

063 BURK, JOHN DALY

Author, Publisher

Petersburg, Richmond

Noted Jeffersonian polemicist responsible for producing the first document-based history of Virginia: *The History of Virginia, From its First Settlement to the Present Day* (1804-16).

Burk was an Irish émigré who came to his anti-Federalist stance from an earlier anti-British one. Family lore has it that Burk was born the son of a schoolmaster in County Cork in 1772; his unusually literate background brought admission to Trinity College in Dublin in 1792 as a scholarship student. There he became immersed in the revolutionary fervor of the day, especially as the French Revolution accelerated. While at Trinity, Burke apparently helped produce the *Dublin Evening Post*, an anti-government journal that supported the idea of a democratic revolution in Ireland as well. That work, he later claimed, brought him to the attention of British officials; they instigated proceedings at Trinity against him for his Deistic views – using Anglican orthodoxy to stymie his seditious activities; he was expelled from the college in April 1794. Unbowed, Burk published an account of his defense later in that year, bringing him into the circle of young Irish revolutionaries then agitating in Dublin. Those associations eventually resulted in a treason charge being brought against him, compelling his flight to the United States in early 1796, taking a new middle name from the "Mrs. Daly" who had aided in that escape.

American Radical

Landing in Boston, Burk found sympathetic companions, and employment as a playwright. He had written a "Republican play" on his trans-Atlantic voyage – *Bunker-Hill; Or The Death Of General Warren* – and now it was published and performed in the Massachusetts capital. He also convinced local Republicans to back a new daily newspaper, Boston's first, which he would edit: the *Polar Star and Boston Daily Advertiser*; it first issued in October 1796, barely six months after his arrival. But within weeks, he found himself in conflict with Federalist editors, particularly over the Jay Treaty with Britain, which reduced the readership for his journal in this merchant-marine center. Rather than continue the daily grind, he and his partner Alexander Martin retired the *Polar Star* in early February 1797, and Burk returned to his playwriting efforts. Two pantomimes of his were performed during the same season as *Bunker Hill*, and more plays would follow. With a growing literary reputation behind him, Burk was induced to move on to New York City in mid-1797, where audiences were larger, and publishers more willing to print his plays.

Still, New York proved frustrating. The initial stagings of his Boston work were well received; but a new play on the life of Joan d'Arc had a decidedly pro-French perspective to it; it was ridiculed when it was staged in early 1798, reflecting the impact of contemporaneous news about the treatment of American emissaries in France, known commonly as the XYZ Affair. Finding himself in need of a steady income, Burke returned to journalism in New York City, editing *The Time Piece* following the withdrawal of founder Philip Freneau in April 1798. This new role put Burk squarely in the sights of the Federalist press, now energized by the XYZ Affair. Those journals lumped Burk in with other "revolutionary Irishmen" who would

undermine the nation's independence out of a hatred for Great Britain. Led by John Ward Fenno of the *Gazette of the United States* in Philadelphia, Federalist papers now published vicious attacks on the editors and publishers behind the "conspiracy" then afoot – people like William Duane and Mathew Carey of Philadelphia, Matthew Lyons in Vermont, and John Thomson Callender and John Daly Burk in New York. Their editorializing led, in part, to the adoption of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798.

Political Refugee

Burk, however, ran afoul of American law before those infamous acts were adopted. He and his partner, Dr. James Smith, were arrested for libeling the president, John Adams, in July 1798; Burk was charged with sedition as well, being a non-citizen. They were bailed by New York Republican leaders led by Aaron Burr. Following the arrests, the partnership dissolved and the *Time Piece* ceased publication, as each man looked to his own defense. This proved to be the end of Burk's journalism career. To make ends meet, Burk turned to publishing books, starting with a history of the Irish rebellion that had driven him across the Atlantic. But with the sedition prosecution still hanging over his head, Burk began negotiations with the Adams administration, offering to leave the country if his passage were paid. Thinking that a deal was done, the U.S attorney prosecuting Burk's case in New York dismissed the charges, and Burk slipped out of the city. He told officials there that he was bound for New Orleans, via Charleston, but he was actually bound for Southside Virginia and refuge among Jefferson's friends there.

With the expiration of the Alien Act in June 1800, Burk emerged from his hiding place in Amelia County and returned to writing for publication, albeit anonymously. He wrote pieces for the three Richmond papers supporting Jefferson: the *Virginia Argus* of Samuel Pleasants (331), the *Examiner* of Meriwether Jones (242), and the *Press* edited by James Lyon (274), son of the Vermont congressman; he also wrote for the *Petersburg Republican* of Thomas Field (162), who had provided refuge for James T. Callender (075) at the same time as Burk's exile. Given his association with Lyons in Richmond, Burk may also have contributed pieces for the Republican papers that the editor had established in Staunton and Washington in 1800. Burk also added to his repertoire a law practice, apparently having studied for the bar while in hiding. Licensed to practice in Virginia in September 1801, he became a naturalized citizen in November 1802, and settled down in Petersburg with a new wife and infant son.

Virginia Historian

It seems that this turn of profession brought Burk into contact with documents relating to the state's founding. In 1802, he determined to write a comprehensive history of Virginia from such documents, relying on Jefferson's extensive collection of such as the project's foundation; he also evidently relied on the work of William Waller Hening (213), who was soon to publish his authoritative compilation of Virginia's colonial laws. In March 1803, a public oration at the Petersburg gave him the chance to lay out the theme he would follow in that work, to favorable reviews. The first volume of his *History of Virginia* issued from the Petersburg press of John Dickson (134) and Edward Pescud (324) on October 1, 1804. It was

dedicated, not surprisingly, to Thomas Jefferson, Burk's patron and protector.

His intention was to produce a history that would trace the Old Dominion's evolution from 1607 to 1800, but with a literary style and a Jeffersonian perspective. The monumental work would consume the next twelve years of his life. From his chronology, the work would have eventually extended to five volumes, three covering the period before 1775 and two covering the period after 1775. However, only four were completed; volume II appeared in mid-1806 and volume III in late 1806, both from the Dickson & Pescud press. Tragically, the rest were either delayed or left undone by Burk's inadvertent death in 1808.

By that time, the Irish revolutionary had lost respect for France, particularly in its embrace of dictatorship under Napoleon Bonaparte. By 1808, the conflict between Imperial France and Hanoverian Britain had caused Jefferson to embargo American commerce with the belligerents. The French now tried to maneuver the U.S. into siding with them in blatant disregard for American sovereignty. Burk made the mistake of denigrating the French for such behavior in a Petersburg tavern in April 1808. Among those listening was one Felix Coquebert, a French traveler who took offense at Burk's remarks. When an apology was not forthcoming, Coquebert challenged Burk to a duel. On the morning of April 11th, the two met at sunrise on a hill a mile outside of Petersburg; Burk was shot in the heart and died immediately. His funeral the next day was large and impressive, with Burk's body being interred in the garden at "Cedar Grove," home of Gen. Joseph Jones, a leading Jeffersonian. Burk left behind an orphaned son, John Junius, who became a ward of Petersburg's Thomas Bolling Robertson; the guardian took young Burk to Louisiana, where he later became that state's governor, and the playwright's son a state supreme-court justice.

Legacy

In the wake of the duel, the completion of Burk's *History* fell to others. First was Skelton Jones (243), brother of Meriwether Jones and formerly editor of the Richmond *Examiner*; Jones also led a dissipative life and was an inveterate duelist as a result; he died an early death in October 1812, likely the result of repeated wounds from dueling. After his death, the work remained in abeyance until Louis Hue Girardin (180), the French émigré schoolmaster turned Virginia journalist, took up the task in 1813, probably at the suggestion of Jefferson himself, as Girardin was then conducted a school in Albemarle County near Monticello. He took the narrative up to the surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781, leaving the last two decades of Burk's plan undone. Yet even that abbreviated work was delayed further when a fire destroyed two-thirds of Petersburg in July 1815, taking the press of Edward Pescud and the completed pages of volume IV with it. That final volume finally appeared from the press of Marvel Dunnavant (154) in late 1816.

Personal Data

Born: In 1772 County Cork, Ireland
Married: In 1797 Christianna Borne Curtis @ Boston, Mass.
Died: April 11 1808 Fleet's Hill, Chesterfield County, Virginia
Children: John Junius (b. 1800)

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Campbell, *John Daly Burk*; Shulim, "John Daly Burk," *APS Transactions*, 1964.