

Introduction

In “The Overcoat,” a short story by Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852), the main character, Akaky Akakievich, is a clerk who copies text for a living. Akakievich loves the job so much that he likes to spend his free time handwriting copies of texts and he falls asleep giddy with the idea that in the morning he will begin his handwriting work afresh. At one point in the story, the narrator explains Akaky Akakievich’s love of handwriting: “It would be hard to find a man who so lived for his job. It would not be enough to say that he worked conscientiously—he worked with love. There, in his copying, he found an interesting, pleasant world for himself and his delight was reflected in his face. He had his favorites among the letters of the alphabet and, when he came to them, he would chuckle, wink and help them along with his lips so that they could almost be read on his face as they were formed by his pen.”ⁱ This account reminds me of John McLean Harrington, who also made a career of handwriting. Although Akakievich is a fictitious character, his devotion to handwriting reminds one of the committed nineteenth-century journalist.

Shortly before the Civil War, the son of an affluent Southern family began a journalism career unlike any in his community, his state, or perhaps even the nation. Journalist John McLean Harrington (1839–1887), also known as “John McL,” and “McL,” worked as a bookkeeper, surveyor, educator, sheriff,ⁱⁱ and postmaster in a community located about thirty miles south of Raleigh, in Harnett County, North Carolina.ⁱⁱⁱ This research explores both *The Nation*, a newspaper, and *The Young American*, a literary journal that contained news. Both were handwritten in 1858.^{iv} With the completion of the first trans-Atlantic telegraph cable in that year, the world felt united in a new way, and the occasion was greeted by bonfires, fireworks, and pageants on both sides of the Atlantic.^v In Europe, Victorians, overcome by sewage odors from the Thames, built massive sewers, a monumental public works project for the time. Meanwhile in the United States, Abraham Lincoln debated Stephen Douglas as the nation slowly fragmented into a hopelessly broken land.

In 1858, Harrington’s *Nation* was stridently pro-Democratic and hinted at the nation’s collapse, but it also featured lighter fare such as jokes and marriage announcements. Harnett County historian Malcolm Fowler described the newspaper as an early version of the *Kiplinger Newsletter*.^{vi} The handwritten newspaper included paid advertisements along with local, state, and national news, including some references to the growing uneasiness over the future of slavery. *The Young American*, with a circulation of one hundred subscribers,^{vii} included news, quips, original fiction, poetry, and paid advertisements.

Harrington’s work reveals a reporter-publisher who embodied the concept of the personal journalist. He was committed to a partisan cause and willing to promote it without benefit of a movable-type printing press, although they were available as early as the mid-fifteenth century.^{viii} The printing telegraph was also available at the time, but went unused by Harrington.^{ix} In his career, Harrington edited seven handwritten publications over the course of eleven years. His work was suspended during a portion of the Civil War, as he lived where the last major campaigns were fought in North

Carolina's Harnett and Sampson counties. The Union and the Confederates fought their next-to-last battle on March 15 and 16, 1865, in Averasboro, about twenty miles from Harrington's home. In that mission, General William J. Hardee's Confederate Army fought to delay Union General William T. Sherman's march from Atlanta to the north.^x The last battle of the Civil War, and the largest fought in North Carolina, took place just a few miles away in Bentonville, part of adjacent Johnson County, on March 19–21, 1865. Harrington did not publish during 1865, so he was unable to cover these major tactical offensives, but he resumed his handwritten publications with *The Times*., a newspaper with an odd period in its name, which ran from October 17, 1867, to April 2, 1869. This research refers to his later work but does not cover it in-depth. Primarily, I will explore Harrington's work in the free press using his novel approach of freehand writing.

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Figure 1. John McLean Harrington (Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Geneva Harrington Cameron).

Harrington is worthy of study because of his unusual experiment in freehand publishing and the various roles manifested by his activity. A man of many identities, John McLean Harrington may be summed up in three roles.

- **A complicated person.**

Democrat. Republican. Personal journalist. Innovator. Harrington was a figure of intrigue, the kind of writer who was not trained formally in the news business but who successfully modeled the conventions of the day. He reprinted articles from other periodicals and inserted his whimsical observations along the way. He did not pioneer any breakthroughs in the press, but his desire to publish by handwriting his work is so novel that it demands attention. Harrington has been called an eccentric and a man who knew no political party loyalty. He contributed a service to his community by providing a voice when no other newspaper existed for his rural area. He worked without benefit of counsel from a veteran journalist. There was no mentor to explain what kind of articles community newspapers commonly published or how to unite a community through the medium of a shared periodical. While brief and unpolished, his work helped his rural community gain a better sense of itself and feel more connected to the world at large.

- **An unsung hero.**

No press association recognized Harrington; and his newspapers have never been on display as examples of journalistic excellence. Yet Harrington demonstrated a commitment to his craft that suggests what is most desired in the work of a journalist. He sifted the news and presented it in an arresting manner with commentary and humor. In a sense, he was ahead of his time by anticipating the fashion of a citizen journalist; he weighed in on the issues of the day because of an irresistible need to be heard. An amateur, Harrington wrote to delight himself first, then others. For this reason, John McLean Harrington could be described as the dilettante editor of Harnett County.

Though he received no accolades, Harrington published his handwritten newspapers over the course of several years. His first publication, *The Young American*, began in January 1858 and was soon followed by a second newspaper,

The Nation, during April of the same year. In late August 1858, Harrington suspended *The Nation* but persisted in publishing *The Young American*. Harrington's work revealed a reporter-publisher who embodied the concept of a personal journalist, committed to a partisan cause and willing to promote it without the benefit of a printing press. He used his work to support the Southern cause throughout the Civil War years. Harrington, who lived from 1839 to 1887, edited a total of seven handwritten publications during his career. The year he died, the first printed newspaper began in Harnett County.

- **A supporter of the free press using freehand writing**

Harrington exemplified the notion of a free press. He did not let the lack of a printing press keep him from publishing, but instead freely hand copied and distributed his publications as evidence of his support for a vigorous free press. In the process, Harrington depended on no other vendors to make, circulate, or run his operation. He may be the nation's best example of the independent journalist, taking freedom to a new level with his commitment to a free press using freehand. Though his work has not been widely recognized, Harrington was committed to the cause of a free press, even when it required the tedious work of writing by hand. In the research that follows, I will examine questions about the production and distribution of a handwritten newspaper in the political, social, and economic milieu of the rural South before and during the Civil War.

ⁱ Nikolai Gogol, "The Overcoat," in *Gateway to the Great Books*, ed. Robert M. Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago, Ill.: William Benton, 1963), 453–478.

ⁱⁱ *The Legislative Documents for Session 1858–59*, lists James A. Harrington as sheriff. This document from 1859 refers to Harrington in a single, poster-like sheet, recorded as page one in the box of loose documents.

ⁱⁱⁱ Harnett County is most notable for its native son, Paul Green (1894–1981), a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright who is famous for his outdoor symphonic dramas, particularly *The Lost Colony* a production from 1937 performed every summer in an outdoor theater at Fort Raleigh National Historic Site near Manteo, North Carolina.

^{iv} The July and September 1858 issues of *The Young American* are not available through the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources; however, the documents are considered to have existed at one time. On page 280 of the December 1858 issue of *The Young American*, Harrington wrote that the 1858 collection of *The Young American*, 321 pages, would be bound in cloth and ready for pick-up on January 1, 1859 for \$2.50. This notice suggests that the collection existed at one time, but this researcher could not locate one.

^v Daniel Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 12.

^{vi} Malcolm Fowler, "News of 'boundless continent' mixed with Harnett tib-bits," *Herald* (Sanford, NC), May 22, 1963, 6.

^{vii} Malcolm Fowler, *They Passed This Way: A Personal Narrative of Harnett County History* (Lillington, NC: Harnett County Centennial, 1955), 151.

^{viii} Paul A. Pratte, “Origins of Mass Communication,” in *The Media in America, A history*, ed. William David Sloan (Northport, AL.: Vision Press, 2002), 10–11.

^{ix} Lloyd Chiasson, *Three Centuries of American Media* (Englewood, CO: Morton Publishing, 1999), 66.

^x Fowler, *They Passed This Way*, 94.

Chapter 1