

WINCHESTER 10: Virginia Reformer

01: The Virginia Reformer and Herald of the Valley (1819-1820)

The last journal started in Winchester before 1820 was a direct challenge to the established Republican weekly there. That challenge lasted just a year, when local party leaders induced a merger of the two prior to the 1820 elections, so as to present a unified front that fall.

In January 1810, Republican Party leaders in Frederick County bankrolled the publication of the *Republican Constellation*, Winchester's first stable partisan competitor to the long-lived Federalist sheet of the Heiskell family, the *Winchester Gazette*. Over the ensuing nine years, that paper was conducted by Jonathan Foster (168), a Pennsylvania-born, Maryland-trained printer and schoolmaster, with the aid of several sons of prominent figures in the town who trained in his office. In December 1818, however, Foster was obliged to offer his paper and press for sale, as a result of his patrons' delinquent accounts and the loss of a subsidy from the Federal government to print the laws enacted in each Congressional session. At the end of March 1819, that process was completed when Foster sold his business to one George McGlassin (287) and retired from journalism.

That transfer alarmed some local Republicans sufficiently to organize a competing journal. McGlassin was Philadelphia-trained tradesman who had never resided in Virginia before he bought Foster's office. Thus, he was unfamiliar with the particulars of recent political events in the state, especially the long-rebuffed efforts of Virginians west of the Blue Ridge to have the state's constitution altered to allocate representation and taxes according to population and not locality. Moreover, his character was in doubt, as he had recently been dismissed from the U.S. Army for abusing men under his command by ordering unlawful whippings, an overtly undemocratic act. Then, on taking control of the *Constellation*, McGlassin dismissed Foster's staff and brought in tradesmen without connections to the area as well. In doing so, he displaced two sons of eminent members of this lower Valley community: Peter Klipstine (253) and Joseph F. Caldwell (073). In combination, these factors raised concerns that some thought could only be dispelled by offering an alternative to McGlassin's paper.

Both Klipstine and Caldwell became central figures in that new Republican journal. Yet, as young tradesmen, neither apparently had the wherewithal to conduct such a paper alone. So each, in turn, formed a partnership with a person named Russell (369). His given name is not recorded in the imprint, at least in its three extant numbers; but circumstances suggest that he was a local militia captain named Elisha E. Russell. In the spring of 1819, he operated a hotel & tavern in Winchester in conjunction with one William Pack; at exactly the moment this new weekly appeared, Russell & Pack opened a reading room in their establishment; this was a business that required a large collection of current journals, and so most reading rooms had close ties to either a newspaper office or a merchant-trading house, which was the source of their collection; hence, it is very likely that the Russell & Pack reading room was linked to the new weekly, with Russell providing financial support for the venture.

The first number of the new *Virginia Reformer and Herald of the Valley* issued on April 24,

1819, exactly three weeks after the first issue of McGlassin's *Constellation* appeared. There was very little publicity associated with its introduction, with only small notices being placed in friendly journals nearby. But those notices made it perfectly clear that this weekly would follow a course different from the *Constellation*:

"In politics it will be republican, but its energies will be wielded against the political corruption that exists in the state government."

One New England paper was even more succinct in describing the paper's purpose, noting that "its professed object is to *reform* the Constitution of that State."

That object had been the central issue in the convention of western Virginia counties held in Staunton in August 1816; their resolutions were essentially ignored by the Assembly in the following winter, and every session thereafter; the majority of the state's white population now resided west of the Blue Ridge, yet the smaller and more numerous counties of the tidewater continued to dominate a state government based on counties and not people; this inequity would not be fully resolved until the 1850s, although some concessions were pried from the eastern counties in a constitutional convention in the winter of 1829-30. As a result, the ongoing neglect of western concerns evinced by eastern legislators was deemed a corruption of the political principles for which the Revolution had been fought. Thus the appearance of a new Winchester paper called the *Reformer* indicates the *Constellation* had abandoned that cause in Foster's later years, and was believed likely to follow suit under McGlassin.

Initially, the *Virginia Reformer* was published by the firm of Klipstine & Russell; but that arrangement lasted for just three months before Caldwell became Russell's trade partner. The timing of the shift – the first week in September 1819 – matched a concurrent recasting of the *Constellation* as the *Winchester Republican*; in doing so, McGlassin laid claim to being both the legitimate party organ in the region and the defender of the party's foundational principles in the face of a splinter group that would "reform" those doctrines. Yet his weekly was compelled to support the reform of the state constitution, so blurring the distinction between his *Republican* and the *Virginia Reformer*.

With the Republican-inclined readership in Frederick County now divided between the two journals, the survival of each one was decidedly uncertain. As the 1820 election campaign dawned, it seems that local Republican leaders negotiated an end to this intraparty conflict. At the close of the *Virginia Reformer's* first volume/year in April 1820, they brokered a sale of the *Reformer's* subscriber list to McGlassin; they then set about recruiting a publisher capable of conducting the *Republican* in his stead – with the older journal passing into the hands of Samuel H. Davis (126) of Alexandria at year's end. Meanwhile, the twice-displaced Caldwell was offered the opportunity to start publishing a new *Herald of the Valley* in the Botetourt County seat of Fincastle. Recognizing that offering a single paper in a town then without one was a far better trade tactic than was issuing a third one in a two-newspaper town like Winchester, the young journeyman quickly accepted the offer. In May or June 1820, Caldwell moved up the Valley to Fincastle, evidently taking the *Reformer's* press with him; there he issued the first number of his second *Herald of the Valley* in July.

With the demise of the *Reformer*, proprietor Russell apparently retired as a journalist, as he is absent from the imprint record thereafter. Klipstine's place in this consolidation scheme remains unknown; he was reported as a journeyman in the office of the rival *Winchester Gazette* in 1822, but his continuation in the trade after that date is doubtful, as subsequent census records record him as a Frederick County farmer into the 1850s.

Sources: LCCN No. 85-025365; Brigham II: 1167; Morton, *Winchester*; Russell, *Winchester*; name authority file, Handley Memorial Library, Winchester; notices in [Frederick MD] *Political Intelligencer* (1819), *New-Bedford Mercury* (1819), [Washington] *National Intelligencer* (1819-20), [Leesburg] *Genius of Liberty* (1819-20), and the *Winchester Republican* (1819-20).