On August 15, 1958, the Washington Reporter will be one hundred and fifty years old. It has appeared regularly for a century and a half under the same name, making it one of the oldest newspapers in the country with such a record. During its long life it has undergone changes in design, political affiliation, terms of publication and ownership and has witnessed the transformation of one of the leading counties of Pennsylvania from agriculture to industry and perhaps back to agriculture again. It has followed and participated in the major political changes that have affected Pennsylvania’s political history since 1808 and it has been a part of the changing population and race picture. Such a close relationship to the political, economic, and social structure of south western Pennsylvania makes The Reporter a significant eye witness to the history of the section, the state, and the nation—and its yellowed pages, now preserved through microfilm, are a gold mine for the researcher and historian. Not only as a study in the history of journalism but in the broader area of history, The Reporter has an extremely wide application.

Like the novice prospector who has been known to mistake iron pyrhite for real gold, the historian must exercise reasonable care in dealing with newspapers lest he too is taken in by the glittering storehouse of information contained in the pages of a paper such as The Reporter. Lucy Salmon in her book The Newspaper and the Historian lists for the historian the many guarantees of the reliability of a newspaper that are reassuring to the doubting historian in his contemplated use of the press as an historical source. Experience in recognizing those items, the reliability of which is guaranteed, helps avoid the danger of mistaking fool’s gold for the real article in research. Such proof as governmental guarantees of a free press, signed letters from subscribers who have a vested interest in the faithfulness of the reproduction of such letters,

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the newspaper's written contract which appears under the masthead, the newspapers's function as a business organization if it is to survive, the reproduction of certain documents, facts and statistics which have no emotional overtones and the personality of the paper itself, guarantee the reliability of the newspaper as an historical source. Although much of what can be guaranteed does not consist of news, its inherent value in reconstructing the past cannot be ignored.2

The authoritativeness of the press as historical material is to a large degree determined by its personality.3 Both externally and internally the newspaper has characteristics that give it a reliability or lack of the same that enables the reader to determine the degree to which its news, editorials or other features can be accepted or rejected. If it prints only the news that is fit to print or if it must include as a part of its regular menu at least one love nest revelation, these tendencies become a part of the newspaper personality. Whether it is a conservative paper or whether it follows a liberal line, the historian must be aware of those features in order to use the paper accurately, and even when a paper is a scandal sheet or when it is obviously biased, it remains a valuable source of material evidence of the existence of such biases—if nothing else.

The personality of a newspaper is reflected in many ways, the most obvious being the name, terms, slogan and conditions of birth. The Reporter, for example, was named what it was because the editor believed that the function of a newspaper was to present the news to its readers in as objective a manner as was possible. The editors, William Sample and Benjamin Brown, announced in the first issue of The Reporter, its principles as follows:

In conducting The Reporter, principle and not men shall be our guide. The principles which gave birth to the Declaration of Independence and which carried the American people triumphantly through the storms and stress of revolution shall be maintained with all the ability and zeal of which we are masters. To the Constitution of the United States and to that of this state, we declare ourselves firmly and unalterably attached and any attempt to destroy either shall be resisted with energy and zeal.4

Underneath the paper's title on page one, as a further pledge to objectivity The Reporter carried two lines of verse: "Tis Pleasant, Through Loopholes of Retreat to Peep at Such a World: To See the

2 Ibid., pp 83-84.
3 Ibid., p 40
Stir of the Great Babel, and Not Feel the Crowd.”

Objectivity as a feature of The Reporter's personality was almost completely a figment of the editors imagination, however. Neither Sample nor Brown attempted to conceal their political prejudices and in the initial issue, of The Reporter there appeared a statement to the effect that in addition to supporting Jefferson and the state administration, the paper and its editors would expose the desperate Federalist party and the "lies which they use to regain power," and in a sweeping conclusion they added that communications from democrats would be received "with pleasure and attended to with promptness."  

During the first twenty years of the life of The Reporter the real and active interest of the paper in the Democratic-Republican party was one of the features of its personality. At the end of the first year of publication Brown and Sample reiterated their earlier stand on politics and announced to their readers that:

The character of the paper is established and it only remains for us to declare that that character shall never alter. The leaders of that party which we term Federal, we firmly believe are hostile to the principles of our government. When we cease to oppose their views may we cease to exist.  

Benjamin Brown was quoted in the Pittsburgh Commonwealth in a fervent and outspoken statement which left no doubt as to his objectivity in regard to politics.

Be it known, then, that I am a Democratic-Republican, one of that unfashionable class which by the lords of the land are despised for their adherence to the rabble. I know not, nor will I ever acknowledge any other government under heaven than that of the people. I will oppose with all my might, every system which tends to undermine their supremacy, and I will if in my power, lash the rascals who dare Traduce them.  

Not content with "Objectively" supporting the Democratic-Republican party and opposing Federalism, the paper attacked political neutrality with the same fervor it maintained in other controversies. Evidently The Reporter did not possess any negative flaws in its otherwise positive personality for it publicly proclaimed that:

We have no good opinion of men declaring themselves of no party in affairs of government—they can have no mind of their own or

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5 Ibid., August 15, 1808.  
6 Ibid., August 21, 1809.  
fear prevents their supporting it. He who would be neuter ought to be declared unworthy the name of a citizen and denounced infamous.8

Another ideal The Reporter supported in the prospectus published in its first issue, was that it intended to refrain from personal attack upon any person. In the same issue, however, the editors accused James Ross, the Federalist candidate for governor, of being an atheist, charged him with blasphemy in administering the sacraments to a dog, criticized him for voting for Jay's Treaty with England, accused him of dividing the union and charged him with refusing to toast the Constitution.9 In a letter printed in the same issue, he was even accused of plotting with Aaron Burr in the so-called Burr conspiracy.

Lest the historian be tempted to turn his back on this example of journalistic schizophrenia, it should be noted that such partisanship was the rule and not the exception and wise use of newspaper sources in this era requires a knowledge of both the ideals for which the newspaper expressed attachment and realities in which they indulged.

Newspapers in the early part of the nineteenth century were in no way the business enterprises that they have become in this century. The purposes for which they were founded were usually partisan and they survived on that basis or not at all. Since it took very little money to establish a paper the cost to the subscriber and advertiser was also relatively small. The Reporter was being influenced by a rural clientele of Democratic leanings who probably had a very small cash income. Not too well educated, they would hardly require the reading material provided by a William Cullen Bryant of the New York Evening Post nor be impressed by the mission which the Niles Weekly Register established for itself. With a price to the reader of only two dollars a year, one dollar to be paid at the "commencement of every six months," the finished product could be expected to attain only a modicum of accomplishment or of objectivity.

Since frontier newspapers could be founded on a very short shoestring, they sprang up like mushrooms in such numbers as to defy counting by contemporary researchers.10 The problems created by such competition were many. They struggled to survive by appealing to the political, social or economic prejudices of their potential customers who

8 The Reporter, August 20, 1810.
9 Ibid., August 15, 1808.
then rewarded them by refusing to pay for their subscriptions. The editors would threaten, beg, plead, compromise and wheedle without too much success. The following pitiful complaint illustrates the nature of the suffering of these early publisher-editors:

Newspaper printing is a business requiring the most intense labor and the closest application of both body and mind. It is a business destructive of health and ease; frequently cuts the thread of existence, and is a bar to every pleasure of life. Do not those then who devote themselves to its duties; who sacrifice health, pleasure and life itself, to the benefit of their fellow citizens; do they not merit their reward? We know we address reasonable, honest men. We know they will answer, “Yes they do.”

By December 1820 the editor of The Reporter complained that he was $3,000.00 in debt. Since a newspaper could be started with a cash outlay of as little as $400.00 the relative size of the debt was large.

Since it is obvious that these frontier newspapers were not the best type of investment from the profit point of view, other incentives must be examined. Sample's experiences in Washington were perhaps typical for at least one other editor, John Grayson of the rival Examiner, enjoyed or suffered as the case might be, the same general background.

William Sample, until 1833 editor of The Reporter, came to Washington Borough in 1808 on his way to the West. Along with thousands of such migrants he was passing through Washington County, located on one of the main traveled roads to the Ohio country, but was persuaded to stay in Washington Borough for the purpose of starting a newspaper. Unpacking his equipment, Sample began publication of The Reporter in a building owned by John Rettig, who operated a hotel there called “The Sign of the Swan.”

In April 1810, The Reporter moved to the mansion house of David Redick, Esq., deceased, located at the Northeast corner of Cherry Alley

10 Earlie Forest, History of Washington County I (Chicago, 1926) pp. 798-813. This author who has spent a lifetime in Journalism and local history lists 33 papers as having been published at one time in Washington. Two papers mentioned in The Reporter are not listed by Mr. Forest and either appeared so briefly as not to merit attention or perhaps appeared under several names. The Western Register is referred to as having originated in The Reporter's office and The Same Old Coon is described as a campaign paper probably published for a short time in 1844.

11 The Reporter, December 18, 1915.

on Main Street near the Court House. The significance of this move in relation to the personality of the paper is the fact that Redick was the first secretary of "The Washington Mechanical Society," a Jacobin Society organized in Washington in 1792. Further significance might be found in the added fact that Sample, editor of The Reporter, was secretary of the same group in 1814. The close association between Sample and this early Democratic Club perhaps accounts for his immediate support of the party and the persuasive forces that conspired to delaw's journey West.

Senwle said in the first issue of The Reporter that he had not intended to settle in Washington but had meant to move West into the Ohio country or beyond. Persuaded to remain in the area he first planned to establish a newspaper in Waynesburg, county seat of Greene County. For what he described as personal reasons, however, Sample remained in Washington where the first issue of The Reporter appeared on August 15, 1808, and in which he stoutly denied being subservient to any other interests than his own.

The Reporter was not the first nor the only newspaper in Washington in 1808. The first weekly appeared in Washington Borough in 1795 and was called The Western Telegraph and Washington Advertiser and was a Federalist paper which continued publication to 1812. The Herald of Liberty, published by John Israel, was issued in Washington Borough in 1798. During the campaign of 1817-18 there were five newspapers being published in Washington Borough alone.

With newspapers bearing such an obvious, if unstated relationship to the political battles of their era, they often indulged in editorial warfare with other newspapers wherein the only limits to weapons or tactics were those imposed by the reticence of the editors. Since reticence in these early editors was the least of their characteristics, newspaper warfare was largely a game without rules.

The dearest enemy of The Reporter during the period from 1808 to 1817 was the Federalist party. All of the venom that the editor could muster or clip out of an exchange paper was heaped upon that

13 The Reporter, April 23, 1810.
14 Ibid., August 15, 1838.
15 Ibid., August 15, 1808.
16 Forest, Washington County I, pp 798-813.
17 The Reporter, September 21, 1818.
"party of treason." "Is it not highly probable," The Reporter asked, "that hundreds or thousands of dollars of the British Secret Service money fund are now in the service of the British party in America?"18

In addition rival newspaper editors who supported the Federalist party were accused of conspiring with the British.19 The Reporter did its level best to turn the War of 1812 into a political victory for the Democratic-Republican party.

Controversy with rival newspapers during the first years of Reporter history were related to this struggle with the Federalists for the most part but sometimes it seemed to be almost entirely based upon personalities. One such dispute was prolonged for several months in 1808 and involved an alleged misquote of a Tree of Liberty story. Brown and

The editors of The Reporter present their compliments to the editor of the Tree of Liberty and inform him that they conceive they have been perfectly consistent and could easily convince even a blockhead of the fact. They are persuaded, however, that the editor of the Tree has a soft place in his head, and they do not wish to enter into a contest with fools.20

When the editor of the Tree of Liberty replied by accusing the editors of The Reporter of mental imbecility, Brown and Sample were indignant, and although unwilling to deny the charge, remarked that they could not take the word of such an animal as the editor of the Tree whose "scull" (sic) was unnaturally thick.21

Such controversies which enlivened the job of newspaper publication in the early years were mild and insignificant when compared with the long struggle between The Reporter and its rivals after 1817. During this era Sample, who after 1810 was The Reporter's sole editor and publisher, was forced to battle tooth and nail to maintain his position as the "true" representative of the Democratic-Republican party, his personal leadership in party circles in Washington County, and his political and journalistic reputation throughout the state. Not entirely a matter of its own doing, The Reporter was merely a victim of the stormy political seas of the so-called "Era of Good Feeling." The Federalist party was on its deathbed and did not survive the election of 1816. This left the political future of ex-Federalists and up and coming

19 The Reporter, October 23, 1820.
20 Ibid., August 29, 1808.
21 Ibid., September 12, 1808.
political newcomers to intra-party warfare. To succeed politically it was necessary to capture county or state political machinery, pose as the “true” descendants of Jefferson, and then withstand the assaults of other political hopefuls.

During this period of internecine warfare both issues and men were scrambled and the readers of The Reporter must have been hard pressed to determine who was who or what issue was represented by what faction. Newspapers found it convenient to label all men who opposed them as enemies of the people, Federalists, or worse and all public issues supported by the opposition as deceitful. Political news analysts with a minimum of objectivity seldom existed and would probably not have been tolerated had they existed. Almost the only redeeming feature of these political sheets was their frankness and rough honesty. The Reporter frankly solicited only Democratic-Republican comment and seldom printed anything that might have given aid and comfort to the enemy.

The struggle between The Reporter and its rival Washington papers after 1817 had its roots in the congressional election of 1816. Reluctant to take sides in that year, The Reporter advocated a “free election” and to this end published a list of names that might produce a candidate for Congress. In addition it published a number of letters from such correspondents as “A Farmer,” “Many Democrats,” and “Whig” which recommended favorite sons in various sections of the district.

If The Reporter was not clear on whom it supported, it was definite about whom it would not support. Among those it refused to accept was Thomas Baird, a rising power in Washington politics, who allegedly supported a compensation bill which would increase the pay of members of Congress. Also The Reporter was unwilling to accept the candidacy of another lawyer, of which, it was agreed, there were already too many.

The Bairds, however, could not be dismissed in such fashion. Not only was Thomas Baird a political power but he was associated with a group of Borough politicos who also wielded political influence. This

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22 Ibid., August 5, 1816.
group included George Baird, Thomas Acheson, David Acheson, Thomas McGiffin and Thomas Morgan, son of Colonel George Morgan of Revolutionary War fame.24

When The Reporter denied the Baird machine of irregular Democratic-Republicans sufficient space to conduct a campaign in 1816, the Bairds began to lay plans to destroy Sample’s political and journalistic hold over Washington County. To this end a letter was written in 1817 to one John Grayson, a printer in Baltimore, offering him an opportunity to take over a paper in Washington, Pennsylvania, for the purpose of supporting William Findlay. Continuing his correspondence with George Baird, arrangements were made, a press and other materials purchased and the first number of The Examiner was published by Grayson on May 28, 1817.25

The Examiner could survive only because of its political support since its subscription list in 1817 did not amount to 400. The editor, Grayson, complained also of being a stranger and of suffering ungenerous opposition and misrepresentation.26

Political warfare on the state level in 1817 was based upon two tickets nominated by two separate party caucuses. The Harrisburg caucus selected William Findlay as the regular or administration candidate. A group meeting at Carlisle nominated Joseph Hiester and the war was on with no holds barred.27 The main issues of the campaign were the personalities of the two candidates and the manner in which they were selected.

Since The Reporter had been committed to Findlay for some time before his nomination, it immediately jumped into the fray. It found to Sample’s surprise that it was not to be alone, however. Two other Washington newspapers also professed to support Findlay. The Western Register, which first appeared in February 1817, was printed in the office of The Reporter by Robert Fee. With a circulation said to be no greater than 140 subscribers, it at first professed to support Findlay only to join the Hiester camp in the summer of 1817.28 The Examiner sup-

24 Ibid., pp 163-164.
26 Ibid.
28 The Reporter, February 3, 1817; June 2, 1817.
ported Findlay throughout the campaign and until the dean of the Baird family, Thomas H. Baird, had been appointed president judge of a district court in 1818.29

_The Reporter_ found the election of 1817 to be a trying one indeed. The battle with the Hiester forces was not nearly so exasperating as the struggle with its journalistic rivals. The battle with _The Examiner_ was a long and bitter one but Sample's experience with _The Western Register_ was no less difficult. Robert Fee had been taken into _The Reporter_ office and was permitted to publish from that place. In the course of publishing political news Fee published material damaging to the Findlay cause which was widely circulated. Sample was accused of plotting to slander Findlay under the guise of friendship and when Fee supported Hiester, _The Reporter_ leveled its guns at the _Register_ and Fee, who were both described as being of no consequence.30

Sample duly noted the proposed appearance of _The Examiner_ in March 1817. His story carried the information that the paper would be a new democratic newspaper. “Any subscriber who does not like the paper need not pay,” read the article, “and any poor person can secure a paper by voting the ticket.” Signed “The Family and Company,” the article was evidently a plant and elsewhere in _The Reporter_, the editor charged it with being a tool of Federal Lawyers, the bank, and turnpike speculation.31

Both newspapers showed little originality in their attacks on one another. _The Examiner_ claimed that the character of _The Reporter’s_ editor and his practice of libeling gentlemen of the Democratic party was well known and properly estimated in every county from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia. Sample, himself a master of abuse, complained that he had been slandered and abused by a newspaper called the _Western Register_, a _Washingtonian_, a _Western Corrector_, and by an _Examiner_.32

The most serious comment of the campaign was published in the Greensburg _Gazette_ in March 1817. It announced the beginning of a Findlay paper in Washington (_The Examiner_) and said that it was started because the editor of the Findlay paper already there was such

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29 Kehl, _Ill Feeling_, p 165.
30 _The Reporter_, June 2, 1817.
31 Ibid., March 31, 1817.
32 Ibid., September 21, 1818.
Sample's real fight was with the Baird family who had brought The Examiner to Washington. The stakes were the Washington County Democratic-Republican party and the various offices controlled by the faction that controlled the county. Sample and his brother-in-law Samuel Workman who was a printer for The Reporter were both to hold appointee offices in Washington County.

Name calling was a common practice in these county political fights. Committee meetings often ended in brawls. At one such meeting in 1817 Sample called Thomas Baird effeminate and a fiste whereupon the Bairds withdrew, organized a rump meeting and published the entire proceedings in The Examiner.

With both factions seeking office, the methods by which officers were chosen became of primary importance. The Reporter wanted county Democrats to hold nominating conventions and by petition to pass along their choices to the governor for appointment. The Examiner, confident of gubernatorial favor, wanted the appointments to come directly from the governor. When The Examiner attacked the attempt to limit the patronage power of the governor, Sample claimed that the protest came from "the pen of a subtle, logical and deceitful lawyer thirsting for office and power." "Mr. Baird," said The Reporter, "although he has the name of a democrat is practically as great an aristocrat as any man in the western country."

Down through the years Sample continued to hammer away at the Bairds, charging them with plain office seeking for personal profit. Throughout the so-called "era of good feeling" the Baird faction succeeded in getting comparatively few political appointments. Sample no doubt deserved much of the credit for this situation.

When George Baird failed to receive an appointment as prothonotary from Governor Findlay, The Reporter hailed the event. Baird was

33 Ibid., March 19, 1817.
34 Ibid., December 16, 1817.
35 Ibid., December 8, 1817.
36 Ibid., October 5, 1818.
37 Ibid., September 21, 1818.
38 Kehl, Ill Feeling, pp 160-168.
called a harpie, panderer and appendage of the Washington club, the most notorious office seeker in Washington County.39

Findlay was hailed for his decision to pass over George Baird for prothonotary even though Alexander Murdoch was to be continued in office for another year. As the last phase of this contest, Sample himself was appointed to the post. (According to The Examiner he had purchased the post on a trip to Harrisburg.)40

After Sample received his appointment he turned The Reporter over to his brother-in-law, Samuel Workman, who was printer for the paper and more important, a faithful Republican.41 Once the change in management was made with no discernible difference in newspaper policy, The Examiner charged Workman with being a tool of Sample. Workman hotly denied the charge but not to the satisfaction of Grayson.

The election of 1820 was a re-run of the 1817 campaign with Findlay again the regular Democratic candidate and Hiester an independent candidate. In Washington newspaper circles, however, the two leading papers were now real opponents, with The Reporter continuing to support William Findlay and The Examiner supporting Joseph Hiester. No longer was it necessary for newspaper readers to choose between two identical packages.

The master political stroke of the campaign was performed by Workman, now editor of The Reporter, when he reprinted old, 1817 editorials and articles which The Examiner had published in behalf of Findlay in the previous campaign.42 During that campaign The Examiner had charged Hiester with being a Revolutionary War coward, a business failure, and an advocate of public spending and accordingly writhed when confronted with its own words.

In spite of the best that The Reporter and other Findlay groups could do, Hiester was elected governor. The Reporter attempted to swallow its bitter pill graciously but in its congratulatory statement warned Hiester to be on guard against the men who supported him for personal reasons.43

39 The Reporter, March 9, 1818. 40 Ibid., May 31, 1819. 41 Ibid. 42 Ibid., August 21, 1820. 43 Ibid., October 30, 1820.
Meanwhile, a petition was circulated in Washington County to keep Sample in the prothonotary's office but to no avail. The Examiner scoffed at this attempt and rightly predicted that Hiester would remove him, which he did in May 1821.

Everything was not lost for the Sample faction, however, as Workman was chosen treasurer of Washington County for a period of three years. Although The Examiner protested, the election of Workman was in the hands of the commissioners who were friendly to Sample and Company.

The practice of factional politics was continued to 1823. In that year the regular Democratic-Republicans met at Harrisburg and nominated John Andrew Shulze. Although The Reporter's caucus choice had been George Bryan, the editor followed the dictates of party regularity and supported Shulze. The Examiner waited until the Lewistown caucus nominated Andrew Gregg and then threw its influence to him. Washington County was represented at the Lewistown convention by several citizens, one of whom became vice-president of the convention. The Reporter warned Washington County against this collection of aristocrats, Federalists, and job-seekers. When the activities of these so-called faction Democrats were reported by Sample, he always referred to them as erst-while Federalists. He explained that the Federalists needed a new name so they had taken this (the convention) means of "stirring up the democratick (sic) turncoats." "Here follows" The Reporter read, "the proceedings of the mongral meeting of turncoats and masked Federalists." When The Examiner defended a local Gregg meeting as being composed of Wigs (sic), Sample pounced on the error in spelling and took journalistic license with Grayson's misspelled word.

Sample took time out from his offensive against his political and journalistic enemies to complain of the repeated references to himself. He protested that Shulze, not he, was running for office. When Workman received a bonus for his work as county treasurer The Examiner leveled its guns at him and repeated the charge that Sample and Family were milking the treasury. The Reporter then stepped up its attack on Gregg.

44 Ibid., October 8, 1821.
46 Ibid., June 2, 1823.
47 Ibid., June 9, 1823; August 11, 1823.
The election was a demonstration of regular strength that withered the Independent Republican movement. After 1823, the local movement which had been pushed by The Examiner and the Washington Club virtually died. Sample returned to his political appointment as prothonotary and Workman became sheriff to the Pennsylvania assembly, where he worked from 1827 to 1830. Politics, which had gone through an era of confusion during the one party period in Pennsylvania, was to return to the two party structure in the next decade.

The Reporter which had loudly proclaimed the firmness of its political faith, left the Democratic-Republican ranks after 1830 and became Whig and then Republican. The Examiner, denounced as sailing under false colors during the years of warfare with Sample remained Democratic and continued its opposition to The Reporter in the same bitter fashion down through the years or at least until journalism took on a new look and became the business enterprise that it is today.

48 Kehl, Ill Feeling, p 131.