

WINCHESTER 05: Triumph of Liberty

01: Winchester Triumph of Liberty (1799-1803)

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The fifth newspaper issued in Winchester was the first in a series of short-lived Republican journals printed by a string of proprietors using the same press. The shortness of their runs reflects the dominance of the local Federalist weekly that each was intended to counteract. It seems that this initial effort was the longest-lived in the series as a result of its community ties, which were undermined once the press was sold to its journeyman-printers.

Background

The opening round of journalistic competition in Winchester encompassed three different weekly papers issued between mid-1787 and late 1791. The first – *The Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* of Matthias Bartgis (024) and Henry Willcocks (445) – appeared in July 1787 and was followed in April 1788 by the *Virginia Centinel or Winchester Mercury* of Richard Bowen (045); that second weekly arose, in part, from a falling out between Bartgis and Willcocks, with Willcocks joining Bowen to publish the rival paper and Bartgis bringing in Nathaniel Willis (450) to fill Willcocks' place in his office; but Willis also broke with Bartgis eventually, and started publishing a third journal – *Willis's Virginia Gazette and Winchester Advertiser* – in competition with both predecessors in March 1790. Yet Willis's venture was the shortest-lived of the three, lasting just six months before he moved his new business to Shepherdstown, and later Martinsburg. His removal left Frederick County readers to choose between other sheets, with *Bowen's Virginia Centinel* emerging as the prevailing choice; so Bartgis was compelled to close his weekly in December 1791, leaving Winchester with one weekly, a paper that served the mercantile interests of the northern Shenandoah Valley.

In closing his Winchester office, however, Bartgis alienated yet another trade partner. He was a trained printer from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, who established a printing office in Frederick, Maryland, in 1785; he then set out to broaden his reach by establishing press operations in Winchester and York, Pennsylvania, in 1787, in partnerships with tradesmen resident in those locales. After parting with Willcocks in Winchester, he turned to Willis; but he also had aspirations to publish a German-language paper there, as he did in Frederick, and Willis was not a German-speaker; hence he sent a bilingual tradesman to Winchester, one George Trisler (419), in early 1789 to assist Willis in conducting the office, resulting in publication of the *Virginische Zeitung* that summer.

Trisler was also a native of Lancaster County, which appears to explain his deciding to move to Frederick to train with Bartgis; his Winchester assignment seems to have been a step up the ladder to trade independence, as he was almost certainly the "& Co." addended to Bartgis's name in the proprietary concern publishing the *Zeitung*. However, the short life of that German-language sheet also seems to have given free rein to an acrimonious dispute with his mentor; Willis's departure from Bartgis's Winchester office forced the closing of the troubled *Zeitung*, while making Trisler the *de facto* proprietor of the older English-language

weekly, although he was not identified as such in its colophon; but faced with the growing dominance of *Bowen's Virginia Centinel*, Bartgis decided to close both the office and the paper rather than sell them to Trisler and so allow him to forge an independent identity. An embittered Trisler quit the print trade with the closing and moved to Baltimore to learn the dry-goods trade; he returned to Frederick three years later to start a retail store of his own there; Trisler quickly became a strong voice in the Republican cause, unlike his Federalist-minded merchant contemporaries. Disenchantment with the Adams administration from 1797 on convinced him that the neighborhood needed a viable Republican journal; Bartgis's Frederick paper was mildly-Federalist by then, reflecting his need for merchant advertising, while Bowen's Federalist weekly was the only paper published in Winchester; moreover, the Jeffersonian *Potomack Guardian* published by Willis in Martinsburg was under increasing attack financially, and soon would be physically as well. So he set out to start a new partisan weekly in Winchester in advance of the 1800 presidential election.

Origin

Trisler's previous residence in Winchester, as well as his business connections in Frederick County, provided a workable foundation for this new venture, as did his familiarity with the print trade. He was also fortunate enough to be able to tap into a growing political network determined to counter the disproportionate influence of Federalist journals – the decided majority of newspapers then published in the country – by starting new papers that would support Jefferson and other Republican candidates in the coming elections. In Virginia, this network helped found such partisan journals in Petersburg, Richmond, and Staunton, while patronizing existing ones in Norfolk and Fredericksburg. Thus Trisler's Winchester weekly was both a part of that state-wide effort and an independent, local venture.

At the end of July 1799, the *Winchester Triumph of Liberty* made its first appearance. It was published by the new firm of Trisler & Hass. Their choice of a title was consistent with the practice of the most ardent of Republican journalists of the day to employ phrases with a clear connection to the revolution in France, throwing back in the faces of Federalists their oft-stated charge that Republicans were agents of French radicalism; in this case, the title is taken from a phrase in Richard Price's 1789 essay, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, that the French Revolution was "the triumph of liberty and justice over arbitrary power," just as would be later asserted for the election of Thomas Jefferson over John Adams and his authoritarian administration. Trisler was clearly the practical printer in this arrangement, while John Hass (205) was probably his financier and perhaps an editor as well. However, the commonness of his name in the region, in combination a dearth of surviving copies of their paper, makes a certain identification of Hass impracticable; but it is likely that he was a merchant-planter in the area, as were many of those financing the new Jeffersonian papers that emerged in 1799 and 1800. Still, it is clear the two actively challenged their Federalist opponents, even as only four numbers of this title survive to the modern day.

That scarcity also reflects the problematic nature of the *Triumph of Liberty* in opposing both Bowen's Winchester journal and the new *Berkeley Intelligencer* published in Martinsburg by John Alburtis (004). Their rivals were sustained by cash-strong merchants and not by the cash-poor agrarian majority that was their target audience; accordingly those papers were

issued in larger print-runs, and so more copies of those titles survive than do those of the Republican presses, whose output was a fraction of that of those mercantile advertisers. So while the electoral results were still in doubt, there was sufficient supplementary patronage to keep the Republican papers alive; but once victory was assured, that support evaporated, sometimes rapidly, but most often gradually, leaving each proprietor to fend for themselves as best they could.

Trisler and Hass were apparently able to make their joint venture work for nearly four years. They clearly forged working exchanges with Republican papers elsewhere, particularly the *Political Mirror* of John McArthur (285) in Staunton; he published a revised prospectus for their weekly following Jefferson's inauguration in the spring of 1801, suggesting that both partisan sheets now sought subscribers in the stretch of the Valley between the two locales, attempting to capitalize on the popularity of the new administration in this part of the state. But eventually the two parted ways. Sometime between issues of March 31 and May 29, 1803, Hass retired from their partnership, leaving Trisler the sole proprietor of this weekly.

Evolution

Yet Trisler was also tiring of the editorial grind in Winchester, wanting to return to Frederick and his retail business there. In the wake of Hass's departure, he brought in a Pennsylvania-trained journeyman named Peter Isler (235) to conduct his Virginia press. Isler completed the training of Trisler's apprentice, Joseph Harmer (201), the son of Jacob Harmer, a well-respected veteran who served with Frederick County's Daniel Morgan in the Revolutionary War. As the issue for May 29, 1803, is the latest surviving number bearing Trisler's name, the ensuing demise of the *Triumph of Liberty* can only be discerned from indirect evidence; still, it seems that Isler and Harmer managed the both the press and paper for Trisler for the remainder of that year, allowing him to be an absentee proprietor. This practice continued until the winter of 1803-04, when Trisler finally closed his paper, probably about January 2, 1804, when the weekly would have completed the first half of its fifth volume/year; the two journeymen then acquired their master's press as independent tradesmen from which they issued a new Republican weekly – *The Independent Register* – about March 20, 1804, as the firm of Isler & Harmer.

The timing of the transition suggests that Trisler was reluctant to conduct the paper through another election cycle, and was willing to leave his partisan journal in younger hands with reliably Republican opinions. But it also indicates that he was prudent enough to sever his financial ties to the problematic journal, so resulting in the cessation of one weekly and the beginning of another. That turn of events makes the transaction evolutionary in nature; while the *Independent Register* succeeded the *Triumph of Liberty*, it was not a continuation, even as it was published by the same hands as its predecessor; the new journal evinced the attitudes of its proprietors, and not that of Trisler and his patrons; and their opinions were ones emerging from supporters of an incumbent administration in Washington, rather than from opponents of such as before. Still, Isler & Harmer would conduct their new paper for only a year before handing the responsibility off to others. Meanwhile, Trisler returned to his Frederick business, which he conducted until his death in September 1845.

NB: Older reference sources, such as Brigham, mistranscribe surname of John Hass as Haff, reading the use of the archaic long "s" [f] as an "f." Correct spelling is used in this Index.

Sources: LCCN No. 86-071895 & 87-090575; Brigham II: 1165; Wayland, *German Element in the Valley*; Wust, "George Trisler;" Cartmell, *Shenandoah Pioneers*; Russell, *Winchester*; Scharf, *Western Maryland*; and Minick, *Printing in Maryland*.