

## 062 BURCH, ISHAM

Printer, Publisher

Richmond, Fredericksburg

Publisher of the *Virginia Express* (1803-05) at Fredericksburg, first with Samuel Chiles (092) and then with his brother, Elisha Burch (061).

Isham Burch was a native Virginian born in Hanover County. Yet, even as he clearly strove to establish a presence on the publishing landscape, he has left little trace in the historical record. It appears that Burch trained as a printer in the Richmond office of Samuel Pleasants (331) in the late 1790s and then worked in the Republican press complex established there by Meriwether Jones (242), the state's public printer from 1799 to 1804.

It is unclear when Burch actually arrived in Fredericksburg, though his tenure there likely began in late 1802 after he purchased the printing office of the *Fredericksburgh News-Letter* from the estate of its proprietor Philip Temple (409). That paper had been the most recent in a series of Republican challengers to the Federalist-aligned *Virginia Herald* of Timothy Green (194) that issued from 1796 to 1811. Consequently, Burch's time in the demanding political press scene in the state capital, as well as the trade and partisan contacts resulting from that work, made him the obvious choice to open a successor to Temple's *News-Letter*.

By early 1803, Burch had found funding for such a project, and likely an editor for the paper as well, in Samuel Chiles (092); Chiles was a well-to-do planter from nearby Caroline County who, at age thirty-two, was looking to establish a political reputation in the area and so build toward his ambitions to electoral office. The combination of Burch's trade skills with Chiles's partisan perspective led to publication of *The Virginia Express* on May 2, 1803. Their paper was apparently one aligned with the views of Jefferson's critics within his own party (the *Tertium Quids*) later exemplified by Chiles's neighbor, John Taylor of Caroline, among others. That approach meant that the proprietors quickly encountered competition from James Walker (425), publisher of the late *Courier*, the town's only Republican journal during the heated 1800 election contest. He resurrected that newspaper in September 1803 after a twenty-month long hiatus as *The Apollo*, apparently at the behest of local Jeffersonians who were unhappy with the new *Virginia Express*.

With two Republican papers now issuing simultaneously in Fredericksburg, there appears to have been pressure brought on the proprietors of both journals with the approach of the 1804 election campaign. It may be that an accommodation was forged between supporters of both journals, as the ensuing course of events created a paper that advocated Jefferson's re-election. First, Walker ceased publishing his *Apollo* after a six-month run in March 1804, reporting that doing so was a financial necessity. Then in May 1804, less than two months later, Chiles withdrew from the concern publishing the *Virginia Express* (he later served as a Whig in the Assembly). In the wake of his retirement, the *Express* began to focus more on the faults of the president's foes than on Jefferson's perceived ideological failings as before.

This transition gives the impression that the original partnership agreement between Burch and Chiles facilitated these changes. It seems that the firm of Chiles & Burch was built upon a one-year contract between printer and financier (from May 1803 to May 1804) with each

contributing to the paper's content. Such a limited commitment was common among those starting journals in this era, a limitation that often led to the paper's demise when that initial contract ended. Yet here, the dissolution of the Chiles & Burch firm did not doom the *Virginia Express*. Rather, Burch had enough capital from the first year that, with other funds provided by his brother, Elisha Burch (061), he could purchase Chiles's interest and continue issuing his twice-weekly journal. Moreover, once Chiles had exited, the brothers found new support among Jefferson's supporters in the Fredericksburg area.

However, the Burch brothers' effort appears to have had little effect on the outcome of the election in either Fredericksburg or Virginia, as Jefferson easily defeated Pinckney that fall, carrying 15 of the 17 states then a part of the Union. Rather, that unproblematic re-election seems to have undermined financial support for the *Virginia Express*, probably because of its earlier criticisms of a popular favorite son that might soon reappear in its pages. As the erosion of their paper's fiscal foundation became evident after the November election, the Burch brothers decided to close the journal once Jefferson was inaugurated for a second time. So the *Virginia Express* ceased publishing at the end of March 1805, some three weeks after that event.

After this disappointment, Burch is seen only occasionally in the historic record. In 1807, he was the featured orator at a Fourth of July banquet in Hanover County; during the War of 1812, he served with a cavalry unit in the Virginia militia; in 1820, he is seen in the federal census for Richmond; and his death was noted in the capital city's newspapers in 1827. His residence there suggests he found work in Richmond's press offices after his 1805 failure, or in another occupation, but no direct evidence of his later employment has been found.

### ***Personal Data***

Born:           ca. 1780   Hanover County, Virginia  
Died:           In 1827   Richmond, Henrico County, Virginia  
No record of wife or children yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; notices in Richmond newspapers (1807-27); genealogical data from family charts posted on Ancestry.com (August 2012).