

019 BANKS, GERARD

Editor & Publisher

Richmond, Fredericksburg, Staunton, Lynchburg

Editor and publisher of several Republican journals in Virginia between 1800 and 1820.

Gerard Banks was a part of the politically active Banks family from the Rappahannock River Valley area above Fredericksburg. His father, also Gerard (1725-1787), was a county-court justice, coroner, and sheriff in Stafford County; his cousin, Linn Banks of Culpeper County (1784-1842), served as Speaker of Virginia's House of Delegates from 1817 to 1838; his brother, Henry Banks (1761-1833), also served as a delegate from Culpeper, Greenbrier, and Kanawha Counties, later becoming a well-known Republican pamphleteer in both Virginia and Kentucky; and his sister, Agatha (1766-1828), married William Waller Hening (213) of Albemarle County, the eminent legal scholar, Chancery Court clerk, Republican leader, and a close political ally of brother Henry Banks. The Hening link also made Banks a marriage relation to William Waller Gray (193), the Richmond-trained printer who was the eldest son of Hening's only sister Eleanor. His mother, Frances Bruce (1736-1818) of Orange County, was daughter to James Bruce, the progenitor of that prominent Virginia name. Thus Banks had weighty familial connections in the growing post-Revolutionary elite of Virginia from his birth onward.

Banks was born in about 1764 in the western part of Culpeper County that became Madison County in 1793. Like most of the rest of his immediate family, he was a land-speculator and planter for his entire life, eventually buying and selling plantations in Culpeper, Louisa, and Goochland counties; this mimicked his father's transactions which made him a major land-owner in King George, Culpeper, and Stafford counties, although his King George holdings were actually Stafford ones as that part of King George was incorporated into Stafford in 1777, including the site of the family home that he built late in life at Green Bank, just west of Fredericksburg and Falmouth on the northern bank of the Rappahannock. On his father's death in June 1787, Banks became the administrator of that far-flung estate while living on a eastern Culpeper plantation near Green Bank that was apparently owned by his father. The elder Gerard's will bequeathed Banks's residence to him, and charged him with the care of his underage brothers William and George, a responsibility that lasted until 1799.

His father's death also brought Banks into the political world, evidently as the heir-apparent to his father's political mantle. In late 1787 Banks was elected as a delegate to the Assembly from Culpeper County for that winter's meeting. But after that one session, he stayed close to Culpeper, serving in elective county offices throughout the 1790s. He returned to the Assembly as a delegate in the 1797-98 session, but thereafter he did not serve in an elective office again, preferring instead to take up the pen in support of Republican principles rather than legislating them.

Banks first came to public notice as a pamphleteer in 1792 addressing *The Right of Suffrage*, advocating its expansion in Virginia. This turn developed into a career as a polemicist with a sharp exchange of "advertisements" in Fredericksburg's *Virginia Herald* in spring 1798. In that Federalist paper, he offered to sell his Culpeper County lands if he could find a situation devoid of Federalist neighbors; the exchange deteriorated from there. Yet Banks was

obviously serious, as he acquired a substantial plantation in Louisa County near the Madison County line the following year and leased his Culpeper property. Meanwhile, he contributed essays to the Jeffersonian papers established in Virginia by James Lyon (274) preceding the 1800 presidential election. Following Jefferson's victory, though, he seems to have returned to farming and land speculation until his polemical skills were once again in demand.

In 1802, Banks sold his recently-acquired Louisa County lands and bought a new situation in adjacent Goochland County, moving closer to Richmond, where brother Henry and brother-in-law Hening had become important government leaders. As the 1808 presidential election dawned, Banks returned to the political fray. With Republican leaders in the state split over who should succeed the president – James Madison or James Monroe – Banks joined brother Henry in supporting Monroe and launched a newspaper to advocate his election. Issued from the Richmond presses of Seaton Grantland (186) and Thomas Pescud Manson (278), *The Virginian*, was clearly a campaign paper, and with the campaign's end, so too ended the paper. Still, that experience whetted his appetite once again for publishing and polemics, as he was heavily involved in journalism over the next decade.

By 1809, Banks had acquired a home in Fredericksburg proper, near the family's Green Bank estate; he and his wife advertised a school for girls there that summer, apparently to aid in the education of their own daughters in the process. The next summer Banks advertised for subscribers to a resurrected *Virginian* there, a project that came to fruition in early 1811 as the *Impartial Observer or the Rights of Man*. This Fredericksburg journal followed a fifteen-year-long string of Republican papers that had failed to compete with Timothy Green's long-lived *Virginia Herald* there, perhaps the state's best known Federalist organ; Banks fared no better than his predecessors had, as his *Impartial Observer* lasted but a month. After that experience, Banks abandoned the idea of owning newspapers, turning instead to editing them, signing short-term contracts to edit journals owned by others. First, he signed on with Richmonders Philip DuVal (155) and Joseph Butler (069) to edit their new *Observer* in Staunton in April 1814; however, that venture too lasted but a month, killed in part by the impending death of Samuel Pleasants (331), the Republican public printer, which drew DuVal back to the capital. A more successful effort was his subsequent contract as editor of *The Echo* in Lynchburg for Russel Dawson (130) and William Waller Gray; while it was only intended as a campaign paper in support of James Monroe as James Madison's successor that year, it actually survived beyond the election, issuing from June 1816 until June 1818. But Banks was its editor only until September, when his wife died in Fredericksburg and he was compelled to return there to attend three underage daughters. *The Echo* proved his last successful publishing effort.

By September 1817, Banks was ready to return to publishing, announcing then his intention to publish a history of the persecution of Baptists in colonial Virginia if sufficient subscribers could be obtained. When that project foundered, he advertised in May 1818 for subscribers to a new political paper that he would publish at Winchester, the *Western Advocate*; that project also was not realized. After that failure Banks disappears from the bibliographic record. It seems that Banks died shortly thereafter, sometime in 1819, near Alexandria, where his last proposed venture had been advertised, as probate transactions begin to appear in Culpeper County court records in 1820. Remarkably, his death was not noted by

any of Virginia's newspapers, indicating that his time had come and gone, so explaining why his last publishing proposals had failed.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1766 Culpeper (later Madison) County, Virginia.
Married [1]: before 1790 Ann Cocke Winston @ Hanover Cty, Va. (d. 1816)
Married [2]: ca. 1817 Sarah Strother @ Fredericksburg, Virginia.
Died: ca. 1819 Alexandria, Virginia (then District of Columbia).
Children: Frances Bruce (n. 1792), Edmund (b. 1796), Gerard IV (b. 1797),
Sarah Lewis (b. 1800), Martha (b. 1811), Virginia (unrecorded).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; newspaper notices in Fredericksburg (1798-99), in Norfolk (1817), and in Alexandria (1818); genealogical data from, in part, *Tyler's Quarterly* and Banks family charts posted on Ancestry.com and RootsWeb.com (August 2012).

Thanks are due to R. Neil Hening of Richmond for use of his notes on the Hening family and the publishing history of *Statutes at Large*, which resolve the confusions over multiple "Gerards" found in those charts.