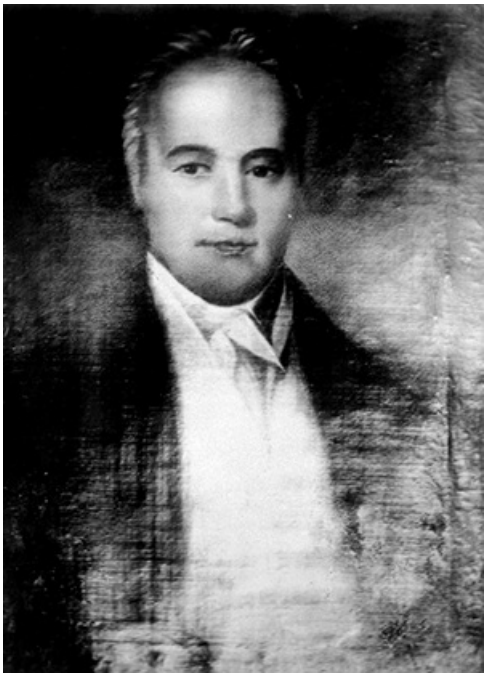
Joseph Gales, Sr. [1]

Gales, Joseph

by Robert N. Elliott, 1986; Revised by SLNC Government & Heritage Library, July 2023

4 Feb. 1761–24 Aug. 1841



A photograph of a portrait of Joseph Gales Senior. Image courtesy the State Archives of North Carolina.

Joseph Gales, journalist and reformer, was born in Eckington, England, the eldest son of Thomas Gales, a local artisan and schoolmaster. Trained in the printing trade [2] by J. Tomlinson, a printer and bookbinder of nearby Newark, Gales in 1784 established himself as a printer, stationer, and auctioneer in Sheffield, an important manufacturing town in northern England. On 4 May 1784, he married Winifred Marshall [3], a young writer and native of Newark. The couple soon became active in the constitutional reform movement then beginning in England and centered in Sheffield. On 8 June 1787, Gales issued the first number of the Sheffield *Register*, a weekly newspaper [4]that quickly rose to prominence among those interested in political and labor reform. This was supplemented on 3 Apr. 1792 by another weekly, *The Patriot*, printed by Gales but edited by Matthew C. Brown, which was devoted to printing extracts from the works of the leading reformers of the time—such men as Thomas Paine, Joseph Priestley [5], Henry Redhead Yorke [6], and James Mackintosh, all acquaintances of Joseph Gales. Following the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 Gales devoted considerable space in the *Register* to reporting its progress.

In 1791, he helped launch the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information, an organization dedicated to "the enlightenment of the people" in their need for political and labor reform, serving several times as chairman. When war broke out between France and Great Britain in 1793, those engaged in reform activities came under the surveillance of government authorities. The habeas corpus act was suspended, a committee in the House of Commons launched a heresy hunt for those suspected of treason, and a number of reformers were arrested. Thomas Hardy, secretary of the London Corresponding Society, an important cog in the reform movement, was arrested in May 1794. Found among his papers were letters incriminating Gales. Word reached Sheffield that warrants had been issued for his arrest, and Gales went into hiding. When it became apparent that he could no longer remain safely in England, he fled to Hamburg, a free city and important trading port of northen Europe.

Left behind in Sheffield, Winifred Gales [3] carried on the business, ably assisted by James Montgomery, the poet, who had joined Gales in 1792 as an assistant. Two of Gales's creditors took out bankruptcy proceedings against the firm, but Montgomery got himself appointed as agent of the creditors. When the printing office and the *Register* were put up for sale, a local citizen made an offer of £300 on condition that Montgomery would remain as editor. It was accepted. The bookshop passed into the hands of Gales's three sisters, who continued to operate it for many years. Montgomery changed the name of the *Register* to the *Iris* ; but determined not to suffer Gales's fate, he ceased to champion the cause of reform openly. With affairs in order, Winifred Gales and her four children—Joseph, Jr., Sarah, Thomas, and Winifred—accompanied by a young orphan apprentice, left Sheffield in July 1794 to join her husband, who had located in Altona, the principal city of the Duchy of Holstein, then under the Protectorate of Denmark. Hamburg was a mile distant.

As soon as his family arrived, Gales made plans to leave for America and he secured passage on a ship leaving on 17 September for Philadelphia. Once on board, delays in getting underway and the apprehensions of his wife caused Gales to reconsider. The family returned to Altona and obtained an apartment; on 17 Nov. 1794 Winifred Gales gave birth to a daughter who, in honor of their temporary home, was named Altona. While his wife recovered, Gales learned French and German, practiced shorthand taught him by a visitor to Sheffield several years earlier, and made friends among the many refugees gathered in Hamburg. He also met Joel Barlow, the American diplomat and poet.

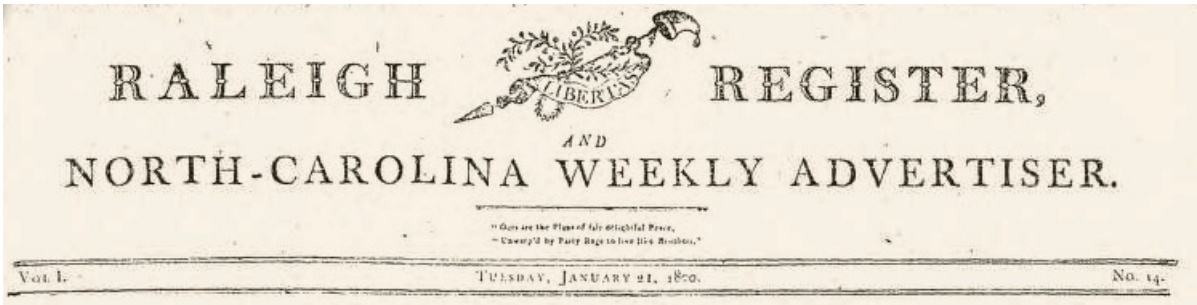
In March 1795 Gales received a letter from friends in Sheffield expressing the hope that he might return. This hope was dashed on further inquiry by Gales. To soften the blow his friends sent a sum of money and the assurance that they would cover the cost of type and printing supplies to be sent to America if Gales would order them from London. With Joel Barlow's help, passage was obtained on a ship bound for Philadelphia. The young apprentice chose to return to England. On 31 May 1795, Joseph and Winifred Gales and their five children took leave of Altona. Two months later, on 30 July, the family arrived in Philadelphia. Gales found employment—first as a typographer, then as a reporter—with Claypool and Dunlop, publishers of the *American Daily Advertiser*. His verbatim accounts (taken in shorthand) of speeches delivered in the U.S. Senate established his reputation as a reporter while affording him a chance to meet some of the nation's leading politicians.

The printing materials promised from London arrived in the spring of 1796. Gales left the*Daily Advertiser*, purchased the semiweekly *Independent Gazetteer* from the widow of its founder, Eleazer Oswald, and on 16 Sept. 1796 issued the first number of *Gales' Independent Gazetteer*. Though his prospectus promised an impartial reporting of the news, it at once became apparent that the *Gazetteer* sympathized with the partisan views of the Jeffersonian Republicans. The paper and its publisher prospered and once again the Gales family was comfortably situated. But on 12 Sept. 1797 Gales announced the sale of his *Gazetteer* to Samuel Harrison Smith, who was then publishing a daily newspaper in Philadelphia,*The New World*.

Gales's reasons for selling his newspaper are not clear. Undoubtedly the annual outbreak in Philadelphia of yellow fever played a part; in the fall of 1797 Mrs. Gales was stricken when the family delayed leaving the city because of the pressure of business. Though she recovered it was a frightening experience. Also, Gales complained of difficulty in collecting subscription debts. Although the Alien and Sedition laws [7] were not passed until the summer of 1798, sentiment in favor of such action certainly was apparent before that time and would have been known by the editor of a newspaper. Gales as an immigrant newspaper editor, sympathetic to France, and clearly on the side of Jefferson in the contest between Federalists [8]and Republicans, was again courting official disfavor. Whatever the reason, he continued his printing business, doing work for a number of congressmen.

Early in 1798, Gales was approached by certain members of the North Carolina delegation to Congress about locating in Raleigh. Nathaniel Macon [9], in particular, recognized in Gales the type of editor needed by Republicans in North Carolina. With the crucial election of 1800 approaching and the party in need of a forceful editor to promote the Jefferson cause, Macon and his friends urged Gales to move to Raleigh [10], the state's new capital, and begin a newspaper. As an inducement he was promised the state printing contract. Pleased with the idea, Gales made a trip to Raleigh. What he saw and heard convinced him, for he engaged a house and returned to Philadelphia for his family.

There were now seven children, two daughters having been born since the family arrived in Philadelphia. On 20 Aug 1799, they embarked on a schooner bound for Norfolk, Va., Soon after leaving Philadelphia the youngest daughter died and was buried at sea. At Norfolk a carriage was hired for the overland trip to Raleigh. The family arrived on 4 Sept. 1799. Their furniture, supplies, and printing materials followed shortly thereafter. Types were sorted, the press erected, and on 22 Oct. 1799 the first number of the *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Weekly Advertiser* [11] appeared.


RALEIGH REGISTER,
AND
NORTH-CAROLINA WEEKLY ADVERTISER.
VOL. I. TUESDAY, JANUARY 21, 1800. No. 14.

The masthead of Joseph Gales's newspaper, The Raleigh Register and North-Carolina Weekly Advertiser.

The *Raleigh Register*, published by Gales until his retirement in 1833, became one of the major newspapers in the state. It was the leading political voice in North Carolina, first for the Republicans and, after 1824, for the National Republicans of Adams and Clay. In 1800 he was awarded the state printing contract, a position he held for ten consecutive years. To indicate his official status, Gales changed the title of his paper to *Raleigh Register, and North Carolina State Gazette*. In 1811, when he withdrew from the contest to choose a state printer, he again altered the title, this time to *Raleigh Register, and North Carolina Gazette*.

As a rival for political dominance in the newspaper field of Raleigh, Gales first encountered the Federalist paper of Abraham Hodge [12] and his nephew William Boylan [13], who had begun publishing the*North-Carolina Minerva* in Raleigh five months before Gales issued the *Register*. Boylan, who was the active partner in the Raleigh paper, was especially hostile to Gales. From the beginning he attacked the *Register* editor in the columns of the*Minerva*, calling attention to

Gales's foreign birth, criticizing his flight from England, and questioning his character. Gales, a temperate editor in such matters, ignored the attacks. But in 1804 a series of charges, coinciding with an unexplained fire that badly damaged his printing plant, provoked a response from Gales. The climax came with the exchange of abusive handbills, which so infuriated Boylan that he severely beat Gales with a cane when he encountered him on the steps of the capitol. Gales sued Boylan for assault and won. He donated the money, less legal fees, to the Raleigh Academy [14].

When beginning the *Register* in 1799, Gales was assisted by Richard Davison, a printer who had worked with him on the Sheffield *Register*. He, too, had found it convenient to immigrate to America. Davison left the *Register* in 1802 to edit the *North-Carolina Messenger*, a Republican paper established in Warrenton. After that Joseph Gales, Jr. [15], who had been expelled from The University of North Carolina [16] in 1801, joined his father to learn the printing trade along with Francis Lumsden, another apprentice, who in 1836 was the cofounder of the New Orleans *Picayune*.

In January 1809 Gales took on as a partner William Winston Seaton [17], a native Virginian, who came to Raleigh first in 1806 to aid William Boylan in publishing the *North-Carolina Minerva*. The next year Seaton acquired the *North Carolina Journal* at Halifax [18], transferring the allegiance of that paper from Federalist to Republican. While in Raleigh Seaton met and fell in love with Sarah Gales, oldest daughter of the *Register* editor. It was thus no problem for Seaton to give up the *Journal* at Halifax for a position as coeditor of the *Register*. He and Sarah Gales were married in Raleigh in April 1809.

Before this Gales had concluded that Joseph, Jr., needed more experience in the art of printing than he could gain in Raleigh. Therefore, in 1806 he sent the young man to Philadelphia to work under William Young Birch, a printer and friend of the elder Gales. The next year Samuel Harrison Smith, who had bought Gales's Philadelphia paper in 1797 and later moved to Washington, D.C., to begin the *National Intelligencer* in 1800, advertised the paper for sale. Gales was interested. He proposed to Smith that he accept Joseph, Jr., as a partner, with the understanding that if he proved capable he would assume sole control of the paper. Smith agreed and until the summer of 1810 young Gales worked as an assistant to the *Intelligencer* editor. During the 1807–8 session of Congress, Joseph Gales himself went up from Raleigh to help in reporting the debates. On 31 Aug. 1810 Joseph Gales, Jr., became editor of the *National Intelligencer*. Then in 1812, Seaton left the Raleigh *Register* to join his brother-in-law as coeditor of the *Intelligencer*.

Gales ran the *Raleigh Register* alone until 1821, when he brought his youngest son Weston [19] into the firm as a partner. Weston, born in Raleigh in 1802, had been expelled from Yale; like his older brother Joseph, he had found college life uncongenial. On 18 Nov. 1823 the two Galeses began publishing the *Register* as a semiweekly, the first to appear in North Carolina. Gales had issued the *Register* semiweekly during the session of the General Assembly [20] in 1804, but on a temporary basis only. However, the twice-weekly schedule proved unsatisfactory because North Carolina's population was too sparse to support it. Therefore on 11 Nov. 1831 the *Register* reverted to weekly publication.

A semiweekly publication was but one of the many innovations made by Joseph Gales in newspaper publishing in North Carolina. Not the least was the verbatim accounts of speeches delivered in the halls of Congress and the chambers of the state capitol. Many a famous speech was saved from oblivion by the shorthand reporting of Gales. He taught the art to his sons Joseph, Jr., and Weston, his son-in-law William W. Seaton [17], and a number of apprentices. E. J. Hale [21], longtime editor of the Fayetteville *Observer* [22], learned his trade as a printer and reporter from Joseph Gales.

But Gales did more. He used the columns of the *Register* to promote improvement and reform within Raleigh and North Carolina. Before the *Register* was a month old, Gales advocated a medical society [23] for the state as a means of combating "the fatal and criminal practices of Quacks and Empyrics." The "bloodthirsty and lawless" custom of dueling [24] he opposed as "repugnant to religion, justice & mercy." Education also enlisted Gales's interest, as it had when he edited the Sheffield *Register*. Not only did he champion the cause of schools in his paper, but also in 1801 he was one of the incorporators of the Raleigh Academy, which opened in 1804. Libraries, too, were high on Gales's list of needs for society. He declared on one occasion that a public library [25] would go further "to improve the condition of society than any other means that could be devised."

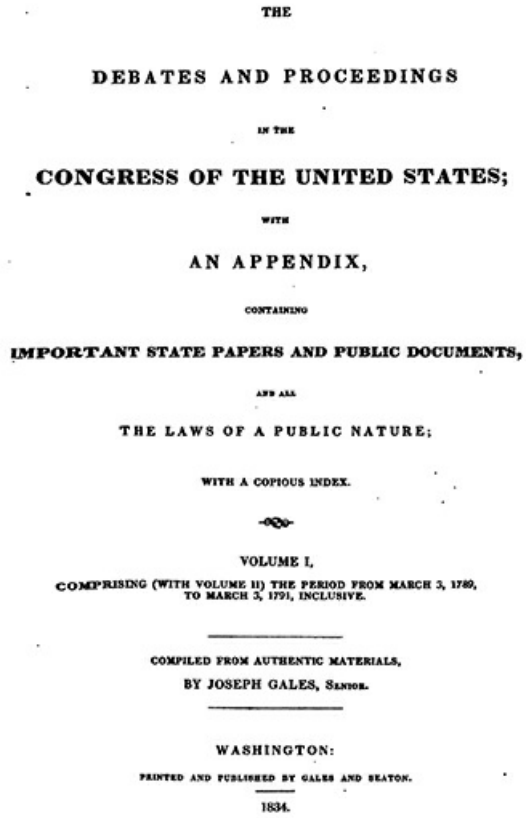
By 1815, Joseph Gales had become one of Raleigh's leading citizens. He served as director of the State Bank [26], as secretary of nearly every civic and benevolent society in Raleigh, as commissioner and treasurer of the town, and, from 1819 until his retirement in 1833, as mayor. His home was the center of social activity, made attractive by his reputation and, as one visitor said, by the "hospitality of his brilliant wife and accomplished daughters." A contemporary described Gales as "a man of few words," but his wife as "a great conversationalist."

In June 1819 a branch of the American Colonization Society [27] was organized in Raleigh and Gales became its secretary. Later, after his retirement and move to Washington in 1834, he became treasurer of the national organization, a position he held until 1839. Though Gales favored the emancipation [28] of slaves he did not openly attack the institution, believing that to do so was unwise. "It will be of no use," he wrote an acquaintance, "to attack the people's prejudices directly in the face." The end of slavery, he felt, must be brought about by gradual means. Indeed, in the columns of the *Register* he opposed any restriction on slavery [29] such as that intended by the Talmadge Amendment on the admission of Missouri to statehood in 1820. If slavery was to be abolished, he contended, the proper agency to do so was the state, not the federal government.

When the state capitol burned in 1831 [30], there was some agitation to relocate North Carolina's capital, a disturbing move to the people of Raleigh. Joseph Gales, as mayor, hit upon the idea of building a railroad [31]—a new innovation in transportation—from a stone quarry nearby to the site of the ruined capitol. His argument was that a railroad would afford a facility for obtaining cheap, durable building stone and thus influence the legislators to rebuild in Raleigh. Gales suggested the idea to other interested citizens, a company was formed, and in 1832, when the legislature met, everything

was in readiness "to treat the members of the legislature with a ride on a Railroad." Though just a mile and a quarter in length, with power provided by horse, this railroad had much effect in developing support for a more extensive undertaking, a cause of great interest to Gales. Since 1823, when elected secretary of the Internal Improvements Board, he had been active in promoting better transportation facilities for North Carolina.

Gales regarded religion as "the key-stone which locks and cements, and beautifies the grand arch of society." Before leaving Sheffield both he and Winifred Gales were active in the Sunday school [32] movement, an interest they continued after settling in Raleigh. Joseph served as superintendent of the Sunday school conducted in the Presbyterian church [33]. While in Sheffield, the Galeses had formed an attachment for the Unitarian faith [34], becoming acquainted with Joseph Priestley, the English chemist and religious reformer. After coming to America, Gales published the writings of Priestley, also a refugee in Philadelphia, in his *Gazetteer*. With Priestley, Joseph and Winifred Gales organized the first Unitarian Society in Philadelphia, and Joseph became the first lay reader. As editor of the *Raleigh Register* Gales aided the Unitarian cause in North Carolina, publishing extracts from the *Unitarian Miscellany*, edited by Jared Sparks, a man with whom both Joseph and Winifred enjoyed a loyal friendship.


THE

DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

IN THE

CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES;

WITH

AN APPENDIX,

CONTAINING

IMPORTANT STATE PAPERS AND PUBLIC DOCUMENTS,

AND ALL

THE LAWS OF A PUBLIC NATURE;

WITH A COPIOUS INDEX.

VOLUME I,

COMPRISING (WITH VOLUME II) THE PERIOD FROM MARCH 3, 1789, TO MARCH 3, 1791, INCLUSIVE.

COMPILED FROM AUTHENTIC MATERIALS,

BY JOSEPH GALES, SENIOR.

WASHINGTON:

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY GALES AND SEATON.

1834.

The title page of Joseph Gales's Annals of Congress, 1834. Image from Archive.org.

[35]Not only did Joseph Gales edit an influential newspaper; he also managed a thriving printing establishment, conducted a bookstore, and operated a paper mill [36] begun in 1808. In 1804, he published a romantic novel on English life, *Matilda Berkley, or Family Anecdotes* [37], written by his wife. This was but one of the many books produced by the Gales press. By far the greater number were state documents, but many volumes were of poetry, religion, and other topics. In 1819, Gales published George W. Jefferys's *Farmer's Own Book*. In 1828, Joseph Caldwell [38], president of The University of North Carolina, had Gales publish his *Numbers of Carlton* [39], a series of essays advocating railroads as a superior means of transportation over canals and turnpikes. This was followed in 1832 by his *Letters on Popular Education* [40], also published by Gales.

In 1833, Gales decided to turn the *Register* and other business over to Weston and retire to Washington, D.C. Both he and Winifred were beginning to tire of their active life. They were now in their seventies and wished to spend some of the time remaining to them with their children in the nation's capital. Obligations to the family in Raleigh were no longer demanding. Two daughters had died leaving young children whom the grandparents had reared. Weston had matured into a capable editor and responsible leader in Raleigh. The people of Raleigh, of course, were reluctant to see them go. Before their departure they were given a public dinner presided over by Governor David L. Swain [41].

Shortly after arriving in Washington, Gales began editing a "History of the Proceedings and Debates of the Early Sessions of Congress," the first part of the *Annals of Congress*, a publishing project long entertained by Gales and Seaton of the *National Intelligencer*. Two volumes were completed by Gales and published in 1834 when the work was suspended. In the late spring of 1839 Winifred Gales died and was buried in Washington. Joseph Gales returned to Raleigh. In January 1840 he was again elected mayor of Raleigh, an honor repeated the next year. But he did not live out the second term. He died at the age of eighty and was buried in the City Cemetery. Thomas Loring, editor of the Raleigh *Standard*, summed up the sentiments of the people of Raleigh when he wrote in his paper of 1 Sept. 1841, "when such a man dies, his loss is felt by all around him."

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Subjects:
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Newspapers and magazines [53]
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