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"THE FIRST RELIGIOUS NEWSPAPER."

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In the historic graveyard of the Third (or old Pine Street) Presbyterian Church, at Fourth and Pine Streets, Philadelphia, there stands a modest headstone bearing on its face these words:

SACRED
TO
the memory of the
REV. JOHN WELWOOD SCOTT.
Who departed this life
March 3rd 1842,
in the 65th year of his age.
He was a sound divine, and was
the establisher of the first Religious
Newspaper ever published.

Being dead, he yet speaketh by his
living example of piety and his
numerous poetical and theological
writings.

ALSO
JANE,
HIS WIFE.
Who departed this life
May 30, 1855
in the 74th year of her age.
*Blessed are the dead who
die in the Lord.*

John Welwood Scott in early life was a printer, with a bent toward scholarship and literature. He was a communicant member of the Third Church, and on December 21,

1813, was elected a ruling elder.¹ On April 22, 1819, he was received by the Presbytery of Philadelphia as a candidate for the ministry, licensed April 20, 1820, and ordained January 16, 1824.² He wrote *An Historical Sketch of the Pine Street, or Third Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, 1837), generally known as *The Pine Street Book*. He published also a long-forgotten poem, *The Mind's Jubilee: a Sketch*. Mr. Scott died on March 3, 1842, at Waynesburg, Mifflin Co., Pa., at the residence of his son-in-law, the Rev. Benjamin Carrell.³ The concern we have at the present time with Mr. Scott's tombstone relates to the trustworthiness of its inscription, that "he was the establisher of the first Religious Newspaper ever published."

It is well known to many that the credit of being "the Father of Religious Journalism" has been claimed by and on behalf of several persons, and that an exceptionally vigorous contest for the honor was for many years waged between Sidney E. Morse, of *The New York Observer*, and Nathaniel Willis, of Boston. Each of these men claimed the coveted title on the ground of being the original proprietor of *The Boston Recorder*, a religious newspaper whose first number was dated January 3, 1816.

The nineteenth chapter of Frederic Hudson's *Journalism in the United States*⁴ opens with the following questions: "When and where was the first religious newspaper published in the United States? When and where in any part of the world?" Mr. Hudson then proceeds to solve what he calls "one of the questions of the age." The evidence collected by him, and printed *in extenso*, consists of: (1) The Autobiography of Mr. Willis, published in 1858, in his seventy-ninth year, in which he claims to have originated the

¹ Gibbons, *A History of Old Pine Street*, Philadelphia, 1905, p. 168.

² Dr. W. M. Rice, "Roll of Ministers and Licentiates in Connection with the Presbytery of Philadelphia," p. 15. (Bound up with Nevin's *History of the Presbytery of Philadelphia*, Phila., 1888.)

³ Obituary notice in *The Presbyterian*, April 9, 1842, and *The Christian Observer*, March 18, 1842.

⁴ New York, Harper & Bros., 1873.

idea of a religious newspaper and to have inaugurated *The Boston Recorder*; (2) a letter of G. Livingstone Morse to *The Evening Post*, in 1872, claiming that his father, Sidney E. Morse, was the original proprietor of *The Boston Recorder*, and that Willis was merely employed by him to print the first few numbers; (3) a letter of E. P. S., dated in 1857, to the *Historical Magazine*, calling attention to the fact that the Rev. John Andrews began the publication at Chillicothe, Ohio, on July 5, 1814, of *The Weekly Recorder*, which was claimed to be the first religious newspaper ever published in this country or in the world.

Having reviewed the evidence, Mr. Hudson pronounces three conclusions as “clear”:

“1st. Nathaniel Willis first conceived the idea of a religious newspaper.

“2d. John Andrews first published a religious newspaper.

“3d. Sidney Edwards Morse first edited *The Boston Recorder*.”*

Such are Mr. Hudson’s conclusions. It will, however, be observed that, in the process of reaching them, the fact that Mr. J. W. Scott had begun the publication of a religious weekly in Philadelphia at a date prior to the publication of both *The Boston Recorder* and *The Weekly Recorder*, is completely ignored. This, no doubt, was no more than an oversight, but it was an oversight hardly excusable in one undertaking to be the historian of American Journalism, and least so in Mr. Hudson’s case, because the statement of Mr. Willis, which he prints in full, brought clearly before him the fact that such a periodical had been published, gave its place of publication, its title (somewhat incorrectly), and discussed its make-up and contents. Before accepting any of Mr. Hudson’s conclusions, it will be necessary to get before us some statement of what can be said in Mr. Scott’s behalf as “the establisher of the first Religious Newspaper.”

For this purpose we can do no better than quote the setting-forth of the claim of Mr. Scott, which appeared as an editorial in *The Presbyterian* of Saturday, July 21, 1866. This

* Page 296.

editorial was presumably occasioned by the appearance on January 5, 1866, of the "Jubilee Number" of *The Boston Recorder*. The number fairly bristled with the conscious pride of being "the oldest religious newspaper," a fact which it asserted editorially "cannot be doubted." The fact was doubted none the less, and hence the editorial in *The Presbyterian*, as follows:

THE FIRST RELIGIOUS NEWSPAPER.

It has been a subject of much discussion where, and by whom the first religious newspaper was established in this country. It has been generally claimed that the religious newspaper was a New England idea, and the editors of the *Boston Recorder* assert very confidently that it cannot be doubted that the "*Boston Recorder* was the first religious newspaper," the first number having been published by Deacon Willis on the 3d of January, 1816. It adds, in very confident terms, "Nothing like this had ever been seen before in this or any other country."

We have the evidence before us, which we think proves most incontrovertibly that the claim of the *Boston Recorder* to be the first religious newspaper published "in this or any other country," is entirely without foundation. There lies now on our table a bound volume of the *Religious Remembrancer*, a religious newspaper, the first number of which was published on the 4th of September, 1813. This journal was published "every Saturday, at \$2 a year, by J. W. Scott, No. 147 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia." It is in quarto form, of four pages, in size about thirteen inches by ten. Mr. Scott was a ruling elder, we believe, in the Third Presbyterian Church, Pine Street, Philadelphia, and afterwards entered the ministry. In his address to the public, contained in the first number of the *Remembrancer*, Mr. Scott says that "no paper was published in this city devoted to the cause of religion; no record of providential occurrences—no journal of religious intelligence, and no medium for communicating the productions of pious minds to the public." He proposes "to supply the deficiency so much lamented." In further developing his plan, he says that "religious intelligence, evangelical essays, and biographical sketches will constitute an important part of the plan," and invites co-operation in rendering the contemplated work a magazine of diversified topics and valuable information.

In carrying out his plan, we have been quite surprised to find how many of the features of the modern religious newspaper are to be found in this, the earliest of them all. The first number contains part of the Narrative of the State of Religion adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the previous May. The suc-

ceeding numbers contain notices of ordinations and installations, (the first ordination noted being that of the Rev. Thomas H. Skinner, D.D.,) formation of Bible societies, obituaries, news items, accounts of revivals, &c. In the number dated October 9th, 1813, a brief notice is given of the meeting of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions at Boston, on the 17th of September. The sermon before the Board was preached by the Rev. Dr. Dwight, in the church in Chauncey Place, Boston. The ordination of Mr. Robert B. Belville and Joseph Barr, at Neshaminy, Bucks county, Pa., is noticed in the number for October 23d, 1813. Extracts are given from sermons by the Rev. Dr. Broadhead, Dr. Griffin, Dr. Staughton, Dr. E. S. Ely, Dr. C. C. Cuyler, and others. Reviews of books published by Dr. Ely, Robert Hall, Dr. Raffles, are given. In the number for July 22d, 1815, the editor says “we have received the first number of the *Christian Monitor*, published in Richmond, Virginia, and conducted by the Rev. John H. Rice, on a similar plan to the *Remembrancer*,” so that there was a religious newspaper published in Richmond, Virginia, previous to the appearance of the *Boston Recorder*. The *Remembrancer* was continued in existence for some years. . . .

In the number of the *Remembrancer* for February 17th, 1816, Mr. Scott states that “three other papers of a similar character had been established in situations well adapted to the purpose of diffusing evangelical intelligence.” These papers were the *Weekly Recorder*, Chillicothe, Ohio, the *Christian Monitor*, Richmond, Virginia, the *Christian Visitant*, Albany, New York. Of these papers we have seen specimens only of the *Weekly Recorder*. A bound volume of this paper is now lying before us, and the first number bears the date of July 5, 1814.

This is quite as distinctly a religious newspaper as the *Remembrancer*, and in its general arrangement somewhat more like the modern newspaper. It contains more secular news than the *Remembrancer*, and has also a page for advertisements. It was published by John Andrews, of Chillicothe, Ohio; price to subscribers two dollars per annum, and was a quarto of eight pages. It continued in existence for some years. . . . Both these papers were started and controlled by Presbyterians, though they were not strictly denominational papers. Whatever credit, therefore, is due to those who first established religious newspapers in this country, is due to men of the Presbyterian communion, and should be frankly and unhesitatingly rendered to them.

The library of The Presbyterian Historical Society contains a complete file of *The Religious Remembrancer*, its first number bearing date September 4, 1813, the publication continuing until August, 1823. There can be no question as to the priority in date of the *Remembrancer* to *The Boston*

Recorder. The question is rather, how Mr. Willis and Mr. Morse got around that priority, and could continue to maintain their claims of precedence. In the case of Mr. Willis at least, the answer is clear. He was aware that *The Boston Recorder* had predecessors, but he denied that the predecessors, were really "religious newspapers."

The whole controversy turns upon the definition which is to be given to the word, "newspaper." And for the purposes of debate it suited Mr. Willis to assume that the word "newspaper" must be taken in its fullest and most developed sense, even to the point of insistence that to be a newspaper, a sheet must contain advertisements as well as news, and be folio in form and not quarto or smaller.

In his Autobiography Mr. Willis says:

"Two or three other publications have been named as predecessors of the *Recorder*; but they could with no propriety be called *newspapers*.

"Prince's *Christian History* was an octavo pamphlet or book, printed in Boston at the time of the revivals under Mr. Whitefield's preaching, and consisted mostly of letters from the towns where he had been laboring. The *Herald of Gospel Liberty* was printed at Portsmouth, N. H., in the quarto form, for Rev. Elias Smith, as I suppose, and contained letters from those places where he had been preaching in his efforts to get the Freewill Baptist or Christian denomination. It was a circular rather than a newspaper. The *Christian* (sic) *Remembrancer* of Philadelphia, was in the quarto form, mostly religious selections, like a scrapbook—while a proper newspaper is in the folio form, and contains secular news, foreign and domestic, and advertisements."*

We are not able to set aside *The Boston Recorder's* predecessors with the ease displayed by Mr. Willis. As regards the *Christian History* we are disposed to accept his general conclusion. That it was "an octavo book or pamphlet," as suggested by him, is certainly not true of it as issued. It was printed "on a large half sheet of fine medium, in octavo,"⁷ folded to make eight pages to each number. It appeared weekly for two years, and it contained, beside ex-

* *Hudson*, op. cit. p. 293.

⁷ I. Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, Worcester, 1810, Vol. II, p. 254.

tracts, letters showing the progress of the Revival. It was therefore a religious weekly periodical, and with a news element in a narrow line. Yet it was hardly a “religious newspaper” in our sense; and for our part we should not so call it. It is open to any one to call it the “first religious newspaper,” and in fact *The Presbyterian Banner* has, impliedly at least, so denominated it.⁸

Passing over *The Herald of Gospel Liberty* for the present, we come to *The Religious Remembrancer*. Was it a religious newspaper or not? The term “religious newspaper” is hardly a happy one. It does not accurately describe either the motive behind a religious weekly, or its contents. It is not the most exact designation of either *The Boston Recorder* or *The Religious Remembrancer*. But as the term is commonly used and applied, we have little hesitation in saying that *The Religious Remembrancer* was a “religious newspaper.” Dr. Alexander, who conceived the plan of it, so intended it to be, and so designated it, as will appear. Mr. Scott so considered it, and in his own announcement of its scope he described it as containing “biographical sketches, theological essays, accounts of revivals of religion, missionary information, together with a great variety of other articles of an evangelical and ecclesiastical nature.” The description of its actual contents already quoted from *The Presbyterian* is a fair one, and indicates even more “news” elements than were thus suggested. As regards its form and size, we think Mr. Willis’s contention that its quarto form prevented it from being a newspaper is little better than quibbling. Its page was as large as many of the early colonial newspapers, whose status no one questions, and as large as many of the later religious weeklies, which are called “religious newspapers” by common consent. In the history of the “Press of Philadelphia,” making chapter xlviii of Scharf and Westcott’s *History of Philadelphia*,⁹ the *Remembrancer* is pronounced to be a religious newspaper of wide scope, and Mr.

⁸ See editorial, September 24, 1903.

⁹ Philadelphia, 1884.

Willis's attempt to exclude it because quarto in form is referred to as "simply an absurdity."¹⁰

In a case like this, where the meaning of a term is in dispute, we can do no more than record our own conclusion. And our conclusion is that J. W. Scott published in Philadelphia a religious newspaper for more than two years before the publication of *The Boston Recorder* by Mr. Willis or Mr. Morse.

It is, however, to be observed just here that even though Mr. Willis were accounted successful in setting aside the claim of the *Remembrancer* to be a religious newspaper, he has thereby accomplished nothing in establishing his own claim that *The Boston Recorder* was the "first religious newspaper." For *The Weekly Recorder*, whose publication began on July 5, 1814, while later in date than the *Remembrancer*, was still a predecessor of *The Boston Recorder*. And of its existence Mr. Willis takes no account whatever. Why he should thus ignore it can only be explained by supposing that he had never personally examined it. A nearly complete file of *The Weekly Recorder* is contained in the library of The Presbyterian Historical Society. No candid mind could inspect it, and then raise any doubt of its title to be called a religious newspaper. Its pages of religious news, its pages of secular news, home and foreign, its column of advertisements, in each number, fill out the requirements even of Mr. Willis's exacting definition. It may fairly be stated as a fact rather than an opinion that the prior publication of *The Weekly Recorder* effectually bars the claim of *The Boston Recorder* to be the first religious newspaper.

In the light of what has been said, let us return now to the three conclusions which Mr. Hudson announced as clear, taking them up in reverse order. His third conclusion, that "Sidney Edwards Morse first edited *The Boston Recorder*," may be dismissed as irrelevant to the subject under discus-

¹⁰ Vol. III, p. 1958. Prof. A. H. Smith in his *The Philadelphia Magazines and their Contributors* (Philadelphia, 1892), goes too far, and thrice calls the *Remembrancer* "the first religious weekly" (pp. 19, 192, 260), thus overlooking the *Christian History*.

sion, *The Boston Recorder* being quite out of the running. His second conclusion, that “John Andrews first published a religious newspaper,” is certainly disputable, and is in our judgment incorrect. His remaining conclusion, that Willis “first conceived the idea of a religious newspaper,” is, to say the least, unprovable. Mr. Willis claimed to have been considering the subject as early as May, 1808, and to hold evidence that he consulted a body of ministers and others in relation thereto, in 1810.¹² But it happened that during his pastorate of the Third Church of Philadelphia, which began in 1806 and terminated in 1812, Archibald Alexander also “conceived the idea of a religious newspaper.”

In his reminiscences, Dr. Alexander says:

“In considering the wants of the people and the difficulty of reaching the multitude with religious instruction, I conceived the plan of a religious [newspaper], a thing at that time unknown to the world. But as the thing was new, I mentioned [it] to none but two or three of my elders; and it met with approbation. It was suggested that we had a printer, who was a well informed young man, John W. Scott. I conversed with him, and he drew up a well-written but rather florid Address, to accompany a Prospectus. Before the plan was carried into effect, I was removed to Princeton; but Mr. Scott went forward with the enterprise, and published for a number of years, before any other work of the kind was thought of, *The Christian* (sic) *Remembrancer*,”¹³

Between Dr. Alexander and Mr. Willis, each claiming originality and precedence for his conception of the idea of a religious newspaper, who shall judge? There seems a lack of definiteness as to date, which is natural enough, but which precludes any competent judgment as to priority.

If, now, the conclusions of Mr. Hudson are set aside, the character of the *Remembrancer* as a religious newspaper accepted, and its priority to both *The Boston Recorder* and *The Weekly Recorder* admitted, may we then consider that the characterization of Mr. Scott on his tombstone as “the establisher of the first Religious Newspaper” is justified?

¹² *Op. cit.* p. 291.

¹³ *The Life of Archibald Alexander, D. D.*, by James W. Alexander, N. Y., 1854, p. 306.

So far as known to us there still remain two possible obstacles in the way of establishing the claim on Mr. Scott's behalf. One of these is Prince's *Christian History* and the other Elias Smith's *Herald of Gospel Liberty*; both of which Mr. Willis recognized as predecessors of *The Boston Recorder*, and which are predecessors of *The Religious Remembrancer* as well. But were they "religious newspapers"? In the case of the *Christian History*, we have already expressed the opinion that it was not. We cannot stretch the definition of a newspaper to that extreme. But this is only an opinion.

The case of *The Herald of Gospel Liberty* we have referred to but not discussed. It will be recalled that Mr. Willis had no trouble in disposing of it. It was only a "circular" to him, and no bar to his claim. But then to him the *Christian History* was a "book," and the *Remembrancer* was like a quarto scrapbook. For our part we have limited confidence in his characterization of *The Herald of Gospel Liberty*, and yet we are unable to find access to a file of it. Very possibly after finding access to it and carefully examining it, it would still remain a mere matter of opinion as to whether it should or should not be designated as a "religious newspaper." The one thing assured is, that whatever our own conclusion in the premises might be, the Rev. Elias Smith himself entertained no doubt whatever about the character of his enterprise, "which," he says, as though establishing a claim to the very words that were afterwards to be cut on Mr. Scott's tombstone; "perhaps, was the first religious newspaper ever published." His words in full are as follows:

"On the first day of September, 1808, the first number of the Herald was published in Portsmouth, N. H., which, perhaps, was the first religious newspaper ever published. Only two hundred and seventy-four subscribers were obtained. In September, 1815, they had increased to fifteen hundred."¹⁴

From this we infer that the *Herald* was regularly pub-

¹⁴ *The Life, Conversion, Preaching, Travels, and Sufferings of Elias Smith. Written by himself, Vol. I.* Portsmouth, N. H., 1816, p. 383.

lished through a number of years. The only hint of its contents are a statement on the same page of *The Life* that in the first number notice was given of the ordination of Peter Young, of York, on the seventh day of the month, and a reference on another page to “writing and publishing the Herald,” as though Smith himself furnished the contents. To our own mind the known situation and these specific references suggest a periodical publication of very narrow scope, a propagandist’s organ for promulgating his opinions rather than a newspaper. But nevertheless it was a weekly religious paper, containing announcements and news of a sort. It existed, and its existence raises an issue of opinion, and one which may never be definitely settled, as to whether *The Herald of Gospel Liberty* was or was not a “religious newspaper.” For the four periodicals taken in their chronological order, the *Herald* of 1808, the *Remembrancer* of 1813, the *Weekly Recorder* of 1814, and the *Boston Recorder* of 1816, represent four stages in the development of that type of periodical which we entitle the religious newspaper. But whether we affix that title to a form so rudimentary as the *Herald* appears to have been may not be easy to decide. Who indeed is to decide it?

Were we, as at present advised, called upon to prepare fresh inscriptions for the gravestones of the Rev. John Welwood Scott and the Rev. Elias Smith, we should plead for delay. If that were impracticable, we think we should record on the one stone that Mr. Scott began in 1813 to edit and publish *The Religious Remembrancer*; and on the other that Mr. Smith began in 1808 to edit and publish *The Herald of Gospel Liberty*; and for filling out the two inscriptions we could think of nothing better than to add to each one the same words, “which, perhaps, was the first religious newspaper ever published.”