

015 ASHBURN, HENRY

Printer & Publisher

Norfolk

Printer and publisher of the *American Beacon* (1815-36) at Norfolk with the brothers Hamilton (380) and William C. Shields (381); also son-in-law of Leroy Anderson (011).

Ashburn was journeyman printer who worked his way into the partnership that owned one of Norfolk's most profitable early newspapers, the venerable *American Beacon*. He was a native North Carolinian, born in Bertie County, some 65 miles southwest of Norfolk on the western bank of the Chowan River. Where he learned his trade is unknown, but he was working in the port-town when the *American Beacon* began publishing in August 1815.

The journal's proprietors were new to town: Samuel Shepherd (379) was a job printer from Richmond who had married the daughter of his old master, Augustine Davis (119), and who later became Virginia's public printer; Hamilton Shields was a Philadelphian who had come to Smithfield in about 1810 to conduct a school and became a local military hero from his service during the War of 1812; his brother, William C. Shields, was a journeyman printer in Richmond who had owned half of that city's first successful daily, *The Commercial Compiler*, started by his brother-in-law Leroy Anderson. From the beginning, the firm of Shields & Shepherd intended to publish a journal equivalent to the *Compiler* in Norfolk. To do so, however, they needed the revenue of a job-printing office and book-store to sustain the paper in its early days. Intending to devote their energies to editing the daily, the operation of their office would require a trained printer and manager – and Ashburn was their choice.

This arrangement worked successfully for the three men, all then in their twenties, even as Ashburn was clearly a subordinate. Circumstances changed in early 1816. On January 30th, Ashburn's room was burglarized and all of the profits he had realized from his ongoing association with Shields & Shepherd – a pile of bank certificates kept in a trunk – were stolen. Finding their journeyman suddenly destitute, the journalists advertised a reward for anyone finding and arresting the perpetrator in every edition for the next three months, to no avail. So Shields & Shepherd decided to restructure the business to make Ashburn a partner in the job-printing office as compensation. Later that summer, Shepherd himself sold out of the business. Hamilton Shields brought in two new partners: his brother William, who sold his share of Richmond's profitable *Compiler* to do so, and Seymour P. Charlton (089), a young Norfolk native trained in Richmond. But to accomplish this shuffle, the new partnership was obliged to buy Ashburn out of his interest in the job-printing office so that he would profit by the reorganization as well. The buy-out and his subsequent salary working for the resulting firm of Shields, Charlton & Co. allowed him to accumulate enough wealth to then buy Charlton's share of the firm upon that partner's retirement from the *Beacon* at the end of 1819.

This juggling indicates the close familial relationship that developed between these three non-native tradesmen, one that continued for fourteen more years. In 1820, the new firm acquired the "Steam Boat Hotel Reading Room" in conjunction with its new operator, one Mr. Martin (280), in order to expand their bookselling business. In 1822, Hamilton Shields secured Ashburn's bond when he married Harriett Sophia Anderson, his niece and Leroy

Anderson's eldest daughter, who was a survivor of the 1811 Richmond Theater Fire. And in 1823, Ashburn became an equal partner with Hamilton Shields when William C. Shields divided his share between them. This fruitful relationship ended in 1834 when Hamilton Shields retired from journalism, selling his interest in the *Beacon* office to Hugh Blair Grigsby (1808-81); that Norfolk native seemed to be heir to the Shields brothers' journalistic mantle, with the thirty-eight-year-old Ashburn now mentoring the twenty-six-year old Grigsby in the absence of his marriage relations. But two years later, Ashburn fell ill in September 1836 and died unexpectedly. His wife's uncle, the Williamsburg and Yorktown merchant Robert Anderson (1781-1859) was left to sort out the disposition of his estate and the *American Beacon* office.

In the end, his life was clearly a case of upward mobility, aided by sympathetic employers, who came from similar backgrounds and drew him into their family. Ashburn's estate held his share of the business until the end of 1837, when Grigsby bought it in a settlement crafted by Anderson, forming the successor firm of Grigsby & Co., with Henry B. Bagnall and Timothy F. Boothby as his tradesmen. The foundation set for the *American Beacon* by the original triumvirate in 1815 allowed the paper to reach this longevity; it also served as the base for its continued survival until 1858.

Personal Data

Born:	In	1796	Bertie County, North Carolina
Married:	Apr. 4	1822	Harriett Anderson @ Norfolk, Virginia.
Died:	Sept. 22	1836	Norfolk, Virginia.
Children:	Robert Anderson (1824-54); Clara Ann Justina (1827-47).		

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Tucker, *Norfolk Abstracts*, Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*. Story of burglary and theft taken from the *American Beacon*, Jan. to Apr. 1816; Robert Anderson Papers, Rockefeller Library, CWF; genealogical data from Anderson family charts in *William & Mary Quarterly* (1903).