

ABINGDON 01: Political Prospect

01: The Holston Intelligencer and Abingdon Advertiser (1806-1811)

02: The Political Prospect (1811-1819)

The first newspaper issued in Washington County was primarily a weekly advertising sheet designed to support the mercantile interests of that southwestern Virginia locale. Being so focused, it later demise was tied to the contraction in currency attending the Panic of 1819.

By 1800, the town of Abingdon had emerged as a vital trading center on the Great Wagon Road that reached into the trans-Appalachian settlements south and west of Virginia. As a result, the early nineteenth century was a period when the town's leading citizens undertook a variety of civic and commercial projects to support and enhance that vitality. The construction of a turnpike in 1804 connecting Abingdon to the important salt-works at nearby Saltville seems to have been particularly effective in expanding markets for local merchants, especially once they induced a printer to move to the town in late 1805 to issue a weekly newspaper advertising their wares.

John Gano Ustick (421) was a Philadelphia-trained printer who came to the Valley of Virginia in mid-1804 to establish himself independently from older cousins in the print trade in that highly competitive locale. At first he was a partner to John McMullin (298) in publishing the *Rockbridge Repository* (Lexington 01), but that weekly's ongoing financial troubles led to the dissolution of their partnership after just six months. Ustick remained in McMullin's employ until November 1805, when he finally left Lexington for Abingdon, so compelling McMullin to cease publication of his four-year-old journal.

The situation he found in Washington County was evidently a very attractive one for Ustick. An ardent Jeffersonian, he found a locale there that was heavily Republican in its politics. The county was populated by two vibrant religious communities; the area's first settlers were largely Presbyterian, and their descendants were well satisfied with Ustick's work for the Lexington Presbytery while with McMullin; the county had also developed a sizable Baptist populace, which clearly identified with Ustick's background as the son of a Baptist minister named for his father's well-known Baptist mentor.

His new *Holston Intelligencer and Abingdon Advertiser* made its first appearance on January 4, 1806. The geography seen in its title evinces the journal's purpose in assisting the town's development as the trade hub for the valleys of the three branches of the Holston River that stretched southwest into Tennessee. The paper's terms also show that Ustick learned from his Lexington experience as well; unlike McMullin, he required his subscribers pay for their newspapers in advance, so avoiding the need for costly collection efforts – at least in the journal's early days. With such a circulation and such a financial foundation, Ustick clearly understood the challenges his Abingdon press faced and planned accordingly.

Still, the ebb and flow of the country's economic tides effected Ustick in the longer term. His first fiscal crisis appears to have been tied to the Embargo of 1807 and the contraction of currency accompanying it. In the summer of 1808, he published a dunning notice seeking

payment of arrears by his subscribers, a notice reprinted elsewhere in consequence of his forceful eloquence:

"It is with pain we again address our delinquent subscribers on the subject of money. In three weeks time our stock of paper will be out, and we have not one dollar to help in the purchase of a new supply. When we ask such as have not paid for their papers, to share with us the good things in this life, we generally receive this answer, that they only subscribe for encouragement. Fine encouragement to take a man's labour and never pay him for it. We want no encouragement, but that which accompanies cash."

The numbering seen in the only known surviving copy of the *Intelligencer* – that for Tuesday May 15, 1810 (vol. 4, no. 198) – indicates that the paper was in suspension for 10 weeks sometime during the prior 208 weeks, perhaps as a result of the imminent paper shortage in 1808, or more likely on multiple occasions.

Despite such difficulties, Ustick's weekly continued for fourteen years. Throughout its life, his journal was "uncompromising in its Republicanism." Indeed, the *Intelligencer* was, in its early years, the only Republican paper in Virginia west of the Blue Ridge, just as had been the *Rockbridge Repository* before it. He backed "the policies of Madison and supporting his administration upon all occasions," particularly over the War of 1812. In the months before war was declared, Ustick turned to more partisan reporting over the simple mercantile news on which his paper was founded. In September 1811, he embraced this politicization by changing the *Intelligencer's* title to *The Political Prospect*, to reflect the newspaper's new *raison d'être*. That moniker remained on the paper's masthead until its cessation in 1819.

The death of the *Political Prospect* appears the result of another currency contraction, this generated by the Panic of 1819. The date that Ustick ceased publishing his Abingdon-based weekly is uncertain, as the latest surviving issue is that for January 8, 1819. What is clear is that Ustick relocated north to Wytheville (then known as Evansham) in early 1820, where he started the *Wythe Gazette* (Wythe 03) in early 1821, indicating that the closure of the *Political Prospect* came late in 1819. To produce his new weekly, he had to lease the press and types that had been used there by Robert Engledow (158) to publish the *Republican Luminary* (Wythe 01) almost a decade before. That circumstance implies that Ustick did not bring with him the tools that he had used in Abingdon and so was then in need of new ones. This points to the end of his tenure in Abingdon was being one marked by financial distress, this time with the loss of the tools of his trade. Ustick would continue publishing a weekly in Wythe County until he retired from the trade in 1828.

NB: The shift of Ustick's business from Abingdon to Wytheville has led to some confusion in bibliographic sources over the timing of his relocation and the newspaper titles involved in each venue. The 1903 *History of Southwest Virginia* by L. P. Summers appears to be the source of that confusion; therein he claims that Ustick's journal continued in other hands until 1830, before it was succeeded by a new Republican paper in March 1831, one which that same history reports continued until mid-1834. However, no issues of any Abingdon-issued paper are known today for the period from 1820 to 1831, nor are there any indirect

references to such a paper found in modern source materials. Summer's reports were repeated by Lester Cappon in his bibliography of Virginia newspapers, though they are not repeated by Clarence Brigham in his bibliography of American newspapers. The successions and titles that are reported here have been drawn from more recent secondary sources and from records of the U.S. Newspaper Program (1982-2011).

Sources: LCCN Nos. 90-69188, 90-69191; Brigham; Cappon. Summers, *Southwest Virginia*; Johnson, Checklist.