



PRESS RELEASE

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First newspaper published in West Virginia acquired by the American Antiquarian Society

Rare discovery includes the first issue: November 15, 1790

Worcester, MA (May 29, 2024)—The American Antiquarian Society (AAS), a national research library in Worcester, Massachusetts, has acquired almost 200 issues of *The Patowmac (Potowmac) Guardian, and Berkeley Advertiser*, the first newspaper published in what is now West Virginia. The bound volume of papers includes the very first issue (vol. 1, no. 1) published in Shepherdstown, Virginia, on November 15, 1790. More than 160 issues in the volume are the only known copies. Before the papers were purchased at auction in January of this year, the earliest known issue of *The Patowmac Guardian, and Berkeley Advertiser* was no. 33 (June 27, 1791). AAS holds that issue as part of its extensive American newspaper collection, which encompasses over 18,000 newspaper titles and more than two million issues. The newly acquired West Virginia newspapers will be conserved by specialists at AAS and made freely available for researchers.

“It’s extremely rare that a state’s first issue would become available, so this is a very exciting find,” said Vincent Golden, curator of newspapers at AAS, “We hold first issues for eleven states, including New Hampshire, Arkansas, and North Dakota.”

The Patowmac Guardian, and Berkeley Advertiser was published by Nathaniel Willis (1755-1831) in Shepherdstown until 1792, when he moved the paper to Martinsburg. Willis remained editor and publisher until 1799 when he left the area for Ohio. Like many newspaper publishers, Willis started out in a big-city printing firm—in his case, Boston—where he learned the trade and printed sermons, almanacs, and broadsides. Many of these are preserved at AAS. *The Patowmac Guardian, and Berkeley Advertiser* reflects Willis’s Jeffersonian Republican views, and the pages are filled with news gleaned from papers printed in Baltimore and Philadelphia, as well as Jamaica and London.



“AAS’s acquisition of so many issues of Nathaniel Willis’s newspaper offers scholars an exciting opportunity to study contentious national politics from a rare vantage point in northwestern Virginia in the decade after the Constitution’s ratification. It also provides a rare chance to trace the work of a prominent printer geographically from the Atlantic coast to Appalachia in the early republic,” said Brian P. Luskey, professor of history at West Virginia University and member of the American Antiquarian Society.

In his newspaper’s first issue Willis included a patriotic poem, “Where Liberty Dwells, There is my Country,” and reprinted a chapter from a popular history of the American Revolution. He also included a prospectus statement outlining his plan for the paper. For \$2 per year, subscribers would receive the weekly paper via post rider. Advertising space was available for \$1 for a “moderate length” ad that appeared over three weeks. In the first issue, all the ads are offerings from Willis himself, including promotion of his 1791 almanac, a call encouraging a “a strong, active, lad” to apply as his apprentice, and a job posting for “an active, sober man, who will undertake the business of post riding.”

[High resolution images of the first issue of *The Patowmac \(Potowmac\) Guardian, and Berkeley Advertiser* \(November 15, 1790\) are available here.](#)

About the American Antiquarian Society

Located in Worcester, Massachusetts, the American Antiquarian Society (AAS) is a national research library and community of learners dedicated to discovering and sharing a deeper understanding of the American past. The Society holds the world’s largest and most accessible collection of original printed, handwritten, and visual sources from before 1900 in what is now the United States. The library of over four million items includes books, pamphlets, broadsides, newspapers, periodicals, children's literature, music, and graphic arts material.

AAS connects people across the globe with these collections through its digital catalog and resources, online exhibitions, and virtual learning experiences. In addition, it supports dozens of



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researchers, artists, and writers each year with a variety of fellowship programs. In 2013, President Obama presented the Society with the National Humanities Medal in a White House ceremony.

The American Antiquarian Society is located at 185 Salisbury Street in Worcester, MA. The library is open Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Tuesdays from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

The library is free and open to anyone with projects or interests related to the collections. All are welcome to join its free public programs held throughout the year. To learn more, visit americanantiquarian.org.

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