

WYTHE 01: Luminary

01: Luminary (1808-1809)

02: Republican Luminary (1809-1810)

The first newspaper issued in Wythe County is known only from its reflection in other places and papers. Yet while its duration can only be deduced from indirect evidence, the persons publishing the weekly are readily known and evince the paper's origin as a family business.

The only surviving copy of the *Republican Luminary* was recorded by bibliographer Lester Cappon in 1935; however, by the time Clarence Brigham issued his detailed bibliography of American newspapers in 1947, that copy had gone missing; that loss leaves scholars today with little information to draw on in discussing the paper and its context. But by identifying its known publishers, a concise outline of its life can be pieced together.

This journal was apparently funded, and perhaps edited, by Robert Engledow (158). He was a merchant-planter in Wythe who owned large tracts of land near the site of the modern-day village of Rural Retreat. Local records indicate that he was publishing a weekly paper on that site in 1808 under the title of *The Luminary*. But the number that Cappon recorded was issued in Wythe Court House (then known as Evansham, later as Wytheville) in November 1809 by the partnership of Dromgoole & Engledow, well after the 1808 public record. These disparate notes indicate a clear connection between the titles, though not the publishers.

Yet genealogical sources reveal that Dromgoole and Engledow were bothers-in-law, a fact that informs the context for the weekly's origin and production. William A. Dromgoole (149) was a journeyman printer from Frederick County who trained in one of Winchester's press offices in the decade before 1808; his elder sister, Margaret (Peggy), had married Engledow in 1799 and moved to his home in the southern Valley. And so, as Dromgoole neared the end of his training, Engledow saw an opportunity in bringing his brother-in-law to Wythe to print a paper that could promote commercial development in the county, as such journals then did throughout Virginia; Engledow even went so far as to buy a press for the project, going beyond the financial commitment non-tradesmen usually made in such ventures. So when Dromgoole completed his apprenticeship, he followed his sister south to Wythe.

The duration of their partnership is uncertain. But as Cappon calculated the beginning of the *Republican Luminary* as coming in March 1809, and as Engledow later advertised the sale of his press in November 1810, it makes most sense to suggest that the concern began in the fall of 1808 and ended two years later – matching standard contract-lengths of that day. Then the pair moved the paper and press to Evansham in the ensuing spring, changing the name of their weekly in the process. The choice of that new title suggests that the paper was intended to counter the influence of Federalist papers in Staunton and Lynchburg, then the nearest towns issuing newspapers. The lack of surviving issues suggests extremely short print-runs and so only a marginal success for their enterprise. And such was a common occurrence between 1808 and 1810 in the Valley of Virginia, given the supply and currency problems that pervaded the region in those years.

These circumstances appear to explain the short life of the *Republican Luminary*. It is plain that Dromgoole recognized that his future in the trade lay elsewhere, despite the familial connections. He moved to Bardstown, Kentucky, in late 1810, joining with Peter Isler (235), another former Winchester printer who had married his younger sister Elizabeth, in Isler's newspaper and press office there; eventually, he became a substantial cotton-planter near Natchez as a result of the connections that he then forged in the interior Southwest.

With Dromgoole's departure, Engledow advertised the sale of his press in November 1810, likely hoping that someone would continue or replace the *Republican Luminary*. But he did not find a suitable buyer, and so his press remained in Evansham as a job-printing office. That course is known from its use in two ensuing journalistic efforts in the county. In 1812, a local schoolmaster, Thomas Erskine Birch (034), had a prospective number of a new literary weekly issued from that press. Then in 1820, Engledow's estate leased his Evansham press to John Gano Ustick (421) as part of a deal for that publisher to bring his fourteen-year-old *Political Prospect* to Wythe County from Abingdon; recast as the *Wythe Gazette*, that paper continued until 1827, probably using Engledow's press for the remainder of its life.

Sources: Not recorded by Library of Congress; Brigham II: 1168; Kegley, *Town of Evansham and Wythe County; Woods, Delta Plantations*.