

The Controversial Daniel Whiting

Since there had not been a newspaper published in the county since the 1790s, the residents of Prince William County relied on newspapers published in Alexandria and Warrenton for local news. It was rare for a town that was a county seat not to have a newspaper, because many of the legal documents needed to be publicized in print, according to the law. In 1858, Brentsville was a booming town and was thought large enough to sustain a paper. The exact date for the start-up is not known, but a copy of *The Prince William Democrat* was published in Brentsville July 30, 1858. William R. Murrell was the editor and overseer of the operation; however, it is thought that F. C. Williams, late of the *Blue Ridge Republican*, was a part owner. Nothing is mentioned of this paper after April 1859; therefore, publishing may have stopped that year.

Daniel Whiting, the focus of this story, was the next to try his hand at opening a paper in Brentsville. He was able to find used printing equipment in Alexandria and have it shipped to Bristow Station by rail and then to Brentsville in wagons. The printing equipment was moved into a tenement on the tavern lot “parallel with the public square.” The location of the printing office may, or may not, have been the tavern built in 1822-23 as part of the county court complex. It might have been in one of the buildings directly behind or even attached to the tavern. The only record that might shine a light on the location was a court action, filed in 1870 by George M. Goodwin, stating that Daniel Whiting occupied his dwelling on Tavern Square as a residence and printing office and that he wanted him evicted from the property.

Whiting’s Brentsville newspaper, *The Prince William Advocate*, was only in operation a few years. This was mainly due to the fact that as soon as he got it up and running; he decided to open a larger paper in Manassas. This weekly Manassas paper, the *Manassas Gazette*, started in 1869 and was in operation until it was absorbed by the *Manassas Journal* in 1896. The successor to this newspaper is still published today. Whiting was the original publisher and editor until probably 1876 when his numerous court battles forced his removal. Whiting’s editorials were often very personal. Being his enemy was not a good idea since he did not hesitate to use the power of the press. Most who responded to his written attacks would do so in the *Alexandria Gazette*.

Besides being the editor and publisher of two newspapers, in two different towns, at the same time, he was much more. He was a justice of the peace, one of the first members of the Manassas town council, the mayor of Manassas, and an eloquent public speaker; he was both for and against temperance.

Everything the flamboyant Whiting did in 1876 had its detractors; however, in most cases, the disputes were of his own making. He involved himself in so many controversies that they seem to run together. The *Alexandria Gazette*, after weeks of covering all the squabbles, labeled it “The Manassas Imbroglio.”

Many of the Manassas townspeople were not happy with the way the county controlled the issuing of liquor licenses. This was 1876, and the temperance movement had a lot of local support. The town council wanted to have full control as to who could sell liquor within the town limits or to eliminate the sale completely, if that were the will of the town. Petitions, with the

support of the council and mayor, were circulated and sent to Richmond to be presented to the Committee on Counties, Cities, and Towns. However, unbeknown to anyone, Daniel Whiting, the mayor at the time, traveled to Richmond to speak against the petitions. This was the beginning volley of one-upmanship that made everyone choose a side.

George C. Round, the Manassas town clerk and a somewhat respected carpetbagger, found himself on the bad side of Whiting. At a meeting held at Hixon Hall, where the object was to gain support to remove Whiting as mayor, Round was the main speaker. Many of the men on the town council were at the meeting and promised to help. Whiting, upon hearing about the meeting, reacted in true form and ordered the town sergeant to arrest Round and charge him with inciting a riot. Charges and countercharges played out in newspapers; however, as most of the residents thought, Round was found not guilty.

Col. Robert Tansill brought charges against Mayor Whiting to the Common Council of the Town of Manassas. The charges included: making an illegal and false arrest of George Round and fined him twenty-five dollars; using threatening, insulting and indecent language on the public streets of Manassas; and being drunk while performing his official duties as mayor. After many motions, objections, and legal talk, it was agreed that the council had no right to act on the charges and that the proper place should be the county court.

No one was surprised that Whiting's next move would be to challenge Tansill to a duel. He delivered the following, using his very young son as the messenger: "Col. Robert Tansill: Sir: You have made false and slanderous charges against me and had them published in the public press, and you have refused to have them investigated. Now, sir, I ask you to retract them, or I shall ask a settlement in a manner in accordance with the code of honor, and allow you to name a time and place and arms to be used. I send this message by my son, and please answer through him." Not getting the response he wanted, Whiting sent a second note to Tansill, stating that he had indeed offered a challenge and asked to meet on the commons, where they could fight with no one else around.

Tansill published his very long and detailed response in the *Alexandria Gazette* along with copies of both letters from Whiting. He started by saying that the communications were delivered by the five or six year old son of Whiting, with the request that the answer be given to the boy. "This act shows that you do not have the slightest knowledge of the code of honor. Also, I have been told that you were drunk when both notes were written." After a long drawn out letter, Tansill ended with "The foregoing reasons prelude the possibility of my meeting you as a gentleman in the manner indicated by you as the code of honor requires equality in all things."

As the result of these many controversies Whiting resigned as the mayor of Manassas and editor and publisher of the *Manassas Gazette*.

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