

## **WINCHESTER 01: Bartgis's Gazette & Advertiser**

- 01: The Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser (1787-1788)
  - 02: The Virginia Gazette or the Winchester Advertiser (1788-1789)
  - 03: The Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser (1789)
  - 04: Bartgis's Virginia Gazette and the Winchester Advertiser (1790-1791)
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First newspaper issued in Winchester was a weekly mercantile advertiser that adopted, in part, the traditional title of *Virginia Gazette*. It was the joint effort of a journeyman printer from Richmond and a publishing entrepreneur from Frederick, Maryland. Yet its long-term continuation depended on that absentee proprietor engaging suitable trade-partners, and so the paper expired when he was unable to secure such assistance in 1791.

### **Prologue**

On January 1, 1787, Henry Willcocks (444), a journeyman printer then working in Richmond during that winter's Assembly session, circulated a prospectus for a weekly that he would publish in Tappahannock, the seat of Essex County on the Rappahannock River; however, he found little support for his planned journal in the face of a competing endeavor by Timothy Green (194) in the larger, nearby town of Fredericksburg. Yet Willcocks was still determined to publish a newspaper of his own, rather than continue working for others, and so set out to find an alternate location for such a project.

Willcocks soon found a sponsor in the person of Matthias Bartgis (024), a printer-publisher in Frederick, Maryland. Bartgis had launched two successful journals there in 1785 – one a German-language paper and the other an English language one – and was now planning to expand his business to the east and west in Winchester, Virginia, and York, Pennsylvania. In these places, he hoped to build an advertising and correspondence network that stretched more than 100 miles along the Great Wagon Road west from Philadelphia. But to do this, he required a reliable tradesman to serve as his resident partner in those distant towns.

As a result, the failure of Willcocks's Tappahannock venture gave Bartgis a possible partner for one of the locations where he intended to expand, and he moved quickly to link up with the disappointed printer. At the end of the 1786-87 Assembly session, Willcocks relocated to Frederick as a journeyman in the original Bartgis press office. Over the next month or so, the two developed a plan that targeted Winchester over York as the better initial expansion site, given that there was not a single newspaper published in Virginia at that time west of the Blue Ridge. That void offered the prospect that the planned York to Winchester network could profit greatly by controlling information distribution deep into the Valley of Virginia to the south. And so the two announced the opening of a new printing office in Winchester in April 1787, probably the first attempted there. In that same notice, they made it known to readers of Bartgis's Frederick paper that they intended to "publish a Weekly News-Paper, entitled The VIRGINIA GAZETTE, and WINCHESTER ADVERTISER, on or before the first Tuesday in May next, provided that a sufficient number of subscribers can be obtained by that time."

## Opening Era

At the outset, it is clear that Willcocks and Bartgis were a bit optimistic. They were unable to find the number of subscribers they thought necessary to begin publication in the three-plus weeks indicated in their announcement, even as they did not face competition. Hence, the initial number of their weekly did not appear until July 11, 1787, two months later than originally planned. At first, Bartgis's interest in journal masked by the use of the proprietary name of Henry Willcocks & Co., but six weeks later, the paper's colophon recorded him as the senior partner in the firm of Bartgis & Willcocks.

This early change reveals that, while Willcocks had found an obliging collaborator in Bartgis, he did not control the project that had so quickly replaced his intended one from the winter before. Indeed, the precedence that Bartgis habitually asserted in his dealings with his trade partners appears to have been a constant in the 1780s. The journal that he started in York, Pennsylvania, later in 1787 came to an abrupt end after just six months, with a lawsuit filed by his partner, printer Stewart Herbert (1754-95) of Lancaster County, charging that Bartgis had defrauded him by altering their partnership papers and then using those documents to commandeer both their press and their paper for his individual benefit.

Such a bitter parting may have been the case with that of Bartgis and Willcocks as well; their partnership came to an end with the *Gazette's* issue for January 4, 1788, seemingly at end of a conventional six-month agreement between them; yet Willcocks immediately joined with the former Baltimore publisher Richard Bowen (045) to publish a second paper in this northern Valley market-town – *The Virginia Centinel or Winchester Mercury* – so engaging in close competition with Bartgis; then after just six months with Bowen, Willcocks relocated to York, Pennsylvania, to start yet another paper with the brothers James and John Edie, one that effectively prevented Bartgis from restarting his antecedent weekly there.

The founding of a second weekly in Winchester in April 1788 has been regarded as evidence of the cultural divisions between German-speakers and English-speakers in this part of the Great Eastern Valley. Bartgis was a German-speaker from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, while Bowen and Willcocks were both native English-speakers. Bartgis's paper regularly addressed issues of concern to ethnic Germans, while his rivals' sheet became the favored advertising vehicle for the English-speaking merchants who dominated the carrying and forwarding trade on the Great Wagon Road. Thus Bartgis was torn as to whether he should devote his energies to serving the German communities of the northern Valley neglected by Bowen and Willcocks, or to challenge his new competitors for the advertising custom of the area's English merchants. His solution to this problem was to try to do both simultaneously.

Bartgis was fortunate in finding a potential partner that could bring a nationalist identity to his journal, rather than the parochial one it manifested, at just the moment that tensions with Willcocks grew in late 1787. At that time, Nathaniel Willis (449) of Boston was seeking suitable employment in the "unsettled West" of the southern interior after running afoul of official sanctions in Massachusetts that attended Shay's Rebellion and its suppression; well-known as the youngest participant in the Boston Tea Party in 1773, Willis had developed a reputation as a radical journalist during the Revolutionary War, and was a thorn in the side

of the state's socioeconomic elite thereafter; in July 1786, he disposed of his half-interest in Boston's semi-weekly *American Herald* rather than submit to a new tax on its paid content and left his hometown to find a situation away from the authoritarian constraints of New England. In view of that history, the pairing of Willis and Bartgis, while clearly one of mutual convenience, was a strange one politically, with the ethnic-German conservatism of Bartgis diverging from the "enlightened" progressivism of Willis. Still, their affiliation would endure for two years. By late 1787, Willis was resident in Winchester, head of a household where Willcocks lived, conducting the editorial side of the Bartgis & Willcocks weekly. With the issue of January 11, 1788, Willis succeeded Willcocks as partner to Bartgis, although his interest in the venture was masked by the proprietary name "Matthias Bartgis & Co." until after issue of April 23, 1788.

Once Willis was in place, Bartgis turned to the problem of issuing a German-language paper from their Winchester press. The first paper issued from his Frederick press in October 1785 had been the German-language *Marylandische Zeitung*, followed three months later by the English-language *Maryland Chronicle*; each was an independent entity, though printed on the same press. It appears that such was the course that Bartgis now charted in Virginia, as it took him more than eighteen months to organize his new *Virginische Zeitung*. That journal apparently first appeared in June 1789, after a prolonged search for compositors capable of working in both languages. It is unclear whether the *Zeitung* was simply a German-language edition of the *Gazette*, or an entirely distinct publication, as no copies of that weekly have survived. But it is clear that in diverting the *Gazette* office's limited resources each week to produce a second paper for a shrinking audience created tension between the partners.

The prospect of that new paper also amplified the disputatious relationship between their *Gazette* and Bowen's *Centinel*. During the summer of 1789 both journals were filled with remarks on the lack of patriotic virtue evinced by the other, particularly that demonstrated by the insular Germans. After nearly six months of barbed comments, a Bowen contributor penned an *ad hominin* attack on the character of both Bartgis and Willis, leading Bartgis to end the exchange in his *Gazette* with an appeal to Bowen to do the same in his *Centinel*.

In the wake of this contest, Willis evidently recognized that Bartgis's cross-cultural *Gazette* was not a viable entity, considering that an alternative now issued from their office while it was being relentlessly challenged by Bowen's *Centinel*. So when his agreement with Bartgis expired at the end of 1789, Willis sold his interest in the *Gazette* to his partner and set out to start a third weekly in Winchester; this journal would be an English-language one that represented the interests of the area's agrarian population, rather than the merchants who supported Bowen's newspaper; the first issue of *Willis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* appeared March 20, 1790, ten weeks after he parted from Bartgis. That event caused Bartgis to alter the title of his weekly to *Bartgis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* so as to avoid the confusion between the two.

Still, Willis clearly understood that offering a third weekly in a locale that seems to have had difficulty in supporting two at that time was a problematic proposition. So after six months of challenging his established competitors, Willis moved his office some thirty miles to the northeast and reopened shop in Shepherdstown. There he resumed publishing his paper in

November 1790 as *The Potowmac Guardian and Berkeley Advertiser*. This move may appear curious, but Shepherdstown was then in the middle of a heated competition for hosting the site of the new national capital city. Hence, this was a case of Willis cutting his losses and moving on, throwing his lot in with those leaders in eastern Berkeley County seeking that design, rather than staying in Winchester and seeing his business slowly die. Such was also the case when he removed his business to Martinsburg in the winter of 1791-92, after the Washington administration chose the site the capital city now occupies at the mouth of the Anacostia River; there his *Potowmac Guardian* became that town's first and only paper.

### **Fading Away**

With Willis's departure, Bartgis was again obliged to reorganize his Winchester office. The first change was apparently the closing of the *Virginische Zeitung*, as references to that title elsewhere cease shortly before Willis and Bartgis parted ways. Then with the first issue of his *Gazette* in January 1790, Bartgis seems to have made a relative his new partner; for the ensuing 22 months, the weekly was published M. & C.B. Bartgis, although the identity of that relation is unknown, as that person's given-name was not revealed. The only relatives of his known to have those initials were his mother and daughter, each named Catherine. From the timing of this association, it seems most likely that Bartgis now made his mother an absentee partner as a way to support her financially as his tavern-keeper father slowly succumbed to illness back in Lancaster.

Remarkably, Bartgis now reached out to Bowen as a partner as well, proving that they had indeed "buried the hatchet" after the past fall's controversies; he convinced his rival to form a new concern to publish a mercantile advertiser in Staunton, one that would be to their mutual financial benefit. As *The Staunton Gazette or Weekly Western Star* appeared within days of Willis's withdrawal, it is evident that Bartgis had long been planning to offset the fiscal challenges posed by acquiring his partner's interest and competition from Willis's new journal by increasing his advertising revenues; this new sheet was one wherein Winchester merchants marketed their goods and services to Augusta County readers with those notices being reprints of ones seen in both the *Gazette* and the *Centinel*. But as the weekly did not promote local business, their paper found little support in the central Valley, and so ceased publication after about three months.

Despite the inability of the *Virginische Zeitung* and the *Staunton Gazette* to help sustain his Winchester press, Bartgis still derived sufficient revenue to justify publication of his *Gazette* there for a time, even as Bowen's *Centinel* surpassed it in size and stature. But to do so, he seems to have reduced the number of copies printed each week, leading to a scarcity of surviving issues today from the paper's post-Willis days. Yet his ill-repute in the community of German-language printers seems to have made it ever more difficult for Bartgis to attract and retain competent help. Lacking such help, the *Gazette* gradually lost its idiosyncratic appeal for ethnic-German readers from a loss of German-language content; it became ever more like the *Centinel*, in both content and tone, and so slowly faded into the shadow of its larger local competitor.

The last known issue of Bartgis's *Gazette* is that for November 26, 1791. As that number was published near the end of that year, it may be that the weekly survived until the last week of December when the second volume of the *Gazette* under the imprimatur of "M. & C.B. Bartgis" would have been completed. But it is also possible that the death of his father shortly before that number issued was the cause for the *Gazette's* termination; his mother no longer required the support this paper provided, now being able to draw on her late husband's assets for her own benefit; moreover, settling his father's estate was a complex process conducted at some distance from Bartgis's Frederick base, and it seems that he was compelled to contract his business ventures temporarily so as to bring that process to an end; thus closing his Winchester office would have simplified his responsibilities.

Whatever the case, the demise of Winchester's first newspaper was an event that evidently went largely unnoticed in the realm of American journalism. The moment of its passing was one where numerous new partisan journals were emerging. Hence, Bartgis's economizing was but one of many such endings among the publishers then operating in the country.

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Sources: LCCN No. 84-025995, 86-071929, 96-096657, & 84-025996; Brigham II: 1167; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Thomas, *History of Printing*; Morton, *Winchester*; Cartmell, *Shenandoah Pioneers*; Dolmetsch, *German Press of Valley*; Wust, "Matthias Bartgis;" Scharf, *Western Maryland*; Ellis & Evans, *Lancaster County*; Prowell, *York County*; Knauss, *Social Conditions among Pennsylvania Germans*; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Hudson, *Journalism*; Vaughn, *American Journalism*; and notices in the [Frederick] Maryland Chronicle and [Winchester] *Virginia Gazette* (1787-91).