

027 BAXTER, DANIEL

Printer & Publisher

Williamsburg, Richmond, Norfolk

Long-lived practical printer who briefly published *Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle* (1789-94), first with William Prentis (340) and then with Thomas Wilson (452).

Baxter would be an indistinguishable figure in Virginia's printing trade were it not for the notice of his passing printed in Norfolk's *American Beacon* in 1836. Bibliographic evidence only shows that he was a partner in publishing *The Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle* (later *The Virginia Chronicle*) in Norfolk between 1789 and 1794. His life story, though, is far more interesting than that terse description indicates.

Born near Williamsburg in 1756, Baxter was orphaned early in life, and so was bound out as an apprentice, landing in the printing office of Alexander Purdie (345) and John Dixon Sr. (140) about 1766. That assignment determined the course of his life for the next seven decades. It also began an association with Dixon that lasted until 1789. First, Baxter worked at the press that Dixon operated in Williamsburg in succeeding partnerships from Purdie, to William Hunter Jr. (231), and then Thomas Nicolson (315). In 1780, when Dixon & Nicolson moved their press to Richmond (at the time the state government relocated), Baxter went with it. There he worked with Dixon's final two partners: John Hunter Holt (223) and John Dixon Jr. (141). Hence, he was also an instrumental, though unseen figure in publishing the lineal descendants of the original *Virginia Gazette* of William Parks (321).

In 1789, Baxter struck out on his own, forming a partnership with William Prentis, another former Dixon apprentice. Prentis had joined with Thomas Nicolson after the dissolution of the Dixon & Nicolson firm after the 1780 relocation of Williamsburg's presses to Richmond; he became Nicolson's foreman, just as Baxter became Dixon's. Prentis then left Richmond in 1786 to start the first newspaper in Petersburg; now he turned to Baxter to head up a new press and journal in Norfolk. The unexpected death of John McLean (297) in May 1789 put his printing office up for sale, along with the subscriber list for his *Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal*. Prentis and Baxter moved quickly to acquire both, with Baxter moving to Norfolk to be the resident proprietor of their new *Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle*. Their partnership continued for three profitable years; by 1792, however, Prentis was compelled to sell his Norfolk interests and refocus his efforts on his Petersburg newspaper. Baxter could not continue alone and so formed a partnership with Thomas Wilson of Philadelphia in order to publish his newly retitled *Virginia Chronicle*.

Yet Baxter faced a larger challenge at that same time: the advent of a competing mercantile paper in what had been a single-newspaper market until then. Over the ensuing two years, *The American Gazette and Norfolk and Portsmouth Public Advertiser* of Charles Willett (445) and William Davis (127) ate into the advertising patronage for Baxter & Wilson's *Chronicle*. By mid-1794, its financial state was precarious, its survival questionable, and Baxter wanted out. Remarkably, the Willett & Davis partnership was also under pressure at that point; the partners were estranged politically, with printer Willett adopting a Jeffersonian perspective in opposition to editor-financier Davis's Federalist one; as a result, Davis forced Willett out of the Gazette office in July 1794. Within a month, Willett had started publishing the long-

lived *Norfolk Herald*, and seems to have offered Baxter a partial interest in his new paper. Recognizing the dire circumstances of the *Virginia Chronicle*, he sold his half-interest in that paper to Wilson at the end of October 1794 and joined Willett as his office manager. But the ensuing collapse of the *Chronicle* seven weeks later devastated Baxter's finances, so preventing him from acquiring an ownership interest in the *Herald* as planned.

So chastened, Baxter never published a paper in his own name again, managing instead the press office of the *Norfolk Herald* for the next forty years. Over those years, he worked for three subsequent owners, first with Willett, then James O'Connor (317), and finally Thomas G. Broughton (055). He retired from the trade only shortly before his death in April 1836 at age eighty. That fact led one obituary writer to claim that Baxter was the "Oldest Printer in America" – and he probably was just that then.

Personal Data

Born: --- 1756 near Williamsburg, Virginia

Died: April 15 1836 Norfolk Borough, Virginia

No record of wives or children yet uncovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; *American Beacon* obituary, 19 Apr 1836.