

A newspaper is born

One rival journal praises the new Dispatch - at least at first

Its type was set by hand.

Nine hundred copies of the Daily Dispatch, predecessor of the Richmond Times-Dispatch, were published that first day, Oct. 19, 1850.

The four-page, 14-by-20 inch paper apparently didn't appear to pose much of a threat to one of its rival papers, The Examiner, which looked favorably on the new newspaper:

"The first number of The Daily Dispatch lies on our table. It is the first attempt at the penny newspaper which Richmond has seen, and if merit be a certificate of success, The Daily Dispatch will flourish like a bay tree.

"In appearance it is cozy and convenient, the type is beautiful, the editorials from the pen of a scholar and the news is carefully condensed and arranged in pleasant columns."

But advertisers did not flock to the fledgling paper. One of the original partners, William H. Davis, was so discouraged by the dismal patronage of advertisers that he quit after a few weeks and returned to the coal business, leaving James Andrew Cowardin, a printer by trade, to go it alone.

While The Dispatch steered clear of political affiliations, it immediately plunged into civic matters, supporting the new Hollywood Cemetery and backing reform of the Virginia Constitution.

When the 1852 publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" generated an emotional fervor, widespread in the North, for the end of slavery, The Dispatch adopted the viewpoint of many other Southern newspapers: It bitterly condemned the book.

Clamors for secession were echoing through parts of the South by the end of 1855. The Dispatch chastised both the "Ultra Northern press" and the "Ultra Southern press" for agitating the situation.

"Let us hope," the newspaper said, "that the reason and good sense, if not the patriotism of both sections, will avert our country a calamity so dire and irreparable as the overthrow of one government and the setting up of two distinct Republics."

By the 10th anniversary of The Dispatch in 1860, circulation had hit 8,000. It was neutral during the presidential election that year, but asserted vigorously that aggression toward the Southern states over the issue of slavery should be met with force.

When Abraham Lincoln's election was confirmed, The Dispatch greeted the news coldly, saying "the event is most deplorable one that has happened in the history of the country."

In a local matter, The Dispatch campaigned for a free bridge over the James River, saying that a bridge with no tolls would be a boon.

But the newspaper soon returned to the most pressing issue of the day, the impending war. It was not long before the paper abandoned its stance that the Southern states should not breakaway from the Union. The Dispatch cast its lot firmly with the Confederacy and defended the rebel cause throughout the war.