

Newspapers

The Eastern Panhandle was the birthplace of newspaper publishing in West Virginia. Three newspapers were founded there before 1800: the *Potowmac Guardian* and *Berkeley Advertiser* in Shepherdstown in 1790; the *Impartial Observer* in 1797 in Shepherdstown; and the *Berkeley Intelligencer* in 1799 in Martinsburg.

In the early years of the 19th century, other regions produced their first newspapers. The *Monongalia Gazette* was founded at Morgantown in 1804; the *Wheeling Repository* was established in 1807; Clarksburg's *Bye-Stander* commenced in 1810; Wellsburg's *Charlestown Gazette* appeared in 1814 (Wellsburg was called Charles Town at the time); and Weston's *Western Star* began in 1820. The *Kenhawa Spectator* began publication in Charleston in 1820, and Lewisburg's *Palladium of Virginia and the Pacific Monitor* was founded in 1823. The *South Branch Intelligencer* was established in 1830 in Romney and published until 1896, when it merged with the *Hampshire Review*, which is still publishing. Charles Town's *Spirit of Jefferson* commenced in 1844, merged with the *Farmers' Advocate* in 1948, and continues publication today. By 1850, 21 weeklies and three dailies, published in both the English and German languages, were serving a population of approximately 300,000 in Western Virginia.

Before the creation of West Virginia in 1863, 43 towns had established at least one weekly newspaper, and larger towns supported several. The *Wheeling Intelligencer*, established in 1852, was the only daily newspaper before the Civil War. The proliferation of newspapers reflected the needs of rival political parties, demand for news of social and political controversy, the need for legal and official notices in recently created counties, and recent technological advances in printing. Although the earliest newspapers were primarily filled with national and foreign news, country editors soon learned that their efforts should be devoted to local and regional news. Throughout the early 19th century, religious and agricultural journals were popular, and many were published in Western Virginia. However, the region's population was small and dispersed over a rugged terrain, illiteracy was widespread, and poor transportation hindered newspaper circulation. By 1863, approximately 250 newspapers had been established, with most failing within a short time. A notable exception was the *Point Pleasant Register*; founded as a weekly in 1862, it became a daily in 1916 and continues publication today.

The press of antebellum Western Virginia was generally Unionist and antislavery, but many areas also supported pro-Southern newspapers. Wheeling's *Intelligencer* was anti-slavery, pro-Union, and the strongest supporter of the statehood movement. Another newspaper opposed to slavery was the *Ceredo Crescent*, established in 1857 when Ceredo was founded as an anti-slavery community in a slave state. The Civil War was detrimental to many of the state's newspapers. The publishers of the *Fairmont True Virginian*, Harrisville's *Ritchie Democrat*, and Lewisburg's *Greenbrier Weekly Era* closed their papers to join the Confederate army. Pro-Southern presses of Charleston's *Kanawha Valley Star* and Martinsburg's *Virginia Republican* were seized by Union soldiers. Pro-secessionist newspapers in Philippi, Romney, and other towns in areas of strategic importance were destroyed by Union troops. Other pro-secessionist newspapers, such as the *Parkersburg News*, were destroyed by civilian mobs.

At least 15 Civil War camp newspapers were published on confiscated presses for army units on active duty in western Virginia. These regimental publications included *Yankee*, the *Knapsack*, the *Old Flag*, and the *Wandering Soldier*, all Union newspapers, and the *Guerilla*, the only Confederate military newspaper printed in what became West Virginia.

Following statehood in 1863, editors changed their mastheads to reflect the name of the new state, although some delayed the change for months. Notable developments after the Civil War made newspaper publishing more lucrative. News companies supplied preprinted sheets to local publishers who added their own copy and advertisements. The introduction of less expensive wood-pulp paper reduced costs. Legislative printing contracts sustained printers in the state capital, which moved from Wheeling to Charleston in 1870, back to Wheeling in 1875, and then permanently to

Charleston in 1885.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, dramatic growth in the lumber, coal, oil, gas, iron, glass, and salt industries brought substantial increases in population and the establishment of new towns. Immigrants, many of whom were industrial workers, established newspapers in the German and Italian languages. African-American newspapers included Martinsburg's *Pioneer Press*, Charleston's the *Advocate*, and Keystone's *McDowell Times*. The *Volcano Lubricator*, *Sistersville Oil Review*, *West Virginia Walking Beam* and the *Derrick Herald* served the oil fields. College newspapers were established at West Virginia University and Marshall College which continue publication to the present. Cheap paper, news distribution networks, and the invention of the linotype, the telephone, and the typewriter decreased production costs and encouraged the proliferation of newspapers. With at least 223 different newspapers (dailies, weeklies, semi-weeklies, and tri-weeklies) publishing concurrently in 1912, more papers were being issued within the state than at any other time. Unlike most of their predecessors, many newspapers founded from 1866 to 1915 have survived to the present.

The presence of so many newspapers in the early 20th century created fierce competition for readers and advertisers. World War I brought more expensive paper, rising wages, and higher postal rates, which forced many smaller papers to suspend publication or merge with competitors. Several newspapers closed when their owners departed for military duty. Although the number of daily newspapers remained fairly constant, the number of weeklies continued to decline after the war. West Virginia's slow population growth in the 1920s and 1930s and the widespread poverty of the Great Depression reduced the number of weeklies to 130. With the onset of World War II, labor shortages, paper shortages, and high costs again forced closures and mergers.

After 1950, the number of weekly newspapers began another decline as tens of thousands of West Virginians left the state. Mechanized mining produced rapidly declining employment in the coal industry while unemployment also increased in other areas of manufacturing. Although circulation remained relatively stable during the 1960s and early 1970s, population losses and an unfavorable economic climate triggered a gradual decline of newspapers through the 1970s.

Ironically, West Virginia's innovative publishers led the nation during this period in technological advances. The installation of the first offset presses in the early 1960s permitted the printing of several different newspapers per day, allowing the owners of such presses to contract to print nearby newspapers as well as their own. By 2002, only 25 presses printed all the newspapers operating in West Virginia as well as many from other states. The disastrous 1985 flood also dramatically changed the technology of newspaper production. The [*Pocahontas Times*](#) was the first West Virginia newspaper to use a desktop publishing system after the flood demolished its printing plant, instantly moving the paper into the computer age. Other flood-ravaged newspapers quickly adopted computerized production, and every one continued to publish. Today, all West Virginia newspapers rely on automated information processing and computerized typesetting systems.

By 2010, there were 21 daily and 58 non-dailies publishing in West Virginia. Marshall University and West Virginia University students published daily papers, while most other colleges and universities maintained a weekly or monthly campus news publication. The state's largest newspapers are Charleston's [*Gazette*](#) and [*Daily Mail*](#); Huntington's [*Herald-Dispatch*](#); Parkersburg's *News & Sentinel*, [*Beckley's Register-Herald*](#) and Morgantown's *Dominion Post*, each of which have a daily circulation of more than 20,000. The largest weekly papers include the *Nicholas Chronicle* and the *Weston Democrat*.

Written by [Harold Malcolm Forbes](#)

Citations

1. Forbes, Harold M. *West Virginia Newspapers, 1790-1990: A Union List*. Morgantown: West Virginia University Library, 1989.

2. Norona, Delf & Charles Shetler. *West Virginia Imprints, 1790-1863: A Checklist of Books, Newspapers, Periodicals and Broadsides*. Moundsville: West Virginia Library Association, 1958.
3. Rice, Otis K. "West Virginia Printers and their Work, 1790-1830." *West Virginia History*, July 1953.