

WINCHESTER 08: Democratic Lamp

01: Democratic Lamp or Winchester Aurora (1809)

The eighth newspaper issued in Winchester before 1820 was the last in a series of short-lived Republican journals printed on the same press by successive proprietors. But while the shortness of the lives of its predecessors reflected the dominance of the local Federalist journal each was intended to counteract, this weekly was the successor to the most popular of those precursors and served as a bridge to the most successful paper published in Winchester before the Civil War.

For most of the 1790s, the *Winchester Gazette* of Richard Bowen (045) was the only paper published in that town, and so became the primary Federalist journal in the lower Valley of Virginia. Local Republicans first contested Bowen's primacy in July 1799 by embracing the plan of George Trisler (419) to publish the *Triumph of Liberty* there in conjunction with one John Hass (205). On Hass's retirement in early 1803, Trisler engaged journeyman Peter Isler (235) to conduct his press for him; later that year, Trisler closed his partisan weekly and sold his entire office to Isler and Joseph Harmer (201), a former apprentice. The new firm of Isler & Harmer offered the next challenge to the *Gazette* in March 1804; but their *Independent Register* about a year, closing when Harmer left Virginia in early 1805. Isler tried to resurrect that weekly in January 1806, but failed; as a result, he too decided to leave Virginia, selling the press acquired from Trisler to his shop foreman, Joseph A. Lingan (266); in March 1806, Lingan issued a new challenger, *The Philanthropist*, in partnership with Matthias E. Bartgis (025), the son of the Frederick, Maryland, publishing entrepreneur Matthias Bartgis (024); Lingan published this weekly for three years, even as the elder Bartgis supplanted his son in early 1807; but in March 1809, Bartgis withdrew from their joint venture, forcing Lingan to end publication of a paper that had become a viable alternative to the *Winchester Gazette*.

Lingan was not deterred by this obstacle. The *Philanthropist* was apparently at the height of its popularity when Bartgis retired, indicating that a successor could be as well. That success was a result, in part, of the death of Richard Bowen in June 1808; his *Gazette* passed to the hands of his shop's foreman, William Heiskell (211), though with a disruption of its revenues caused by demands for payments to Bowen's intestate estate at just the moment that the flow of ready cash withered in the area from the effects of the 1807 Embargo Act. Heiskell's overexcited remarks on that subject, and Republicans generally, during that fall's elections drew readers to Lingan's journal; hence *The Philanthropist* helped assure an overwhelming majority for James Madison in Frederick County that November. Madison's popularity had not declined by the following spring, nor had Heiskell's theatrics been muted. Consequently, Lingan clearly expected that a new partisan weekly could easily replace his former one.

That new journal – the *Democratic Lamp or Winchester Aurora* – appeared initially on June 27, 1809, under Lingan's name alone. As only two numbers of this paper survive, it is clear that he produced short print-runs every week, evidence of tightly-controlled expenses, but also of a limited distribution. It was a strategy that had marked the production of his prior

effort, one that had allowed Lingan to profit from the effort in the face of the overwhelming advantage that the mercantile *Gazette* maintained in paying advertisers. Yet this scarcity of surviving copies also leaves modern observers able to only speculate about the content of this new paper; his choice of a title suggests that this successor was more strident than was the well-mannered *Philanthropist*, particularly in its allusion to the provocative Philadelphia *Aurora* of William Duane (1760-1835). But that observation cannot be confirmed by direct evidence of Lingan's editorial predisposition here.

Subsequent events indicate that this new journal depended on the trade and editorial skills of Jonathan Foster (168), as well as those of Lingan. Foster had come to Winchester from Alexandria early in the fall of 1807; trained as a printer by Bartgis in Frederick, Maryland, he worked in the press offices of District of Columbia while conducting a school in the Potomac River port-town; Foster repeated that pattern in Winchester, opening a school there while working on Lingan's press in place of Bartgis's son, who had left the office that spring. Thus both his literary and craft expertise promptly became a part of Lingan's *Philanthropist*, and then of his *Democratic Lamp*.

Foster's presence and political leanings apparently allowed Lingan to retire from partisan journalism later in 1809. Sometime between November 21, 1809 (the latest number known of the *Democratic Lamp*) and January 2, 1810, Lingan closed his weekly and moved to the Indiana Territory; Foster acquired his well-used Republican press and began issuing his new *Republican Constellation* on that later date; the immediate success of Foster's replacement suggests Lingan also sold him the *Lamp's* subscriber list. Moreover, the short six-week gap between those dates indicates that there was little or no interruption in the publication schedule, as does the fact that the day of issue continued to be Tuesday, as had been since the *Philanthropist* started four years earlier. These circumstances imply that the *Democratic Lamp* expired on the last Tuesday of 1809, with the birth of the *Constellation* following on the first Tuesday of 1810.

Whatever the case, though, Foster's new weekly would survive until June 1862 in varying guises under several successive publishers, evincing the solid foundation Lingan had built over the previous four years. Hence, the *Democratic Lamp* proved to be a bridge between the unstable past of Republican journalism in the lower Valley of Virginia and its durable, if changeable, future in Winchester.

Sources: LCCN No. 86071900; Brigham II: 1164; Morton, *Winchester*; Russell, *Winchester*; name authority file, Handley Memorial Library, Winchester; Wust, "Matthias Bartgis"; Scharf, *Western Maryland*; and Thomas, *History of Printing*.