

Thomas J. Lemay

Thomas J. Lemay (1802-1863) was a politically-active editor in the fiercely partisan journalism of antebellum North Carolina, when editors often competed with personal invective in their editorial columns,

As editor-owner of the Raleigh Star and North Carolina Gazette from 1826 to 1853, however, Lemay tried to calm the purple prose by asking editors to agree not to discuss personalities or use "indecorous language" in their columns,

His efforts to bring new standards for editorial policy as well as to standardize financial procedures led to the earliest gathering of North Carolina newspaper editors as a professional group.

In 1837, Lemay joined Thomas Loring and Joseph Gales, editors of other Raleigh newspapers, in calling a meeting in Raleigh. Thirteen of the state's 25 editors showed up.

The call for an editorial ethics code was ahead of its time, however, and it fell on deaf ears in most editorial offices. The meeting of editors, however, set a tradition that would lead to other ad hoc gatherings of editors, and eventually to the founding of the North Carolina Press Association.

Lemay was among the earliest to grasp the possibilities of the telegraph. In 1850, he followed the example of Edward J. Hale of the Fayetteville Observer in getting telegraphic copies of important government papers tapped from the office of their political friend, Secretary of the Navy William A. Graham of North Carolina.

Like nearly all North Carolina editors of his day, Lemay was for state's rights and a small federal government, but strongly favored local and regional internal improvements, the state fair, state help for railroads and economic development.

Another specialty with Lemay was improved farming methods. In the 1840s, he established the monthly North Carolina Farmer. He also issued a yearly Lemay's North Carolina Almanac.

As a journalistic mentor, Lemay left his mark on the most famous of all 19th-century North Carolina editors, William Woods Holden of the North Carolina Standard. The young Holden spent five years as an apprentice and employee on the Star, living in Lemay's house. When Lemay sold the Star in 1853, Holden had been editor of the Standard for 11 years and was already a top leader of the resurgent Democratic Party.

By Roy Parker Jr.
January 1998