

WINCHESTER 03: *Virginische Zeitung*

01: *Virginische Zeitung* (1789)

The third newspaper published in Winchester was the first German-language journal issued in Virginia. It was an adjunct to the mercantile weekly then offered by its publishers, aiming to move that paper's ethnic-German readers to an alternate sheet and thereby to improve the appeal of the parent journal among English-language subscribers and advertisers. The effort was unsuccessful, as the paper lasted no more than six months.

The origin of the *Virginische Zeitung* was tied to the ongoing competition between the first two newspapers published in Winchester. Matthias Bartgis (024), a publishing entrepreneur from Frederick, Maryland, began issuing a bilingual weekly there in July 1787 – *The Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* – in partnership with Henry Willcocks (444); Willcocks left the concern at the end of that year and joined with the former Baltimore publisher, Richard Bowen (045), to start a competing English-language weekly – *The Virginia Centinel or Winchester Mercury* – in April 1788. As he was still resident in Frederick, Bartgis brought in Nathaniel Willis (449), the well-known publisher of "patriot papers" in Boston during the Revolution, to conduct his Winchester weekly, creating the firm of Matthias Bartgis & Co.

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 Bartgis now hoped to chart in Virginia.

However, it took him more than eighteen months to organize his new *Virginische Zeitung*. His impediments seem to have been both labor and subscriber related. Over those months, Bartgis occasionally printed advertisements in his *Gazette* seeking compositors capable of working in both German and English. But the intervals between those notices suggest that while he had found such proficient help, he soon lost that skilled hand because he had not collected the number of subscribers that he deemed necessary to commence publication, so making that individual superfluous.

When the *Virginische Zeitung* finally appeared in June 1789, Willis was not recorded as a full partner in the weekly, as he had become a year earlier in the publication of the *Gazette* with Bartgis. Thus it is unclear whether the *Zeitung* was simply a German-language edition of the *Gazette*, or an entirely distinct publication, chiefly because no issues of that paper have survived. But it is clear that in diverting their office's limited resources to produce a second weekly for a shrinking audience, tension between Willis and Bartgis emerged.

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 a German-language alternative now issued from their office while it was still 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 office to his partner and set out to start a third journal in Winchester; this journal would be an English-language sheet representing the interests of the area's agrarian population, rather than the merchants supporting 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

By that time, publication of the *Virginische Zeitung* had ceased. Its existence is known only from references to the paper in Bartgis's *Gazette*, which are seen from June to September 1789 alone. Clarence Brigham and Klaus Wust both suggest that the journal was continued for six months, as that span matches up with the dissolution of the Bartgis & Willis concern at the end of that year. But then again it is also possible that this German-language weekly was issued for just three months, as was common in this era with new publications; the last reference to the paper now known appeared on September 9th, offering the prospect that the journal was not issued during the final three months of 1789. Yet both possibilities cannot be confirmed without surviving numbers, meaning that the *Virginische Zeitung* could have been issued for anywhere from one to six months.

The marginality of such German-language newspapers in Virginia is evinced by the fact that only three others were attempted by 1815 – two in Staunton and one in New Market – and then only one other, designed to advocate secession among the state's German-speaking communities, issued from a Richmond press in 1860. Rather, those ethnic publics embraced English as a nation-building language, especially after the War of 1812, so making journals like the *Virginische Zeitung* both problematic and short-lived.

Sources: Not in USNP files at LOC: Brigham, "Additions;" and Wust, "Bartgis' Newspapers in Virginia" (1951).