its provocative title, taken from *L'Ami du Peuple*, the Parisian newspaper published by the controversial revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat in 1793. So it is noteworthy that Rhoades's paper survived into its second volume/year, with the number issued on October 2, 1813 being the latest one known today.

However, *The People's Friend* evidently followed the *Spirit of the Press* into oblivion in late 1813, probably because of Rhoades's death. Such an outcome is inferred from Williamson's

continued legal problems. In May 1813, Rhoades sold the unpaid note that Williamson had tendered him in obedience 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 court record when trial was finally held on this matter in February 1814, suggesting that he died sometime between October 2, 1813, when the last known number of his paper issued, and the subsequent trial date. (Williamson lost this case as well and was assessed sizable costs.) Then in January 1815, McDowell and Morris sold the press Rhoades had used in an auction sale that was part of an attempt to recover monies that Williamson owed them. Still, no definitive record of Rhoades's fate has yet been found, and no further numbers of his journal are known to have been issued, leaving this tale incomplete.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-026846; Brigham II: 1155; Waddell, *Annals of Augusta County*; *Williamson v. Norton* (1814-004) in Augusta County Chancery Court Records; and *McDowell & Morris v. Williamson* in Staunton Hustings Court Records.