

WHEELING 02: North-Western Gazette

- 01: The Virginia North-Western Gazette (1818-1819)
 - 02: Virginia North-Western Gazette (1819-1824)
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The second journal published in Wheeling was, like its predecessor, a mercantile advertiser designed to promote the water-borne commerce carried on there, as well as the trade in goods travelling the National Road through town. The paper's three-decade-long existence reflected its success in realizing those ends, while its passing foreshadowed the impending collapse of the Whig party, of which the *Gazette* was an early and erudite advocate.

Wheeling's early history is closely tied to the migration of Euroamerican settlers to the Ohio River Valley. The town was founded in 1793 by Ebenezer Zane (1747-1811), on land that he had laid claim to before the Revolution; once the General Assembly recognized the riverside village as a town in 1795, Zane solicited the Congress for a contract to build a road through the adjacent Northwest Territory from Wheeling to Kentucky, so making the Ohio County seat the primary jumping-off point for those colonizing the territory, and making what came to be known as "Zane's Trace" the only major road in Ohio until well after the War of 1812. Consequently, when Congress later authorized construction of a new "national road" west from Cumberland, Maryland, both Wheeling and Zane's Trace became key settings along its prospective path.

Beginnings

That federal legislation in March 1806 induced the relocation of merchants to Wheeling to exploit both the overland and water-borne commerce expected to accompany the road's construction. It also prompted one Alexander Armstrong (014), a journeyman printer from nearby Washington, Pennsylvania, to establish a job-printing office and weekly newspaper there in early 1807 in support of those ventures. However, the contractions of trade and currency attending the Embargo of 1807 convinced Armstrong to return to Washington in November 1808, so leaving Wheeling without a vehicle capable of advertising the goods and services available there until April 1818.

That ensuing paper was *The Virginia North-Western Gazette*, published by Thomas Tonner (416) and Joseph Clingan (095). Its initial appearance corresponded to the actual completion of the National Road between Wheeling and Cumberland, an event anticipated for more than a decade, and one slowed by the disruptions resulting from the war with Great Britain. That event led Tonner, an Irish-born physician who was one of Wheeling's "earliest settlers," to propose publishing a new journal that would advocate for western rights and commerce. It appears that he convinced Clingan, a printer from Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, to come to Wheeling to manage the technical side of his new

venture; it also seems that their arrangement was a simple six-month contract, as later that fall Clingan returned to Pennsylvania.

The quick success of the *North-Western Gazette* shows that Tonner had properly assessed the new paper's setting, recognizing that Wheeling could now support a weekly advertiser, unlike the situation in 1808, and that there was a readership there amenable to his political and economic views. That assessment was clearly tied to the presence of the National Road, news of which dominated the early days of Tonner's paper. Just a month after starting its publication, he launched a campaign using the road's potential to promote the port town:

"The advantages of this road to the nation at large, and to the town of Wheeling in particular, begins now to be acknowledged, even by those who scoffed at the very idea a few months back. They perceived that as soon as this road is finished, a complete change will take place in the carrying of trade between the Atlantic and the *Western Waters*."

Still, Tonner was plagued during the first two years of its publication by shortages of paper; it was a recurring problem for Tonner and his successors until William Lambdin (1784-1854) began a paper mill in the town in 1829. These shortages obliged him to suspend publication three times in those two years, for four weeks in 1818 (October 15 to November 12), eleven weeks in mid-1819 (May 6 to July 29), and then another three weeks that fall. Yet, he was able to continue publishing the paper despite the concurrent economic downturn resulting from the Panic of 1819, unlike Armstrong in 1808. So by the summer of 1820, Tonner owned a stable and profitable paper that ably served the town's *raison d'être*.

Nonetheless, by that time he evidently wanted to return to the less-strenuous demands of his medical practice and went looking for a like-minded buyer for his paper. He found one in Robert I. Curtis (114); the New-Jersey-born, Philadelphia-trained printer had conducted a series of papers in towns on the southern shores of Lakes Erie and Huron in the years after the War of 1812, and closed the last of those sheets in April 1820 when faced with quickly multiplying partisan competition in an setting that could barely support one weekly paper. Thus Tonner's *Virginia North-Western Gazette* was an enticing alternative, and he acquired the weekly in September 1820.

Maturity

Curtis embraced an editorial perspective that focused on western economic growth and the political disputes over the means and ends to effect such development. Hence his *Gazette* frequently boasted of the accomplishments of Wheeling's growing manufacturing class, as well as the scale of trade in country produce in the town and the number of migrant wagons that it served. Consequently, the expansion of roads and canals (internal improvements) and their positive effect on the local economy were central concerns. Simultaneously, Curtis established an editorial competition with his journalistic peers in Pittsburgh in a self-evident attempt to undermine that town's growing domination of regional commerce; he printed reports of the levels of water in the Ohio River, ones that were published with considerable frequency when those levels prevented vessels from travelling the river above Wheeling; it was part of a contest of pure boosterism that continued for the entire life of the *Gazette*.

His commitment to publicizing the town can be seen in May 1824 when Curtis turned the regionally-focused *North-Western Gazette* into the locally-centered *Wheeling Gazette*.

Such a perspective also meant that the *Gazette* reflected the political concerns of its prime supporters – the mercantile and industrial businesses that advertised in his paper. When Curtis acquired the weekly in 1820, it evinced a mildly Federalist character in consequence of that party's support of domestic manufactures; hence his journal became a supporter of Kentuckian Henry Clay, a prime mover of the National Road, in the 1824 elections, and then an advocate for John Quincy Adams's commercial policies once he took office in 1825. Of course, this partiality made Curtis highly suspicious of Andrew Jackson and his supporters, and eventually he would be drawn into a political and legal controversy as a result of that suspicion in 1827.

After the disputed 1824 election, Jackson launched a four-year-long campaign to displace Adams in the next election. Key to his censure of political leaders in Washington was the supposed "corrupt bargain" that Adams made with Clay to guarantee that Jackson did not become president. Jackson soon added a story about being approached by one of Clay's managers with a deal to gain the Tennessean's support for Clay if he denied Adams a seat in his cabinet. That story was recounted in a letter from Carter Beverly, Jackson's campaign manager in Virginia, to Duff Green, the editor of the Jacksonian *United States Telegraph* in Washington, who published the letter. Curtis knew of several inaccuracies in Beverly's story and published an article detailing them, insinuating that Beverly (and Jackson, by inference) had lied about the purported offer. Enraged, Beverly filed a libel suit against Curtis in October 1827, bringing immediate national attention to the Wheeling editor. At trial that December, both sides argued the "truth" of their writings, and so the fallaciousness of the other's; the jury found that they could not determine the truth of one side or the other, and acquitted Curtis – to the resounding condemnation of Jacksonian papers in the west and the deafening silence of the general's eastern supporters. Even the ever-combative Duff Green avoided the issue, simply reproducing Curtis's own published account of the trial without comment or follow-up.

This episode established the *Wheeling Gazette* as a respected Whig voice in the Upper Ohio River Valley. Indeed, as the Jacksonian era developed, it proved to be something of a voice in the wilderness, as Ohio County was surrounded by counties in Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Ohio that were solidly in the Democratic column. Yet Wheeling, as the prevailing voting bloc in the county, carried Ohio for Clay in 1824, for Adams in 1828, and for Clay in 1832. Curtis no doubt had a hand in those results, subjecting him to frequent criticism in the Jacksonian journals published in Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. Still, such an editorial prominence evidently increased demand for the *Gazette*, which allowing Curtis to share the weekly's profits for a while in the fall of 1828, with his shop's foreman, M. C. Hull, publisher of a belles-lettres monthly there in 1822 and later the first foreman in the office of the long-lived *Picayune* in New Orleans.

By 1834, however, Curtis faced new and formidable challenges in the ongoing contest for hegemony – as one scholar calls it – over the commerce of the Upper Ohio River Valley; two daily papers were now published in Pittsburgh, both often deprecatory of Wheeling and its

business interests, even as they differed politically from one another. In response, Curtis decided to increase the pace of his production to daily as well, while continuing a weekly edition for readers at a distance from town. It is uncertain when he actually started this new schedule, or how long he maintained it; but it is clear that by the end of 1834, Curtis had tired of the grind, and likely was in need of a financial savior for an over-extended *Gazette*, preferably one with suitable Whig proclivities.

Transitions

Curtis found such a redeemer in Winchester. Samuel Hopkins Davis (126), a New-Jersey-born printer trained in Alexandria, had acquired the *Winchester Republican* in late 1820, and transformed that one-time Jeffersonian journal into a Whig paper that held its own in the northern Valley against the widely-quoted *Martinsburg Gazette* and the *Virginia Free Press* of Charlestown. Yet the increasing number of Jacksonian papers in the neighborhood led Davis to sell a majority interest in his weekly to James G. Brooks (1801-41), the well-known editor of the *Morning Courier* in New York City, so removing himself from a daily role in its publication. But by late 1834, Davis was ready for a new journalistic challenge and was persuaded to take on the weakened *Wheeling Gazette* with its well-used job-press.

Effective January 1, 1835, Davis became the sole proprietor of the *Gazette*, having sold his remaining interest in the *Winchester Republican*, and immediately began a major refitting of the seventeen-year-old journal. First, he reduced the frequency of publication for the core edition to a thrice-weekly pace, while continuing to offer the weekly one as well; it was a pace continued until 1839. The change obviously reduced the amount of content needed to sustain the journal, so reducing the pressures on its staff; but it also allowed the existing office, now managed by John M. McCreary (535), to issue a wider range of non-newspaper imprints, particularly books, so broadening the business's revenue stream.

Yet his success in saving the *Gazette*, particularly while facing increasing competition from Jacksonian papers in the neighborhood, made Davis's proprietorship relatively short-lived. The Congressional process that led to the admission of Michigan as a state in the Union in 1837 included restructuring of the residual parts of the Northwest and Louisiana Territories into the Wisconsin Territory in July 1836; with numerous Jacksonian papers then being issued in the areas that later became the states of Wisconsin and Iowa, Whig settlers in the territory determined to enlist an accomplished partisan editor to conduct a new *Wisconsin Territorial Register*, and their choice for that role was Samuel H. Davis. Davis was apparently given sufficient financial guarantees in this prospective venture to permanently abandon his successful newspaper and adopted state; he sold the *Gazette* to McCreary at end of April 1836 and removed to the territorial capital of Belmont, in modern-day Iowa; that fall, the territorial legislature declined to patronize his new journal, so compelling its closure; the following spring, Davis started another Whig newspaper in Peoria, Illinois, and lived there for rest of his life.

This change in ownership meant that the *Gazette* had little influence over the votes cast in the presidential election that fall, wherein Jackson's vice-president, Martin Van Buren, was elected as his successor; Ohio Country fell into the Democratic column for the first time

since 1820, although McCreary would help bring Wheeling and its environs back into Whig ranks in 1840. He would be assisted in that effort by the national economic collapse of 1837 credited to "Martin Van Ruin" that left the area destitute:

"Times are harder than we have ever known them. Our banks are not discounting a dollar. Money is scarce—but few persons have any, and are disposed to hold onto it. Business is extremely dull, nobody pays cash, and merchants don't care about selling on credit. We hav'nt got any river; the place where it used to be can be seen, but water is mighty scarce; wagons are driving across the channel opposite the city, without more than wetting the hubs."

Yet despite these trying circumstances, McCreary deftly managed his paper's finances and so was able to resume publishing the tri-weekly *Gazette* as daily edition again about May 1, 1839. In doing so, his paper also became a temperance advocate, evincing the concerns of its mercantile and manufacturing supporters over the drunken idleness that accompanied the economic crisis.

Remarkably, McCreary's success also brought an offer that drew him away from Wheeling, just as Davis had been in 1836. In May 1843, the long-lived *Cincinnati Gazette*, another daily newspaper, underwent a major reorganization that made minority partner Stephan Slaterly L'Hommedieu (1806-74) its chief proprietor; recognizing McCreary's achievements upriver, L'Hommedieu offered him an opportunity to manage the office of his paper, evidently with a remuneration that bettered that of his Wheeling situation. By this time, the introduction of state-supported railroads and canals in western Pennsylvania was giving Pittsburgh new advantages that Wheeling could not match, especially given the Virginia state government's inability to do the same; apprehending the certain decline of Wheeling relative to its long-time rival, McCreary decided to move on to Cincinnati, which was then also a larger place than the Ohio County seat, and seek his fortune there instead.

Dénouement

In leaving Virginia, McCreary sold the *Gazette* to David Hull, apparently his shop foreman and a relation of Curtis's one-time partner; the exact date of the transfer is uncertain, as no issues of the *Gazette* survive for the period from February 6, 1843 (a McCreary number) to May 8, 1844 (a Hull number). Given the fact that Ohio County gave Whig Henry Clay an overwhelming majority in the 1844 election, it seems most likely that McCreary departed earlier rather than later, in order to provide his successor with the chance to rebuild his base of support in advance of that election.

Yet that electoral majority may also have been a product of Wheeling's other Whig paper, the *Wheeling Times and Advertiser* of James E. Wharton (1809-81); Wharton had come to Wheeling from Massachusetts in 1836 – about the time that Davis left Ohio County – to join Enos W. Newton (1794-1865) in publishing his *Western Virginia Times*; Wharton became its sole proprietor in 1838 when Newton relocated south to Charleston to publish the *Kanawha Republican* there. As a result, Wharton was in ongoing competition with the *Gazette* during McCreary's and Hull's tenures, so reinforcing the Whig message in this Jacksonian region while dividing the market for such a partisan viewpoint, clearly an unsustainable situation.

By 1843, it seems that the *Gazette* had become subordinate to the *Times* in circulation, and that condition may have induced McCreary to leave the town as much as did the agreeable offer from downriver, despite keeping the paper afloat during the Van Buren Depression. What is certain is that after the national defeat of the Whigs in November 1844, the viability of each of Wheeling's Whig journals was endangered by the fragmentation of the national party that had emerged during that campaign. So it is not surprising to find that an effort to fuse the two journals into a single partisan sheet quickly followed that loss.

Wharton proved to be the beneficiary of that effort; his *Times* absorbed the older *Wheeling Gazette* in mid-December 1844, thus creating the *Wheeling Times and Gazette* and ending Hull's career as a journalist. The merger allowed Wharton to offer three editions of the new journal – a weekly, a thrice-weekly, and a daily. The editor would conduct this Whig journal until 1855, when his anti-slavery sympathies led him to move to Massillon, Ohio, to conduct another newspaper there. The journal that he left behind in Ohio County then limped along through the latter years of the 1850s, hamstrung by the intraparty divisions that annihilated the Whig party after the 1856 elections. It apparently ceased publication sometime in 1859, taking with it the remnants and legacy of the second newspaper to be published in the early nineteenth-century entrepôt of Wheeling.

Sources: LCCN nos. 83-025147, 83-025147, 84-031597, 86-092496, 86-092495, 86-053005, 86-092495, & 86-092534; Brigham II: 1175; Norona & Shetler 1413; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Cranmer, *Wheeling and Ohio County*; Alfred, "Struggle for Hegemony" (2014); *Pioneer Printers of Fitchburg, Massachusetts*; notices in *City of Washington Gazette* (1818), *Boston Commercial Gazette* (1821), *Steubenville [OH] Gazette* (1821), *Washington [DC] National Intelligencer* (1824-43), *Washington [PA] Review and Examiner* (1826-36), *Cincinnati Chronicle and Literary Gazette* (1827), [Chillicothe] *Scioto Gazette* (1827-39), *Alexandria Gazette* (1827-43), *Pittsburgh Gazette* (1827), *Salem [MA] Gazette* (1827), *Richmond Enquirer* (1827-44), [Lexington] *Kentucky Reporter* (1827), *New-York Spectator* (1828), *New-York Morning Herald* (1830), [Worcester] *National Aegis* (1830), [Providence] *Rhode Island American & Gazette* (1832), *Baltimore Sun* (1838-41), *Baltimore Patriot* (1834), *Baltimore Gazette* (1832-36), [Hagerstown MD] *Torch Light* (1835), *New-York American* (1835), *National Banner and Nashville Whig* (1835), *Newark Daily Advertiser* (1836), [Boston] *Columbian Centinel* (1837), [Cumberland MD] *Phoenix Civilian* (1839), [Columbus] *Ohio State Journal* (1839), *Georgetown [DC] Advocate* (1842), *Philadelphia Inquirer* (1844), and *Daily Cincinnati Gazette* (1845), as well as in the *Virginia North-Western Gazette* (181-24) and *Wheeling Gazette* (1824-44).