075 CALLENDER, JAMES T. – [JAMES THOMSON CALLENDER]

Editor & Publisher **Petersburg, Richmond**

Notorious polemicist who published a book in 1800 at Richmond that brought a prosecution under the Sedition Act; who wrote for the Republican newspapers of James Lyon (274) and Meriwether Jones (242) from the Richmond jail; finally editing the anti-Jefferson *Recorder* (1801-03) for Henry Pace (319) there.

Callender's authorial career in the United States was a direct result of the reaction of the British government to the French Revolution. The egalitarian ideals that were essential to the American Revolution derived from the rationalistic thinking of the French and Scottish enlightenments; in the 1790s, radical movements based on those same ideals emerged in Europe, inspired by the successful rebellion in North America. In France, that movement became a sociopolitical revolt of ever-increasing violence against "counter-revolutionaries," real or imagined; conservatives in London feared the spread of such a destabilizing event across the Channel and so moved their government to suppress egalitarian radicalism in the British Isles; the focus fell on editors and publishers in Ireland and Scotland who openly advocated upending the standing imperial order in favor of popularly elected governments in those "conquered" places. When sedition trials instituted in 1792 became treason trials in 1794, a considerable number of Irish and Scottish radical writers chose to emigrate to what was then seen as the sanctuary of freedom and equality, the United States.

Political Refugee

James T. Callender was among those leaving. Facing trial for publishing a "seditious" tract in 1792 – *The Political Progress of Britain* – he fled, making for Philadelphia to take up his pen in a more favorable setting there. But like many of these new arrivals, Callender found that European perceptions of the America situation did not conform to realities in the new-born country. In Scotland, his focus had been on the corruption of government officials, reporting how self-interested individuals regularly used their authority to enrich themselves and their friends to the detriment of the general public. In America he observed a similar set of circumstances. Callender found employment as a reporter (or recorder) of the proceedings in Congress; in the split between Federalists and Republicans that arose in the mid-1790s, he sensed that counter-revolutionaries were in charge, and so began to write about them in Philadelphia's papers. In the policies of Federalists, he reported that a privileged few were using their positions to aggrandize themselves and in so doing concentrate both national wealth and power in their hands alone – a decided defeat for popular self-government and egalitarian ideals.

His first published tract in 1795 was on the unfairness of the American tax system, but that failing was only symptomatic of a larger problem. He found particular fault with Alexander Hamilton's handling of the national debt, especially with the notes that had been issued in accumulating that debt. Wealthy speculators, he charged, were buying notes at a sharp discount from poorer distressed holders before redeeming them at the higher values that Hamilton was willing to pay; those purchasers were acquainted with the Treasury Secretary

and were key patrons of the Federalist faction, clearly a conflict of national interest; but more importantly, such speculation drained the federal treasury, obliging new taxes on the bulk of the citizenry to retire the remaining debt. Callender associated such exchanges with the practices of British merchants, to whom those same Federalist speculators now wanted to tie American commerce, via the Jay Treaty. For the Scotsman, this course was simply a reversal of the revolutionary victory over British tyranny – independence would be lost.

In articulating these opinions, vociferously and repeatedly, Callender was soon enmeshed in quarrels with the editors of Federalist journals, particularly with William Cobbett, known to many as Peter Porcupine. Cobbett was an English émigré himself, but was not the radical reformer that Callender had been; with a tone similar to Callender's, he both challenged and ridiculed Republican objections to Federalist policies, whether foreign or domestic. His popularity among Federalists meant his biting commentaries were reprinted often, to the disgust of Jeffersonians, who were then at a 4-to-1 disadvantage in newspaper outlets. This situation led to new publishing ventures, such as the network of Republican papers founded in Virginia by James Lyon in advance of the 1800 election. For Callender, such an expansion would be a boon, as his writings had typically been confined to Philadelphia newspapers, particularly the *Aurora* of Benjamin Franklin Bache, grandson of the famous founder. But before such new journals could be launched, it was both possible and desirable to increase the number of anti-Federalist pamphlets in circulation. Callender contributed several tracts to this endeavor, none more telling than his attack on William Cobbett in 1796 – *British Honour and Humanity, or The Wonders of the American Patience*. This was followed in 1797 by *The American Annual Register*, a work intended as a recurring annual report on national affairs from an avowedly Republican perspective.

Seditious Alien

However, the year 1797 proved a turning point in the partisan competition. The Quasi-War with France erupted, and intense criticisms of how the administration of John Adams treated France, a treaty ally since 1777, reverberated throughout the limited Republican press. The Federalist response in Congress was to outlaw criticism of the government (the Sedition Act) and to restrict the freedom of new immigrants, like Callender, to give voice to such criticisms in print or public (the Alien Act). Thus, Callender's two productions in 1798 brought intense scrutiny from the Secretary of State, Timothy Pickering of Massachusetts, and eventually the threat of prosecution. That year Callender published his most significant assault on Alexander Hamilton, revealing the founder's adultery with a married woman; it was followed by an article linking Hamilton and Theodore Sedgwick, president *pro tempore* of the U.S. Senate, with Northern speculators in profiting from federal debt instruments. While Hamilton managed to deflect much of the criticism by admitting to being a blackmail victim in the affair's wake, any further national political ambitions he may have had were derailed by the revelations.

With the 1800 presidential election now approaching, Callender publicized his forthcoming history of the Adams presidency – *The Prospect Before Us* – with which he hoped to sway the electorate in Jefferson's favor; indeed, Jefferson himself assisted in the production indirectly by arranging funding for the writer at various times. As a result, Callender became

a target, in turn, of Adams himself; Callender was told of Pickering's intent to prosecute him for seditious libel for his pamphlet on Hamilton, the same course that he was then following with John Daly Burk (063), among others, for their "seditious" works. So like Burk, Callender sought refuge in the sovereign state of Virginia, beyond Pickering's immediate grasp; after a brief stay in Loudon County with U.S. Senator Stevens Thomas Mason, he came to rest in Richmond in May 1799. There he was hosted by Meriwether Jones, the new public printer and publisher of the semi-official *Examiner*; for the next six months, Callender frequently wrote for Jones's paper while he finished writing *The Prospect Before Us*.

Yet as well-known as is Callender's subsequent prosecution for that work, the pieces that he wrote for Jones's *Examiner* embodied a more immediate threat to his life and liberty at the time. After just two months working for Jones, his scathing commentaries led one group of young Federalists in the city to organize an assault on both Callender personally and the *Examiner* office. An "association" of about 50 individuals, headed by Conrad Webb, Thomas Wilson, and William Temple, was formed in mid-July with the intention of running Callender out of town by force and destroying the *Examiner* office. When Jones heard of the plot, he sent Callender to the countryside and reported the planned assault to his friends in the city government; in response, a Richmond militia unit commanded by Alexander MacRae (299), soon a business associate of Jones and Lyon, was dispatched to protect the *Examiner* office with about 100 armed volunteers under his command. So stymied, the associators were forced to defend themselves in the pages of the new *Virginia Federalist*:

> "The object … was to acquaint Mr. Callender, that our feelings would no longer submit to be tortured and daily wounded, by an outcast from a foreign country, that we could no longer listen to the revolutionary admonition of a man whom we conceived possessed no right to intrude his opinions on the public, as the criterion of a Republican virtue."

But Callender brought suit against Webb, Wilson, and Temple – the signers of the published justification – and they were compelled to post bond guaranteeing their good behavior. In turn, several of their supporters brought charges against McRae for fomenting insurrection by calling out his unit and then proclaiming that they would defend the *Examiner* office by killing all those who would try to destroy it; the magistrates hearing his case dismissed the charges out of hand.

Still, the thwarted attack turned Callender away from writing for the *Examiner* and toward contributing to Lyon's initial publication – the *National Magazine or A Political, Historical, Biographical, and Literary Repository* – while finishing *The Prospect Before Us*, which Jones and Lyon both promoted.

The first volume of that work was issued in January 1800; its unnamed publisher has usually been identified as Jones, but Callender himself later indicated that the book was printed in parts by all of the Republican presses in Richmond. As a result, Callender's essay was not a solitary effort; it was part of a larger, coordinated one to effect Jefferson's election. Other elements of the plan were a string of new Republican papers published in Petersburg (*The Republican*), Staunton (*Political Mirror or The Scourge of Aristocracy*), and Georgetown (*Cabinet of the United States*), all started by Lyon, all financed by Jeffersonian leaders in

those places, and all published in concert with the publication the first volume of *The Prospect Before Us*.

But an impediment to the publication of the second volume soon materialized. In mid-May, Callender was indicted by a federal grand jury in Richmond on three counts of seditious libel for the content of that first volume; he was promptly arrested at the Petersburg home of Thomas Field (162), Lyon's partner in the newly-founded *Republican* there, where he had gone to consult with Lyon about publishing that second volume. In June, he was tried and convicted in a dubious trial directed by Justice Samuel Chase, an arch-Federalist determined to apply the federal sedition law in Virginia. Callender was sentenced to six months in jail and a $200 fine for his criticisms of Adams. He served his time in the city's jail, alongside the slaves arrested in Gabriel's conspiracy that summer; he was finally released in November. By then, the election was over and Jefferson seemed headed for the presidency, although with some confusion when Aaron Burr forced the issue into the House of Representatives that winter. Callender returned to writing for Richmond's Republican papers – most often for the *Virginia Argus* of Samuel Pleasants (331) – while waiting to harvest the fruits of his labor in those partisan fields.

Disenchanted Writer

Curiously, the critic of corruption in office now expected to be rewarded with a public post. He wrote to Jefferson essentially demanding the funds needed to open another press office and paper in Richmond and appointment as the city's postmaster – he received neither. The problem was that Callender thought himself due more than the new president was willing to give; for even as Jefferson now removed Federalists from government posts, he replaced them with moderate Republicans and not radical ones; moreover, preference went to those of longer service to the cause than Callender had provided. The relationship between the two men soured further when Callender did not receive a refund of his sedition fine as he believed he had been promised; Jefferson would not pay him out of his or his party's pocket for a fine taken by the government; however, the Federalist marshal in Richmond, who had been replaced by Jefferson, could not demonstrate (from incompetent bookkeeping) that the fine had ever been paid to him. Callender felt used and abused; he now turned away from the *Examiner* to find a new outlet for his venomous skills, one Henry Pace.

Pace was evidently another British émigré who had arrived in the country in about 1798; he was, as one contemporary noted, someone "who could compose types much better than he could paragraphs." He apparently made his way to Richmond in the winter of 1800-01 and forged an association with the Republican presses of Jones and Pleasants. In early 1801, his small shop aided those larger offices in the publishing the second volume of *The Prospect Before Us*. . That production proved to be a defining moment in each man's life; shortly after that volume appeared, Pleasants parted ways with the controversial writer; Pace took Callender into his home, just as Jones had, offering charity to the polemicist when no one else in the city would. He could afford to do so as his business was finding patronage among Virginia's literati, particularly to St. George Tucker, professor of law at the College of William & Mary. Those contacts induced Pace to publish a new literary weekly in Richmond – the

state's first such journal – in July 1801: *The Recorder or Lady's and Gentleman's Miscellany*.

Callender had apparently tried to convince Pace that publishing such a non-partisan paper would not be a viable project, arguments which were prophetic; within six months Pace's new journal was in trouble financially. Recognizing Pace's need, Callender now offered to edit the paper for him – clearly wanting a new journalistic outlet – provided that the printer made him a partner and allowed the serial's focus to become more political; Pace agreed and the Scotsman took control of *The Recorder* in February 1802. Immediately, it became evident that Callender was now determined to skewer Jefferson and his administration as thoroughly as he had done with Adams and the Federalists before. Over the next fifteen months, his main target was the Jeffersonian leadership in Richmond, particularly the public printer, Meriwether Jones, who now became the epitome of corruption in office for him. But his most memorable assault was his report in September 1802 of an illicit sexual liaison, including a bastard child, between Jefferson and Sally Hemings, one of his enslaved servants. This well-known narrative is an example of the increasing rancor that now began to pervade Callender's writings; where previously his animosity had been discharged against persons he did not know personally, now it was aimed at those he did, especially those who had not lived up to his expectations of them, as Jefferson now had.

Such overtly personal attacks on people who were close by had injurious consequences. In December 1802, he was assaulted by George Hay, the man who had served as his defense attorney in the sedition trial, over Callender's censures of his friends; a local court found Hay justified in acting against Callender for his scandalous behavior, and forced Callender and Pace to post a bond guaranteeing their future good behavior. In March 1803, following a story about the drunken, belligerent behavior of a few college students in the city, a larger group of students attacked the Pace & Callender office; thereafter both men kept pistols close at hand.

Still, all was not well between the partners. It appears Callender's well-known drunkenness kept him away from the *Recorder's* office for weeks on end, and that in April and May 1803, he contributed nothing to the paper as a result of one lengthy bender. Near the end of May 1803, Callender asked Pace to settle their accounts, evidently thinking he was not receiving his due, as *The Recorder* had now become a profitable venture. Pace agreed to his request, despite his editor's recent absence, but before he could reconcile those accounts, Callender took to the pages of the *Virginia Gazette*, the Federalist journal of Augustine Davis (119), to accuse Pace of withholding monies owed him, and that he was terminating the partnership as a result. Incensed, Pace published a long defense of his business practices, one wherein he reported that Callender had never provided funding for the venture, he had embezzled funds, and had voided their partnership agreement by his repeated dereliction, before he finally circulated fabricated stories about Pace's conduct; he also immediately filed suit against Callender seeking £2000 damages. So with the issue of June 18, 1803, Pace resumed sole ownership of the *Recorder*, leaving Callender to fend for himself.

A month later, the Scotsman drowned in the James River, apparently while drunk. A coroner's jury determined that his death was accidental, but Jones implied it was a suicide, given the legal problems that Callender now faced from the only person willing to support

and employ him after his release from prison. Fifty years later, Samuel Mordecai chronicled the local understanding of this event, saying

> "Poor Callender, a martyr to both democracy and federalism, and also to liquor, died a whiskey and watery death. He had one day imbibed too much whiskey before taking his daily bath in the river, and was drowned."

It was a cheerless end for a singular individual, one who was at once known and despised by Americans of all political stripes.

Personal Data

Born:	In	1758	Scotland, possibly in Stirling.
Died:	July 17	1803	In the James River, near Richmond, Virginia.
	Had at least one child who reached adulthood; wife died in 1798.		

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 5; Durey, *James Thomson Callender*; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; notices in various Richmond newspapers [*Examiner*, *Virginia Gazette*, *Virginia Argus*, *Virginia Federalist*, and *Recorder*] from 1799 to 1803.