

## WHEELING 01: Wheeling Repository

01: The Wheeling Repository (1807-1808)

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The first newspaper published in Wheeling was also the first one issued in what is today the northern panhandle of West Virginia, as well as the second produced west of the Allegheny ridge in early Virginia. It was a mercantile advertiser tied to the western Pennsylvania town of Washington, whose traders used Wheeling as an outlet for their products. Hence, the paper expired when trade on the Ohio River withered as a result of the 1807 Embargo.

The initial commercial development of the port towns along the Ohio River in northwestern Virginia was tied to aspirations among inland merchants to their east to shorten the routes providing access to trade on the river, as well as circumventing the growing domination of regional commerce by the town of Pittsburgh. Wheeling was a particularly appealing locale, as the area's existing road system focused on that town as both a port and a point of access to Zane's Trace, the road leading west through Ohio into Kentucky, which would become a part of the new "national road" authorized by federal legislation in March 1806.

*The Wheeling Repository* was the first in a series of papers intended to create a mercantile link between the Ohio River ports and the nearby seat of Washington County, Pennsylvania, also called Washington, thereby exploiting the transportation improvements embodied in that planned road. It was published by one Alexander Armstrong (014), a journeyman-printer from Washington; before his arrival in Wheeling, he had managed the office of the *Western Telegrapher* there, conducting its press for the equal benefit of himself and the family of his late master, John Colerick (099), who had died in 1804. Yet that situation left Armstrong essentially dependent of the Colerick family; consequently, he determined to establish his trade independence in Wheeling, once Congress had approved construction of the National Road, and thereby profit from the town's expected commercial growth, which would require both job-printing and a weekly advertiser.

Armstrong's new weekly made its first appearance on March 5, 1807, almost exactly one year after the road was authorized. He set out to straddle the heated partisan divides that then rent American journalism by offering an "independent" paper, one wherein "selections will occasionally be made of pieces which may recommend themselves by the tendency to entertain the vacant hour, to reform the heart, or instruct the mind." But having sprung from a Federalist press, and by promoting the region's mercantile interests, the *Repository* would soon evince Federalist attributes out of course. Hence in its early days, Armstrong focused on the contradictions arising from the indictment and trial of Aaron Burr, asking why General James Wilkinson, who had revealed Burr's treason, was not also on trial as a co-conspirator, as was widely believed in the Federalist camp. Similarly, his correspondents questioned the scale of appropriations asked by the Jefferson administration for enlarging the American military in the wake of the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair, seeing inconsistencies in arguments of Republicans for those funds when they had opposed lesser amounts for the same purposes during the open conflict of the Quasi-War a decade before.

Still, publishing a weekly journal in a place so distant from the eastern print-trade centers on which he depended for supplies was difficult; one local historian, for example, contends that Armstrong transported "the paper on which [his weekly] was printed on pack horses over the mountains," which was probably the case before the National Road finally reached Wheeling in 1818. But more importantly, currency was scarce in the Ohio River Valley at this time, making payments for subscriptions and advertisements to the *Repository* problematic; this situation was then exacerbated by the embargo on trade with Great Britain and France enacted by Congress in December 1807. A most telling account of the Embargo's effects on Ohio River commerce was a report that Armstrong published in September 1808; therein, he told of the return to Wheeling of a fully-loaded flatboat after its master was unable to sell its cargo of perishable country produce for want of sufficient currency, whether specie or notes, among potential buyers all along the Ohio River south of the port.

This shortage threatened all newspapers that were then published in northwestern Virginia and western Pennsylvania. Armstrong had apparently retained an interest in the *Western Telegraph* in Washington, which was plagued by the same currency constrictions as was his *Wheeling Repository*; in August 1808, a new Federalist weekly appeared there – the *Washington Reporter* – so threatening the financial center that still supported Colerick's family. Armstrong was encouraged to return to Washington to reinvigorate the *Telegraphe* and so save his investment there; to do so, however, required that he close the *Repository*. Given the then-current economic state, favoring Washington over Wheeling was clearly the better choice. Accordingly, the *Wheeling Repository* ceased publication with the number for November 5, 1808, with Armstrong promptly leaving the Virginia port town.

Eventually Armstrong would return to Wheeling, where he conducted the town's first daily paper – the *Wheeling Compiler* – and operated a large paper mill. But those 1830s ventures were ones that were only viable once Wheeling finally emerged from under Washington's shadow and attained the promise that had drawn the printer-publisher there in 1807.

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Sources: LCCN No. 86-092519; Brigham II: 1175; Norona & Shetler 1422; Cranmer, *Wheeling and Ohio County*; Crumrine, *Washington County*; notices in *Washington [PA] Reporter* (1808).