

WYTHE 02: Signi Argus

01: Signi Argus (1812)

The second journal issued in Wythe County has left an even thinner trace on the historical record than did the first. It was a literary weekly whose editor was a local schoolmaster with ambitions to fame as a writer of patriotic prose and poetry. That focus limited its potential audience, and so its life, which may have been as brief as a single issue.

The *Signi Argus* was wholly the creation of Thomas Erskine Birch (034). Between 1807 and 1812, he was the preceptor of the Anchor & Hope Academy just outside Evansham (today Wytheville), and a Methodist minister of uncertain orthodoxy. He was a native of the island of St. Kitts who fled a school in England to join the American cause during the Revolutionary War; after he served in both the Continental and Maryland navies, Birch settled in Virginia where he took up the ministry and teaching. Former students – such as Joseph E. Johnston, the Confederate general – spoke highly of his curriculum, one focusing on literature and the practical arts, though not on languages.

It was during his Wythe County period that Birch experimented with publishing. First was a collection of Fourth of July orations, entitled the *Virginian Orator*, issued in 1808 from the Richmond press of Samuel Pleasants (331). Birch sent a copy of his small book to Thomas Jefferson in 1812, apparently looking for his endorsement of the work via an exchange of letters. The timing of that exchange is intriguing, as it corresponds to the moment that he was working to establish the *Signi Argus*. With a title which translates roughly as "the sign of the guardian," Birch was embracing a common Republican trope of the time, alluding to a character in Greek mythology, Argus Panoptes; a giant with a hundred eyes, several of his eyes were always awake, making him "all seeing" (*panoptes*); it was an idiom that Pleasants himself had adopted when he renamed his Richmond paper in 1796 as the *Virginia Argus*.

Why Birch would think such a specialized journal was a viable proposition in the small cross-roads town of Evansham may be tied to the proximity of an under-used press. Merchant-planter Robert Engledow (158) owned such a press, one used for simple job-printing then, following the demise in November 1810 of a weekly he had conducted with brother-in-law, William A. Dromgoole (149): *The Republican Luminary*. Yet as today there are no copies of the *Signi Argus* known extant, it is uncertain how long his paper issued. But it is clear that Birch abruptly closed his school and moved to Abingdon in Washington County in late 1812; so his literary weekly was clearly abandoned by then, if not before.

Birch continued his wandering ways, moving on from Abingdon to Russell County in 1816, and then to Harrison County, Kentucky in 1818. He died there in early 1821 at age fifty-six.

Sources: Not recorded by Library of Congress or Brigham; Kegley, *Wythe County*; O'Neil, *Birch Family History*.