

054 BROOKS, SAMUEL

Engraver & Publisher

Norfolk, Richmond

Publisher of the weekly *Impartial Observer* (1806-07) in Richmond; also long-time engraver and jeweler there.

Brooks is described, at different times, as a jeweler, goldsmith, silversmith, seal cutter, and engraver. He evidently gained his training as metalworker in Philadelphia about the time of the end of the Revolutionary War, so it is likely that he was from that area as well. Though Brooks first appears as an independent craftsman in 1792, he was working there well before that; he would later write of consulting with Benjamin Franklin in carving a medal die in 1789. By 1794, though, he had removed his business to Norfolk, where he advertised his services through 1802. Shortly thereafter, he relocated to Richmond to conduct a profitable business there as "jeweller, engraver, & fancy worker" for the next two decades.

His first public notoriety came in 1804 with the arrest of Thomas Longwood of Buckingham County, who was circulating counterfeit bank notes. Longwood had approached Brooks in October 1803 to produce the plates he needed to mimic notes from the first Bank of the United States; the engraver played along with the counterfeiter while notifying authorities of the scheme. When Longwood was arrested in April 1804, he was found with not just a copperplate press, but a coin press as well, and the counterfeit products each produced. The *Virginia Argus*, the official *Gazette* of the state government, published a long account of the affair, complete with a testimonial from the governor, John Page, commending Brooks for his willingness to risk his reputation – he apparently did provide plates at the state's request – in an effort to protect the legitimacy of the country's currency. In the weeks immediately after the arrest, Brooks engaged in a long-distance, print-based debate with Jacob Perkins of Boston, on the printing methods that could best be employed to prevent such illegality in the future.

This civic engagement unmistakably motivated Brooks to publish a new weekly newspaper in Richmond that could offer such politically-neutral and socially-necessary debates without becoming involved in the ongoing partisan newspaper war of that day. On May 1, 1806, the *Impartial Observer* made its first appearance. Brooks edited the journal, while having it printed by one of Richmond's job-printing offices. The first press openly identified with this venture was that of Thomas Pescud Manson (278), who printed the *Observer* from June 1806 until January 1807. But once Manson withdrew from the project, Brooks found that continuing the paper was ever more difficult. He suspended publication for ten weeks in early 1807 before making a final three-month-long attempt at sustainability. Evidently his partner in that effort was John Courtney Jr. (109) but the result was still unsatisfactory, as he closed the *Observer* in mid-July.

Brooks continued his original tradecraft in Richmond through at least 1820, when he disappears from the public record. The census that year shows him supporting a household with three children under ten, as well as his wife and three teenagers, whose names are still unknown. Likewise, the date and circumstances of his death remain undiscovered.

No specific Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; MEDSA Index; Brigham; city directories in Philadelphia (1793) and Richmond (1819); advertisements in Philadelphia (1792-1800) and Richmond (1804-11) newspapers; counterfeiting story in *Virginia Argus*, May to June 1804.