

WINCHESTER 04: Willis's Gazette & Advertiser

01: Willis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser (1790)

The fourth newspaper published in Winchester was possibly the shortest-lived of the four weekly journals started there before 1791. Designed to address the concerns of the area's agrarian interests, the paper struggled in competition with the town's existing mercantile advertisers, and was relocated to Shepherdstown after issuing six months in Winchester.

Willis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser reflected the ambitions of its publisher, Nathaniel Willis (449). He was a practical printer, bred to his craft in the Boston office of Edes & Gill, proprietors of the *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, perhaps the most radical newspaper published in North America in the 1760s and 1770s. Consequently, Willis earned the distinction of being the youngest person having a hand in the Boston Tea Party of 1773 at age eighteen, in the company of his mentor Benjamin Edes. During the war years, he associated with fellow journeyman Edward E. Powars to publish the *Independent Chronicle* (first called the *New England Chronicle*), known for its vocal opposition to the anti-populist predispositions of the region's proto-Federalists, such as John Adams and Timothy Pickering. In 1786, Willis found his livelihood as a journalist and printer threatened by a new tax levied on paid newspaper content, a tax prompted by the growing number of published criticisms of policies pursued by the state government that led to Shays Rebellion that fall. Declining to be "shackled in this State," Willis sold his Boston home and business and left Massachusetts to pursue his fortunes in the "unsettled West" of the southern interior.

In time, Willis landed in Winchester. There he succeeded Henry Willcocks (444) as resident partner to Matthias Bartgis (024) – the Frederick, Maryland, publishing entrepreneur – as a proprietor of the town's first weekly: the *Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser*. His predecessor left that concern in the spring of 1788 to join Richard Bowen (045) in publishing the *Virginia Centinel or The Winchester Mercury*, a weekly representing the interests of the area's English-speaking merchants. In contrast, their *Gazette* attempted to bridge the divide between the region's German- and English-language communities, and so suffered from its dependence on less-affluent patrons. Thus, the well-schooled Willis came to recognize that their *Gazette* was not a viable entity in the face of the *Centinel's* ongoing and strengthening challenge. So like Willcocks before him, Willis left his partnership with Bartgis when their initial contract expired at the end of 1789, and set out to start publishing a third paper there. Accordingly, the first number of *Willis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* issued on March 20, 1790, just ten weeks after his parting from Bartgis.

The journal that Willis designed was one representing the interests of the lower Valley's agrarian population, rather than the mercantile interests who patronized Bowen's weekly. Hence, his Winchester paper evinced the same anti-authoritarian zeal he had learned with the Sons of Liberty before the Revolution, only now expressed in the context of the growing autocracy of Federalist officials at the national, state, and county levels. Still, the practiced journalist understood that offering a third weekly in a place that had difficulty in supporting

two at that particular time was clearly a problematic proposition. So Willis remained open to new opportunities elsewhere.

In September 1790, Willis closed his Winchester weekly to pursue such a prospect. That July, Congress passed the so-called "Residence Act" authorizing a presidential commission to locate a site "on the river Potomack, at some place between the mouths of the Eastern Branch and the Connogochegue" as the setting for a permanent capital city. That stretch of river runs from Alexandria, Virginia, to Williamsport, Maryland, and includes what was then the eastern border of neighboring Berkeley County. That county's leading citizens promptly banded together to propose a site encompassing the port town of Shepherdstown, and began a promotional campaign to effect its selection. Willis became a part of that campaign in November 1790. After closing his Winchester newspaper, he removed his press office to Shepherdstown, where he began issuing a weekly entitled *The Potowmac Guardian and Berkeley Advertiser*; from its start, this paper energetically promoted the selection of that small town as the site for the new capital. Such an outcome seems to have been more than speculative in the fall of 1790, given the state of the commissioners' deliberations at that time; if so, then Willis's relocation was clearly an attempt to establish his business as the leading press in the new capital, as did happen with other printer-publishers once the site of the District of Columbia was decided. By March 1791, however, George Washington had settled on a location at the southern end of the specified stretch of the river, which brought an end to the advocacy campaign. Consequently, Willis followed a new opportunity, moving his *Potowmac Guardian* to Martinsburg in the winter of 1791-92, where it then served as Berkeley County's journal-of-record until 1800.

Sources: LCCN No. 84-025990; Brigham II: 1168; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Beers, *N. P. Willis*; and Cartmell, *Shenandoah Pioneers*.