

066 BURLING, THOMAS

Printer, Publisher, Proprietor

Richmond

Printer and publisher who managed the *Richmond Enquirer* (1804-17) for Thomas Ritchie (360); also proprietor of the *Spirit of Union* (1817-18) with William Waller Gray (193).

Burling was, as Thomas Ritchie wrote in 1818, "bred to the printing business" in New York City. He began his journalism career there at the age of twenty-two, acquiring *The New-York Weekly Magazine; or, Miscellaneous Repository* in January 1797 from John Bull, its founder. Its motto was *Utile Dulci* – "the useful with the agreeable" – which became the hallmark of his life. He found that editing and printing the paper was more than he could handle alone, so he contracted with John Tiebout to print it for him that April. Their association continued for a year, though the *Magazine* came to an end in June 1797. That fall, the pair began a new weekly, *The Tablet and Weekly Advertiser*, with Burling editing and Tiebout printing their journal. But by April 1798, Burling had sold his interest to Tiebout and moved on.

Baltimore American

It is not until 1802 that Burling again appears in the bibliographic record – as proprietor of the *American and Baltimore Daily Advertiser*. The timing and people involved are suggestive of what occurred in the years between the two ventures. At the time of Burling's departure from *The Tablet*, the notorious Jeffersonian editor John Daly Burk (063) had taken over *The Time Piece* from Philip Freneau there; he left behind a partner in Boston, Alexander Martin, who had helped him publish the anti-Federalist daily *Polar Star* there; Martin went on to Baltimore to publish another such journal in May 1799, the *American and Daily Advertiser*. That newspaper started as the *Baltimore Intelligencer* in March 1798 under the guidance of William Pechin, formerly of Philadelphia. Pechin sold his paper to Martin, Martin sold it to Burling, and then Burling sold it back to Pechin, all while it was under intense scrutiny from Federalist writers for the paper's criticisms of the Adams administration – as was Burk then in New York. It seems very likely that Burling knew Burk in New York, given their common interest in theatricals, and so had been recommended to Martin by him; after Burk was jailed for seditious libel in July 1798, Burling joined Martin in Baltimore, serving as his shop foreman until 1802; he then became a transitional figure in the newspaper's transfer back to Pechin that spring. It is clear that he worked for Martin before the transfer and Pechin afterward, implying the transfer fit into a set of existing and long-standing relationships, personal, political, and financial.

Still, Burling secured unquestioned Jeffersonian credentials in his own right during his days with the *American*, largely as a result of vituperative exchanges in early 1802 with Matthew Brown (057), then the polemicist-in-chief for Baltimore's notorious *Federal Gazette*. After Burling returned control of the *American* to Pechin in August 1802, he continued to manage the paper's office. There, in a chance encounter in 1803, he first met Thomas Ritchie (360), then a young bookseller in Richmond who had ambitions to become both a journalist and proprietor. Finding that they were kindred spirits politically, as well as being of a similar age, Ritchie included Burling in his plans for a new Jeffersonian journal for Richmond.

Richmond Enquirer

Ritchie was certainly aware of the journalistic climate in Richmond. The two primary papers were *The Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser* of Federalist Augustine Davis (119), and the *Virginia Argus* of Jeffersonian Samuel Pleasants (331), but neither journal was virulently political in nature, as the implement they "chiefly used was the scissors" and not the pen, as a contemporary succinctly noted. There were also two minor players in town: *The Examiner* of Meriwether Jones (242) and *The Recorder* of Henry Pace (319); however, both of those were about to disappear. Pace's journal had been devastated legally by his choice to employ the late and disgraced James T. Callender (075) as his editor; it would close in August 1803. Moreover, Ritchie knew that Jones was then planning a change of his employment; he had served as the Commonwealth's public printer since 1798, with his paper acting as the state's journal of record; Jones was now seeking a federal appointment that would allow him to withdraw from both his state post and his paper; that also meant that the *Examiner's* office and subscriber list would soon be up for sale.

Burling joined Ritchie in Richmond in spring 1804. Meriwether Jones had retired from his paper the preceding August, splitting his interest between his brother, Skelton Jones (243), and his shop foreman, William W. Worsley (462). Ritchie bought Jones' share in January 1804; he and Worsley immediately ceased publishing the *Examiner* and planned for a new journal. The press, however, remained in the public printer's hands until March when he retired from that position to take up management of Virginia's federal Land Office; Jones then sold his press to the firm of Ritchie & Worsley. With press and subscriber list in hand, Ritchie sent for Burling to manage their new office, as he had for Pechin in Baltimore. The *Enquirer* made its debut on May 9th, issued twice-weekly, except when the legislature met, when it was issued thrice-weekly.

Thomas Burling would manage the *Enquirer's* production until 1817, interrupted only by a brief stint in the Virginia militia during the War of 1812. His role was evidently a key to its origin. Worsley had already seen disappointment, having been a part of a failed paper in a highly competitive environment – as proprietor of Norfolk's short-lived *Commercial Register* in 1800-01 – and did not want to repeat that experience with the *Enquirer*. Thus he made a limited commitment to Ritchie's project; after just a year together, Worsley sold his interest in the *Enquirer* office to Ritchie in May 1805 and relocated to Kentucky; there he found considerable success in both Lexington and Louisville as a journalist and textbook publisher.

The *Enquirer* office, however, was more than a newspaper alone. From its start, job printing was a significant part of the work done there; and from that start, the office provided such to one segment of the state government. Meriwether Jones' retirement as public printer led to the selection of Samuel Pleasants as his replacement; as Pleasants was then printer to the Virginia Senate, he now had to resign that post; Thomas Ritchie was elected to succeed him, holding that post until the end of the 1814-15 General Assembly. In that session, the Assembly had to rearrange those appointments once again as a result of the recent death of Pleasants; Ritchie was designated as the new printer to the Commonwealth, and his office manager, Thomas Burling, followed him as printer to the Virginia Senate. That appointment

sustained the press that Burling then maintained for his own use in the *Enquirer* office.

Spirit of Union

In August 1817, Burling evidently determined to strike out on his own once again, fifteen years after his prior attempt in Baltimore. For several of his years managing the *Enquirer*, he employed the services of William Waller Gray (193), nephew of the eminent law reporter and court clerk, William Waller Hening (213). Gray had twice attempted weekly journals in Lynchburg: the *Lynchburg Press* in 1810-11 and the *Echo* in 1816-17. Now he had returned to Richmond from that second venture, intending to try once again in the capital. The two men formed a partnership – Burling & Gray – and advertised a non-partisan weekly to be called *The Spirit of Union*. Their new paper issued on October 17, 1817. Ritchie took note of the accomplishment much as would a proud father, reporting that their journal was "very handsomely printed, and its contents very judicious and interesting." But even such a glowing endorsement did not keep the enterprise from quickly foundering. At \$3.00 per annum, its price was 50 percent more than most weeklies then published, and such was supposedly payable in advance. The partners amended their prospectus advertisement in September to note the swift encouragement they had received in reaching the requisite number of subscribers to commence publication. Yet it seems that those subscriptions were promises not payments. The *Spirit* issued its last number on December 26th, barely two months after the first; four days later, a notice in the *Enquirer* revealed that the press office had been seized for non-payment of the note financing Burling & Gray's operation, and that the whole would be sold at auction just one week hence – Tuesday, January 6, 1818.

On Monday January 5th, Thomas Burling died. Ritchie's obituary for his friend, published on the day of the planned auction, said that "he suddenly bid adieu to all temporal affairs" but did not indicate the cause of Burling's death. Nonetheless, the rest of Ritchie's obsequies suggest suicide: "we knew his foibles, we knew his virtues," the editor wrote, and that he "could wish others to be more fortunate, and more prudent than Thomas Burling," but to wish them to be "more conscientious in his dealing, we wish no man to be – no, not one." Ritchie was unmistakably defending his friend's reputation, even as the sale of the assets of his bankrupt business proceeded.

Aftermath

What brought the firm of Burling & Gray to such a quick and tragic end was obviously debt, but what triggered that result is unclear. Burling already owned a press, so would not have needed one to start the *Spirit of Union*; however, the valuation of that press in his estate inventory was about half of what a decent press then cost. Thus their company may have acquired another press from the residue of Pleasants' *Virginia Argus* office that summer. The original buyer of that office, John Burke (065), had foundered as well; after sinking his business in a sea of debt, Burke fled Richmond in January 1817, one step ahead of a debt execution. Thus his creditors were still unpaid, and so likely put a very short date on any promissory note offered as payment for all or part of their security, the old *Argus* office. Such a suggestion is supported by the signer of the auction notice, Richmonder Michael Grantland, attorney at law, designated as "trustee" for the note holders. The sale of the

Spirit's effects proceeded despite Burling's death. After the sale, Gray advertised that he intended to again publish the *Spirit*, but never did, perhaps because Burling's intestate estate was not settled until late 1818. A year later, Gray was still in town, operating a job-printing office on the corner of E (now Cary) and 17th streets.

Burling was survived by his father in New York and a wife and infant son in Richmond. His widow Martha remained in Richmond for the rest of her life, operating boarding houses in the Bank Square neighborhood until her death in 1846. Their son, Ebenezer, has left a more indelible mark on the historical record than either parent. He was a contemporary and childhood friend of Edgar Allan Poe. They attended the school of John H. Clarke together, and Poe often used the Burling residence as a refuge in his many conflicts with his guardian, Richmond merchant John Allan. Yet Ebenezer did not live to see Poe return to Richmond to take up the editorial reins of the *Southern Literary Messenger*; he was dead by then, falling to one of the city's cholera epidemics in the 1820s.

Personal Data

Born: May 20 1775 New York City, New York.
Married: July 31 1805 Martha Boswell @ Richmond, Virginia.
Died: Jan. 5 1818 Richmond, Virginia.
Children: One son, Ebenezer (b. 1808), named for his paternal grandfather.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Thompson-Stahr, *Burling Books*; *Stafford's Baltimore Directory for 1802*; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; notices in the *Richmond Enquirer*, 1804-18, esp. obituary on 6 Jan 1818.