

## THE GRIST FAMILY AND THE YORKVILLE ENQUIRER

By Paul Gettys

In her article “Traversing the Grist Family Tree,” Margaret McNab Gale recounts her efforts to document her family’s history. We thought it would be interesting for our readers to provide a summary of the remarkable legacy of the Grist family in the newspaper business in York.

John Ellis Grist (1807-1870) was born in Spartanburg County, the son of Isom and Rhoda Lawrence Grist. He married Elizabeth (Betsy) Lawrence and they began a family. For some time, John worked for the *Pendleton Messenger*. In 1833, they moved to Yorkville, when their son Lewis Mason Grist was 17 months old. The Nullification controversy was the consuming political passion of the day, featuring the rivalry of John C. Calhoun and President Andrew Jackson. Grist established a purely political paper, *The Patriot*, which was published weekly and was a Unionist partisan. The Unionists opposed the position of the Nullification advocates that South Carolina had the right to nullify, or void, offensive tariffs that had been passed by the U. S. Congress. Unfortunately for the future of *The Patriot*, the Nullification crisis was resolved by a compromise soon after the establishment of the paper, and Grist ceased publication.

Grist decided to stay in Yorkville and in 1835 began a newspaper that would contain both local and national news. The *Journal of the Times* was initiated on June 15, 1835. This effort lasted for two years, after which Grist bought some used printing equipment and began the *Yorkville Compiler* on June 1, 1840. By this time, his son Lewis was nine years old, and he began working for his father. The *Compiler* ceased publication in July 1843. Not to be deterred, John Grist began a new publication the next month, which he named the *Farmer’s Miscellany*. Lewis undertook more responsibility, and began setting the type for this paper. He had spent some time as a teenager traveling through Georgia and Alabama, working as a journeyman at newspapers and learning the trade. It is interesting that John Grist kept experimenting with content in his newspapers in an effort to gain subscribers. From a one-issue political paper, he gradually began adding more variety and content, including fiction, commentary, and local news.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The early history of the family’s newspaper business is summarized in the article “Four Generations of Grists” in the *Yorkville Enquirer*, January 31, 1930.

In 1851, John sold his interest in the *Farmer's Miscellany* to his son Lewis, who gradually expanded its coverage. By this time, he was about 20 and had been working in the newspaper business most of his life. On January 4, 1855, Lewis changed the name of the newspaper to The *Yorkville Enquirer*, publishing as a weekly. He had as partners Samuel W. Melton and Willis Miller. About the time he undertook his newspaper career, Lewis married a girl he had met in Alabama, Frances Viena Vise. They married in 1854 and bought a house. The *Enquirer* became a success, and its influence spread far beyond the status of a local newspaper. Grist bought out his partners in 1858, and by 1861, the *Yorkville Enquirer* had subscribers in most counties in South Carolina and in many states in the South.<sup>2</sup>

In his editorial positions, Lewis opposed Secession. He had been a member of the Independent Presbyterian Church, which had an anti-slavery position. However, when the inevitable conflict began, he closed ranks with his neighbors and helped raise a company with W. H. McCorkle. This company of local men became Company A of the South Carolina 12<sup>th</sup> Volunteers. McCorkle was named Captain and Grist was First Lieutenant. Later, when McCorkle was promoted to Colonel, Grist became the Captain. His right arm was shattered at the elbow at the Battle of Second Manassas, and his wife went to Virginia to nurse him. He credited her care for saving his arm from amputation.<sup>3</sup>

The war presented a crisis for the *Enquirer*. Lewis' father John resumed his role as editor while his son was in the service of his country. The paper became an indispensable source of information from the war fronts, carrying news of battles, letters home from local soldiers, and the dreaded lists of wounded and dead. It was read widely in South Carolina. John was able to continue publishing every week during the war, except two weeks when paper was unavailable.

At the close of the war, Lewis returned and resumed control of the *Enquirer*. The newspaper adapted and changed with the times. The period of Reconstruction was followed by gradual economic recovery and later by the period of rapid industrialization in the Piedmont. The *Enquirer* reported on all these changes. During the late 1800s, the paper featured a series of articles by Dr. Maurice Moore called "Reminiscences of York." This series discussed the many changes taking place in the town and memories of old Yorkville. The series was later gathered into a book.<sup>4</sup>

In 1870, John Ellis Grist died. In the same year, Lewis and his wife Frances purchased a new home at 234 East Liberty Street. This house had been built around 1850-1853 by B. F.

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<sup>2</sup> Information on Lewis Grist's life was derived from the article "Death of Capt. L. M. Grist" published in the *Yorkville Enquirer*, January 17, 1903.

<sup>3</sup> *Yorkville Enquirer*, January 17, 1903.

<sup>4</sup> *Enquirer Herald*, December 22, 2015.

Rawlinson of Rock Hill. It remained in the Grist family for many years.<sup>5</sup> Lewis and Frances had a number of children. Lewis insisted that each son begin to learn the newspaper business, just as he had done as a boy. His sons L. George Grist, Wood Davidson Grist, Oliver E. Grist, Albert M. Grist, and Reginald M. Grist each undoubtedly spent many hours learning the business. In 1894, all the sons were made partners in the *Enquirer*.<sup>6</sup>

The *Yorkville Enquirer* had become an institution in upstate South Carolina. As a newspaper of record in the county seat, it benefitted from the regular publication of legal ads for the local courts and county government. Readers all over York County were also interested in news from trials taking place in the courthouse, from county government activities, and from social news in York, the county seat. In November 1890, tragedy struck the *Enquirer* in the form of the first of several fires to damage the newspaper office and production facilities. The publication of the newspaper was interrupted for a time, but the family built a new office, which was opened in 1891. This building, which continues to stand at 67 North Congress Street, is a fine example of Folk Victorian architecture, with a cornice featuring a foliage design and dentil molding. The side of the building has metal stars which show that a reinforcement system was installed, with “earthquake rods” placed from lessons learned in the Charleston earthquake of 1886.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the history of the *Yorkville Enquirer*, the Grist family and the newspaper itself were never fearful of taking controversial stands. John Grist had started his career publishing a pro-Unionist paper during the Nullification controversy. The Grists opposed slavery, they opposed Secession, and after the war, they opposed the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, even though York County was one of the hotbeds of Klan activity in South Carolina.<sup>8</sup> Many locals suspected that Grist was providing information on Klan activities to the Federal troops occupying the county. These positions undoubtedly cost them readers and created opposition. Lewis Grist was attacked at least three times, and one occasion involved a fight in the York County Courthouse that led to a trial.<sup>9</sup>

Lewis Grist died in 1903, and the *Enquirer* became the property of sons David, Oliver, and Albert. Oliver died in 1917 and Wood Davidson (David) died in 1925. Albert Grist continued as editor. By 1930, he was joined by the next generation as staff members, including Margaret Grist, James D. Grist, Lewis Grist, Jr., and Sarah Elizabeth Grist. At that time, the paper was published twice weekly. Remarkably, the circulation was reported to be larger than the

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<sup>5</sup> The web site Roots and Recall ([www.rootsandrecall.com](http://www.rootsandrecall.com)) has a page on the house at 234 East Liberty Street providing history, photos, and a summary of family ownership.

<sup>6</sup> *Yorkville Enquirer*, January 31, 1930.

<sup>7</sup> See Roots and Recall web site for the page on the *Enquirer* Building, with photographs and detailed information.

<sup>8</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, March 9, 1941.

<sup>9</sup> *Fort Mill Times*, July 22, 1909. W. H. Windle, a farmer from the Fort Mill Township, was accused of assaulting Grist in the office of County Clerk J. A. Tate. He was found guilty.

population of York.<sup>10</sup> The City had modernized its name in 1915, shortening from Yorkville to York. The newspaper refused to adapt to the name change and continued to be the *Yorkville Enquirer*. In the early 1930s, Albert introduced a new feature. Two days a week, he would ride through York County and would meet people and describe the surroundings. The resulting articles, under the title “Just a-Rolling Along the Way – In My Green Chevrolet” became a popular feature. These articles today are a valuable source of information on the people and places that made York County and surrounding areas interesting during the Great Depression. As an example, in September 1933, the column discussed various historic grist mill sites along the Catawba River. Albert Grist interviewed my great-grandfather, Gillom A. Gettys, who described his father taking him as a boy to see the Davie mill at Landsford and two grist mills across the river in Lancaster County.<sup>11</sup>

Albert Grist died in 1941. In 1943, Lewis Mason Grist, Jr. and James Grist sold the *Yorkville Enquirer* to Mr. and Mrs. Fred Shirley. At the time, the *Charlotte Observer* stated that the *Enquirer* was the oldest newspaper in America under continuous ownership by one family.<sup>12</sup> The newspaper went under several ownerships until becoming part of the McClatchy chain in 1990. In 2007, the *Enquirer* was merged with the *Clover Herald*, another local McClatchy paper. On December 22, 2015, the final issue of the *Enquirer-Herald* was printed, 160 years after the first edition of the *Yorkville Enquirer* was published and 182 years after a young John Grist moved to Yorkville to enter the newspaper business.

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<sup>10</sup> *Yorkville Enquirer*, January 31, 1930.

<sup>11</sup> *Yorkville Enquirer*, September 26, 1933. This trip probably took place around 1860. Gillom Gettys was born in 1852 and his father, Ebenezer, was killed in 1864 from wounds suffered at Spottsylvania.

<sup>12</sup> *Charlotte Observer*, March 9, 1941.