

036 BLAGROVE, CHARLES

Proprietor & Publisher

Shepherdstown, Richmond

Publisher of the *Impartial Observer* at Shepherdstown in 1797 with Philip Rootes (362); later apparently financier for a job-press conducted by younger brother Henry (470) and Daniel Trueheart (420) in Richmond (1812-13); also cousin of Leighton Wood III (533).

Blagrove was associated with the Virginia printing trade both as a newspaper proprietor and as the financier of a job-press, though he had not been trained as a printer. Rather, those ventures were sidelines in a legal career that focused on land sales and property law.

His family originated in Williamsburg through associations within the Bruton Parish Church there. Blagrove was the son of the Rev. Benjamin Blagrove (1746-93), an Anglican minister actively involved in the Revolutionary movement, and Sarah Creese Pelham (1754-1834), a daughter of composer Peter Pelham (1721-1805), the church's long-serving organist, and a granddaughter of the like-named Boston mezzotint engraver (d. 1751). The couple married in the church in 1773, just two years after the minister arrived in Virginia from England; over the ensuing fifteen years, their union gave rise to at least 10 children, including nine sons. Son Charles was born in February 1778, probably in Surry County, where his father then served as rector in Southwark Parish, after sitting on the local Committee of Safety there in 1776. The family moved on to Richmond at war's end with the father serving as chaplain to the General Assembly; they then moved on to Martin's Brandon Parish in Prince George County in 1785, to Westover Parish in Charles City County in 1787, and to St. Peters Parish in New Kent County in 1789, before landing at St. Paul's Parish in Hanover County in 1791; sometime before 1793, they had also established a residence in Richmond, which became the family homestead on the death of Rev. Blagrove that fall.

Following the father's death, three of his sons became a part of the American printing trade, two in Virginia (Charles and Henry), and one in Boston (William). Their mother's brother, William Pelham (1759-1827), had been sent to Boston before the Revolution to apprentice with his grandfather's former associates there, and now he offered a similar opportunity to his nephew, William Blagrove (1784-1828); Pelham was eventually succeeded in his book-selling business there by Blagrove, who remained in Boston until 1811.

Still, his elder brother Charles was the first to emerge as an independent print-tradesman. In 1797, he formed a partnership with Philip Rootes, a lawyer from Petersburg who had conducted the short-lived *Virginia Star* there in 1795, to publish a new weekly paper at Shepherdstown. The partners evidently shared an affinity for Jefferson's agrarian ideology and its requisite distribution of land to middling farmers. Consequently, the Shepherdstown area, with its growing population and its proximity to the routes used by those migrating to the west, appeared to be a viable setting for a new weekly supporting such ideals. The firm of Rootes & Blagrove issued the first number of their *Impartial Observer or, Shepherdstown, Charles-town, & County Advertiser* that June.

The new journal was the second attempt at publishing a weekly paper in this small Potomac River port; but like its predecessor, this was a short-lived venture, surviving perhaps just six

months. This one was easily eclipsed by the established journal at Martinsburg, the county seat – *The Potomak Guardian* of Nathaniel Willis (449) – as would others attempted in the town before 1816. Still, the project is noteworthy, as West Virginia histories all note that the first "book" published in that future state was issued from their press: *The Christian Panoply, Containing an Apology for the Bible in a Series of Letters Addressed to Thomas Paine*. That publication is also instructive; here two young politically-inclined journalists tried to counter the dominance of the state's established Federalist journals in an area they thought receptive to Republican ideals, while producing an imprint appealing to those who might be skeptical of Jefferson's deistic tendencies – a perspective suggestive of Blagrove's upbringing in a religious household. He may have had a legacy from his father's estate to fund the press, but it was certainly not enough to offset a lack of local support, causing the enterprise to fail.

In the wake of the *Observer's* demise, Blagrove returned to his family's base in Richmond. He would not be part of the Virginia print-trade for another fifteen years, and that venture, like his previous one, would be short-lived. Instead, Blagrove turned to the practice of law, particularly property and estate law, which had also been Rootes's legal specialty. The reputation that he then amassed over the next decade led to his election by the General Assembly in 1810 as Registrar in Virginia's Land Office, the agency that recorded public-land purchases made with warrants issued by the state government, a process dominated by the redemption of warrants issued as compensation for military service.

For his first two years as Registrar, Blagrove followed the standing practice of having the agency's job-printing done in Philadelphia, the principal legal-printing center in America. But in the fall of 1812, an opportunity to bring that work back to the state capital arose. The death of Richmond printer John O. Lynch (273) – also known as John O'Lynch – in August led quickly to the sale of his press office that October. Lynch acquired that office on the death of his master, Thomas Nicolson (315) in 1808; now, Daniel Trueheart, a young journeyman printer who trained under both proprietors, determined to secure that office for his own benefit, and the Registrar became the means to that end. Blagrove apparently provided the funds needed for Trueheart to purchase the establishment, as well as securing trained help for Trueheart in the person of his younger brother Henry. The new concern of Blagrove & Trueheart promptly publicized their acquisition of Lynch's press office, promising that the firm would provide fine job-printing promptly to all who called.

Unfortunately, the Registrar ruffled a few feathers with this acquisition, as his public office now patronized his new family business; while clearly a more efficient arrangement than sending his agency's printing north, such a manifest connection to this vendor raised the suggestion of corruption in office – a charge that haunted the contracts made for Virginia's public printing ever since the Revolution. So in June 1813, just nine months after the firm was formed, the Registrar sold his interest in Blagrove & Trueheart to Thomas Ritchie (360), proprietor of Richmond's legendary *Enquirer*. The new firm of Ritchie & Trueheart offered the same services as had its ill-fated predecessor; they also continued to do job printing for the Land Office, and would do so for some time once Ritchie became the public printer in 1815; moreover, Henry Blagrove was brought into the office of Ritchie's *Enquirer*.

The Registrar held onto his public office for just another year; he died in Richmond in August 1814, not yet forty. Blagrove left an estate that held 2400 acres of land in southern Ohio, the region where the land-warrants issued to Virginia's Revolutionary soldiers were most often exercised; by that time he had also registered land-grants of another 1200 acres there to William Pelham, his cousin and brother-in-law. Whether these transactions indicate a series of self-interested acts while in office or not, it is clear that Blagrove's industry late in his life provided substantial support for his mother and heir, Sarah, who would outlive him by another twenty years.

Personal Data

Born: Feb. 2 1778 Surry County, Virginia [?]

Died: August 1814 Richmond, Henrico County, Virginia

No known marriages or children.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; Norona & Shetler; Rice, "West Virginia Printers;" Henrico County Will Books; advertisements in Richmond *Enquirer*, 1810-1815; genealogical data from *William & Mary Quarterly*, 1930.