

065 BURKE, JOHN – [JOHN McDONALD BURKE]

Printer, Publisher, Proprietor

Richmond

Final proprietor of the *Virginia Argus* office (1814-17), in conjunction with Philip DuVal (155), Arthur G. Booker (031), Louis Hue Girardin (180), and David Burke (064), his brother.

John Burke was, as one observer has noted, a man "with major schemes and minor capital." Nothing is known of him except for his participation in the dissolution of the multifaceted press office of Samuel Pleasants (331) following that tradesman's death in October 1814. At that time, Burke was employed as Pleasants' shop foreman, so likely a practical printer, though his origins and training are uncertain. What is certain is that Burke was the driving force behind a combination of partnerships that acquired all of Pleasants' business assets.

Burke evidently recognized that Richmond's printing trade had changed in the twenty years since Pleasants first started his business. The "Argus Office" was an integrated operation consisting of a printing plant, a newspaper office, and a book store. At the outset, the three elements supported each other, contributing to the success of the whole; now, as a result of the town's growth, each element could survive independently without need for support from the other two. Thus Burke moved to split the operation into three distinct businesses under three different ownerships, albeit with him as a part of all three.

The first step in Burke's plan was to purchase the entire business from the Pleasants estate. He accomplished this in December 1814 by forming a partnership with Philip DuVal, son of a wealthy Henrico planter, as his principal source of financing. The promissory note that Philip DuVal & Co. gave to the estate would be paid off by the sale of the printing plant and the book store.

Next, Burke formed a partnership with Arthur G. Booker, a practical printer who had also been employed by Pleasants; they bought the printing plant from DuVal & Co. in late March 1815 as Arthur G. Booker & Co. – in essence buying it from himself. The three-month lull between these transactions was apparently the result of negotiations with John Holt Rice (354) for publication of his new religious weekly, *The Christian Monitor*; with such a major contract in place, there would have been little concern about the new firm's ability to pay for its substantial acquisition – at least three presses and the supplies to run them.

The Rice contract also provided Virginians a reason to patronize the last element of Burke's tripartite enterprise. In late March 1815, the firm of DuVal & Co. was dissolved; Burke took control of the *Virginia Argus* newspaper as John Burke & Co., meanwhile DuVal joined with bookbinder Frederick A. Mayo (284) to procure the estate's book-store stocks from Deborah Pleasants (328), Samuel's widow, who had retained their ownership when the rest of the business's assets were sold the preceding December. Their new Frederick A. Mayo & Co. operated in the same space in the old Argus office that had been occupied by Pleasants' bookstore, just as Arthur G. Booker & Co. occupied the space dedicated to the old Argus printing plant. Burke now received rent from his former partners, just as he contracted for their services whenever he needed them, all without anyone having to remove their infant businesses from the building at Main and 11th streets.

This arrangement seems to have worked efficiently until December 1815, when unforeseen circumstances intervened. On December 2nd, a notice appeared in the *Argus* announcing the retirement of Arthur Booker from the firm bearing his name owing to his "increasing ill health;" Booker kept control of the debts owed to the firm while Burke took control of the press itself. Burke promptly induced DuVal to take over the shop's press work, and its vital *Christian Monitor*, as his job-printing partner. However, their new firm of DuVal & Burke continued only until April 1816, when DuVal withdrew from participation in all of Burke's schemes, including the book-store and bindery, taking the *Monitor* contract with him.

Burke tried to stem the bleeding by bringing in new partners; his brother, David, came on board as his partner in the job-printing business, while he made Louis Hue Girardin, the new editor of the *Argus*, as his partner in the newspaper. Meanwhile, DuVal sold his interest in the book-store and bindery to John Frayser (174). But all this shuffling could not arrest the slow-motion collapse of Burke's would-be empire. By July 1816, Burke had moved his two businesses out of the old *Argus* Office into smaller quarters at Main and 13th streets. Yet by October, the *Argus* itself, the keystone to his entire combination, had reached the end of its fiscal rope; the Burkes closed the venerable journal on October 19th. Their job-printing office only survived the paper by three months. In January 1817, both Burke brothers left town for parts unknown, leaving their creditors behind. Apparently Deborah Pleasants was still the largest creditor in this affair, chasing Burke for payment until at least 1822.

Circumstances suggest that there were at least three tradesmen who actually benefitted from this spectacle. The "Argus Office" consisted of three presses in 1814, and immediately following the Burke brothers' abrupt departure from Richmond in 1817, three new job-printing offices opened in the capital – those of William Allegre (005), of William Waller Gray (193), and of Samuel Shepherd (379) & William Pollard (336). This noteworthy failure bred opportunity for a new generation of printers in Richmond.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; notices in *Virginia Argus & Richmond Enquirer*, 1814-22.