Founded in 1855 by Matthew Fields, like many newspapers of the era, The Sentinel began as a partisan publication in a divisive political environment prior to the Civil War in 1861. Issues such as slavery, tariffs, and state’s rights were fiercely debated across the nation.

Matthew Fields was the first of four children born in 1813 to William Fields and his wife Margaret Ramsey Fields on a farm located a mile from Rockville. At sixteen, he began an apprenticeship as a printer under prominent landowner Jesse Leach at The Maryland Journal and True American, a newspaper that published in the County from 1828 to 1834 with the intent to support political candidates and influence public opinion. Leach’s publication did not survive but Fields had attained the knowledge of a printer.

After marrying Rebecca Beckwith in 1851, Fields was appointed to be the postmaster of Rockville and the following year was elected to be Montgomery County’s sheriff. Having been elected as a Whig, Fields partnered with his friend John Braddock Jr. at The Maryland Journal and Montgomery Advocate, a newspaper that supported the Whig political party.

As the Whig Party declined, Braddock’s publication ceased production in 1855 after just two years and Fields found himself affiliated with the newly-formed Democratic Party in opposition to Abraham Lincoln.

On August 11, 1855, Fields published the first edition of The Montgomery County Sentinel. According to an October 9, 1930, edition of The Washington Herald, The Sentinel was founded with the intent “to take flings at the Yanks.”

From the very first edition, The Sentinel became a political voice in the county, routinely advocating for Confederate causes. Printing took place at a cabin on Washington Street which was later expanded to accommodate community gatherings as residents congregated to discuss news and politics.

During the 1860 election, Fields dedicated the opinion writing to criticize the anti-Catholic ‘Know Nothing Party,’ as well as the Black Republicans. After closely covering the Democratic nomination process, Fields ran columns urging his readers to vote for Democrat John C. Breckinridge.

After the election of Abraham Lincoln, Fields worked to convene a citizens’ meeting in Rockville to discuss the issues of slavery and states’ rights. Much to Fields’ disappointment, attendees of the meeting favored remaining in the Union while continuing the preservation of slavery. Despite routinely publishing anti-Lincoln rhetoric, Fields published Lincoln’s entire inaugural address.

When the Civil War began with the attack on Fort Sumter, Fields was clear to point out his preference for the Confederacy. As troops under Colonel Charles Stone occupied the county, The Sentinel covered the raids on the various volunteer militias regardless of political leanings.

Throughout the war, The Sentinel published on the issue of slavery and when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Fields published the document’s text in full on September 26, 1862. In addition to discussing the various political issues, war reports were used to inform readers on the progress of the war.

After rioting killed Union soldiers in Baltimore, martial law was instituted in Maryland, allowing the Union Army to imprison Confederate sympathizers for disloyalty. On October 6, 1862, Union soldiers arrested Matthew Fields on the suspicion of ‘southern sympathies.’ Court documents indicate Fields was to be released as soon as he was willing to take an oath not to publish material favoring the South. He was released on November 25, 1862, during Lincoln’s Thanksgiving Amnesty.

Following Fields’ arrest, The Sentinel continued publication under the direction of his wife Rebecca and the help of his sons. Fields was arrested a second time in April 1864, with no formal charge, but production had to be suspended due to a lack of expertise in operating the printing press. After Rebecca Fields wrote to Congressman Francis Thomas, a judge ordered Matthew Fields to be released.

Due to the lack of existing copies of The Sentinel, not much is known about Fields’ views on the latter events of the Civil War or the early Reconstruction period.

Fields eventually died in 1871 and his wife took over publication, often handling production entirely on her own until 1910 when Matthew Fields’ son Henry Clay Fields became the editor. Rebecca Fields would maintain a limited role until her death in 1930 at age 100.

The Fields family maintained ownership of The Sentinel until 1932 when it was sold to P.G. Stromberg. Stromberg expanded The Sentinel and hired numerous reporters and a newsboy to handle deliveries. In its centennial year, the family of P.G. Stromberg sold The Sentinel to Louis Linebach and Cy Campbell. During their ownership, Linebach and Campbell had significant disagreements, with Campbell eventually selling his stake in the publication.

In 1962, Leonard and Bernard Kapiloff purchased The Sentinel from Linebach and the Kapiloff family continues to publish it today.

Investigative reporter Bob Woodward wrote for The Sentinel after being turned down from The Washington Post. Woodward later rejoined the Post and was soon reporting on the Watergate Scandal.

Much like under the direction of Matthew Fields, The Sentinel coverage included major national events.

On April 22, 1970, The Sentinel covered the nation’s first Earth Day as volunteers from Rockville and across the County gathered to collect trash and debris from ecologically-sensitive areas. In October 2002, staff writers covered the D.C. sniper attacks, publishing multiple stories per week over the course of the month.