

THE ULSTER COUNTY GAZETTE

In this State named for George Washington, at a time when elaborate preparations are being made everywhere for celebrating the bicentennial of his birth in 1932, there are abundant reasons for giving attention to the many reprints of the *Ulster County Gazette*, published at Kingston, New York, January 4, 1800. The funeral of George Washington occupied parts of the inside pages with the customary inverted rules to give the black borders of mourning, which made the paper an attractive item contemporaneous with Washington's passing. The flood of reprints of this humble little newspaper has caused it to be referred to as "without doubt the most widely known literary relic in this country."¹

For a score of years, as the month of February drew near, the History Department and Library of the University of Washington, as well as librarians and newspaper editors throughout the State, have received appeals from owners of copies of that famous newspaper. Nearly every one of the owners was convinced that the copy possessed was an original which had been in the family for generations.

No other item in American literature has received such extensive, minute and careful study as this *Ulster County Gazette*. The decision arrived at is that not one original copy is known to exist at the present time. Sixty-seven reprints, beginning about 1825, have been catalogued. There is little surprise in the quotation that the *Ulster County Gazette* "covers the country like the dew."² Probably a ten-year-old issue of any present day newspaper in the United States would be more difficult to find than one of the reprints of this paper one hundred and thirty-one years after its first appearance.

Reasons for this phenomenal condition have been studied by many experts and their conclusions seem logical enough except as to the large number of reprints. The original was a small four-page paper containing its regular amount of news and on the inside pages, as stated above, an account of Washington's funeral. Washington died on December 14, 1799, and, by the time the *Ulster County Gazette* of January 4, 1800, made record of the funeral, it is likely that the other 199 newspapers in the United States at that time had also published some account of that event. A few of those other old papers have been reprinted but in no instance comparable to the case of the *Ulster County Gazette* as to number of issues or number of copies.

¹ A. J. Wohlhagen, "The Spurious *Ulster County Gazette* of January 4, 1800," in *The New York Historical Society Bulletin*, Volume I., (April, 1917), p. 15.

² R. W. G. Vail, *The Ulster County Gazette and Its Illegitimate Offspring*, published by The New York Public Library in 1930, page 15.

The paper was established in Kingston, New York, on May 5, 1798, and continued until 1822. The publishers were Samuel Freer and his son, Samuel S. Freer. There have been found copies of three original issues before that important one of January 4, 1800, and another such original after that date. These have been of great assistance in studying supposed originals of the duplicated copy.

It is undoubtedly true that original copies existed and were used when the first reprints were made. The motives for those earliest reprints were probably sentimental and patriotic, to celebrate an anniversary of the paper or of Washington's death. In later years the motives were quite mercenary.

Some of such motives were revealed in bold circulars to promote the sale of the reprints. One of these of 1857 is headed "Literary Curiosity!" and quotes approving paragraphs from contemporaries. The portion there credited to *Emerson's Magazine and Putnam's Monthly* relates the finding of an original copy beneath the lath and plaster of an old house that had been demolished and "some enterprising citizens" were preparing type and paper to issue an exact copy. This issue was to sell at ten cents a copy or one hundred copies by express for five dollars. Another circular of about 1867 was headed, "The Oldest Paper! A Relic of 1799." Both statements are errors. This printer says: "and now offer, after much delay and expense, so close an imitation of the original, that it is questionable whether Samuel Freer himself, the old publisher, would detect the counterfeit, were he still in the land of the living." He was to sell the reprints at ten cents a copy and added that copies would be "exposed for sale in all the cities and towns of the United States."³

Patriotic and mercenary motives were combined in 1876 when another reprint was sold in large bundles at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. Those copies spread in all directions.

Wisconsin has had much experience with the reprints being offered for the consideration of librarians and others. In the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* for September, 1918, there is an article entitled "Historical Fragments" in which M. M. Quaife tells about the efforts of owners to sell their copies. He also tells about a colored printer in Decatur, Illinois, "a dozen years ago," who reprinted the *Ulster County Gazette* and sold his issue to local merchants. They gave away the papers as premiums with each purchase at their stores.

The American Antiquarian Society has a copy of a letter from

³ Photographic reproductions of both circulars in the New York Public Library pamphlet, facing p. 6.

Mr. Folger McKinsey telling how a reprint was made in the office of the *Daily News*, Frederick, Maryland, for a little man whose name is forgotten. Ordinary news print was cut to the proper size and soaked in an old tan vat to give it a semblance of age and then, after drying the paper, reprints were made about 1888 and run off in ten-thousand lots. These were shipped to the customer wherever ordered and for a period of ten years were sold by him at County or State Fairs for five cents a copy. It was that customer's only source of income.

It has already been stated that separate copies of the reprints appear periodically in this State of Washington. The Library of the University of Washington has two copies, Librarian Charles W. Smith has a personal copy and the present writer has three copies, each of a different issue. It is also evident that copies have arrived in bulk. A few years ago a gentleman telephoned from Kirkland, Washington, that he had a bundle of thirty-four copies he would like to sell. On February 18, 1923, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* published an item saying that a lady had brought to the office a copy of this old paper which "had been preserved" by her grandmother. Probably every other newspaper in this State has had some similar experience.

In fact it is quite likely that the copies are so numerous from the many reprints that every newspaper in the United States has had occasion to mention, at one time or another, the famous old *Ulster County Gazette*. On December 29, 1926, the *Courant* of Hartford, Connecticut, published a playful article, which included: "The mystery is one which the angels would fain inquire into and, in fact, they have, for Vassar College has a wonderful collection of copies of this issue, each of the same date, but no two alike."

The one who headed up the work at Vassar College was the late Professor Lucy M. Salmon. In 1925 she issued a revised edition of her small folder telling about the thousands of copies of reprints but declaring that no original copy was known to exist. She said that Vassar College would appreciate the gift of any reprint, adding: "The numbers have, as far as known, no commercial value, but they are of great service in our work in history." In 1923, she had published her important book, *The Newspaper and the Historian*, in which on pages 420-421 she discusses the *Ulster County Gazette*, reproducing photographed headings of sixteen different reprints.

Mr. Harry Miller Lydenberg, Assistant Director of the New

York Public Library, began work with that great institution as cataloguer in the Lenox Branch in 1896. He contributed to the *New York Times Saturday Review of Books* for August 27, 1904, an article which is now in the bibliography as "apparently the first study of the various reprints of the *Gazette*." Professor Salmon says that with that article in hand one can identify any of the reprints.⁴

Mr. Clarence Saunders Brigham, former Librarian and now Editor of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts, has collected and studied copies of the reprints. The Society has sixty-eight copies of thirty-one different issues.

Mr. J. Van Ness Ingram, of the Library of Congress staff has studied the issues of the paper. In 1929, the typed list was revised providing identification for twenty-two different issues or reprints. That list needs further revision for it is known that the Library of Congress now has forty-five copies of twenty-five issues. In order to answer many questions, the Division of Accessions, Library of Congress, issued an undated, single-page circular, entitled "The Ulster County Gazette of January 4, 1800," giving information about the many reprints and something of their nature and furnished to inquirers without cost. As the Library of Congress enjoys the confidence of the American people, it is well to quote here from that circular letter:

"Almost every private owner of one of these reproductions honestly believes that he has an original copy, but persons who are competent to decide and who have taken an interest in the question, are of the opinion that no authenticated original issues can now be traced. * * * The commercial value of the reprints does not exceed fifty cents. It is impossible to tell how high a bid somebody might make on an original issue, supposing one should unexpectedly be discovered. Such a copy might bring about fifty dollars, but hardly much more."

That quotation is made from a copy of the circular received by the present writer in January, 1926, from M. A. Roberts, Chief of the Division of Accessions, Library of Congress. In the five years since that date much study has been given to the subject and many publications have commented on the probable non-existence of a genuine original. From such abundant publicity it is, of course, probable that a genuine original would bring a much higher price than the fifty dollars mentioned.

⁴ Lucy Maynard Salmon, *The Newspaper and the Historian* (Oxford University Press, 1923), p. 421, footnote.

The New York Public Library has thirty-four copies of thirty-one different issues, half the number of copies from an equal number of issues, as those in the collection of the American Antiquarian Society. However, the New York Public Library has apparently caused an examination to be made of all the collections and has gathered information from all known sources for the recently published pamphlet of thirty-four pages. Here Mr. R. G. W. Vail, formerly of the New York Public Library staff but who has recently become Librarian of the American Antiquarian Society, has given a history of the paper, its publishers and the known reprints, sixty-four in number. On the last page is a note describing three new discoveries of reprints bringing the total to sixty-seven. Professor Salmon, in her above quoted book, reproduced sixteen headings of the reprints. In this pamphlet of the New York Public Library there are reproduced such photographed headings accounting for sixty-three reprints, adding "No. 64 not seen." On page 19, the pamphlet describes the three large collections of reprints, mentioned above, and then says: "Other notable collections of reprints of the *Gazette* will be found in the New York Historical Society, New York State Library, Vassar College Library, Wisconsin, Connecticut, and Massachusetts Historical Societies, and in the libraries of Yale, and the University of Chicago, as well as a few variants in virtually every library and historical museum in the country."

The experts have used all known tests such as the analyses of paper and ink and measurements of type. They have numbered and catalogued the different reprints. It is therefore wise for anyone having a copy of the *Ulster County Gazette* of January 4, 1800, to submit it to a dependable institution, such as the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., the New York Public Library or the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts. This suggestion is made only for the owner of a copy who may wish to learn whether or not it is an original, and, if not, of what age the reprint may be and also about what price could be expected from its sale.

The owner of any copy of the famous little paper may appreciate a chance to check its contents. There being no genuine original available, Mr. Vail has prepared a description of the contents by comparison of the numerous reprints and placed it in the New York Public Library pamphlet on pages 6-7 as follows:

"Page 1, *Column* 1: Notes on the Dec. 10 sessions of the House of Representatives and Senate with their addresses to President John Adams relative to his previous message to both houses,

and his reply to the addresses; *Column 2*: same continued, and beginning of foreign news dated from London, Oct. 18 [1799], including account of an engagement between the British and Dutch forces on Oct. 10th; *Column 3*: same continued, including news of military affairs in Switzerland, and account of battle of Zurich, Sept. 25, reprinted from *London Gazette* of Oct. 20, 1799; *Column 4*: same continued, also later dispatch dated Sept. 30, and extracts from a letter dated Sept. 16;

"Page 2, *Column 1*: same continued, also extracts from letter of Sept. 29, dispatch from London of Oct. 20, also 'Latest foreign' dispatch giving letter of Oct. 7, 1799, from Archduke Charles, all relative to campaign in Switzerland; *Column 2*: military dispatches from Paris, Oct. 13 (regarding Buonaparte), Strasburgh, Oct. 9 (Germans has retaken Manheim and Frankfort), and London, Oct. 24 (Evacuation of Holland by the British), also news of Congress, Dec. 19, 1799; *Column 3*: same continued, including address on the death of Washington delivered before the House by [John] Marshall, also beginning of address of condolence of the Speaker of the House delivered to the President, including resolutions of the House on the death of Washington, drawn up by General Henry ["Light Horse Harry"] Lee, father of General Robert E. Lee, containing the famous phrase: 'first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his country'; *Column 4*: same continued with the President's reply enlogizing Washington, also Senate's message on same subject, with President John Adams' reply dated Dec. 22, 1799;

"Page 3, *Column 1*: same continued, also dispatch from George Town, Dec. 20, giving full account of Washington's funeral; *Column 2*: same continued, also summary of foreign news, three legal notices and two advertisements (heifer found, and peas for sale); *Upper right corner, occupying part of Columns 3 and 4*: a six stanza poem of four lines each written especially 'For the Ulster County Gazette on the death of General Washington. By a young lady'; *Remainder of Column 3*: two legal notices; *Remainder of Column 4*: same continued, also rhymed advertisement of Luther Andres & Co., also list of unclaimed letters.

"Page 4: 33 legal notices and advertisements."

That description is probably as nearly correct as one can now be made. Owners of some of the reprints will find the news and advertisements shifted from one column to another but most of the printers have tried to reproduce all of the contents.

EDMOND S. MEANY