

**076 CAMERON, ALEXANDER**

**Journeyman Printer**

**Norfolk**

Printer of the *Virginia Gazette or Norfolk Intelligencer* (1774-75) with William Duncan (151), Robert Gilmour (179), Donald McDonald (286), John Brown (056) and John Hunter Holt (223); retained by Lord Dunmore (153) when that press was seized to publish his *Virginia Gazette* (1775-76), and went north with him in 1776.

Cameron had a remarkably well-travelled career in the printing trade, with Virginia being just his first stop in the Americas. Born in Scotland, probably in the early 1750s, he was trained to the trade there. In early 1774, he was invited to emigrate to Virginia as part of a group of Scottish printers who would establish the first press office and weekly newspaper in Norfolk. The project was initiated by William Duncan, a merchant of Scottish origin in the port; he recognized that the existing Williamsburg *Gazettes* were ever-more incapable of meeting the demand for advertising space and that the solution to that vexing problem was to publish a mercantile advertiser in that entrepôt. He persuaded printer Robert Gilmour to buy a complete press office for him in Scotland and bring it to Norfolk to produce such a journal. Gilmour brought with him two journeymen: Cameron and Donald McDonald. Under the banner of William Duncan & Co. the trio issued their new *Norfolk Intelligencer* in June 1774 and found immediate acceptance in the town.

However, all four men, like most of their Scottish brethren there, found themselves on the wrong side of the political divide then emerging in America; most revolutionary leaders in Virginia viewed the port-town as a "damned nest of Tories" and so closely monitored the activities of immigrant merchants and craftsmen. In January 1775, Duncan ran afoul of local efforts to enforce trade restrictions that were part of the Continental Association of 1774, one of the first measures of resistance to imperial authority authorized by the Continental Congress. Duncan was forced to yield control of his office and paper to another merchant, one John Brown, even as Gilmour remained owner of the press. Brown did not long control the journal either, as he was found guilty of importing slaves in violation of the Association's ban on such in March 1775. By that time, patriot leaders had arranged for a new proprietor to take over the new *Intelligencer*, someone whose politics were more to their liking. They brought in John Hunter Holt, son of the patriot printer of New York, who had once been a Williamsburg merchant. Cameron and McDonald were now employed producing a journal that did not reflect their political views.

Holt would not long control the *Intelligencer* either, though he ran afoul of imperial dictates rather than continental ones. Lord Dunmore, Virginia's last royal governor, had fled from Williamsburg shortly after Holt arrived in Norfolk, a result of his plan for suppressing the nascent rebellion in Virginia being leaked to a Williamsburg paper; through that summer, Dunmore and his wandering administration operated from ships anchored off Norfolk, drawing withering commentaries from Holt in his weekly. At the end of September, after a particularly coarse assault on the character of one of Dunmore's lieutenants, the governor ordered Holt arrested and his printing office seized. The governor snared the press alone, but acquired two willing printers for that press in Cameron and McDonald. For the next six

months, the two journeymen worked on board a ship in Dunmore's "fleet" off Norfolk, producing job-printing for his "official" government, as well as a newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette*, "printed by Authority," serving Dunmore's need for an official voice.

Such a water-borne enterprise could not last long. Dunmore sailed for New York City, now in the hands of British forces, in August 1776, taking Cameron, McDonald and the Gilmour press with him. Once there, the men were employed by Sir William Howe, commander-in-chief of British forces in North America, as printers to his growing army – at Lord Dunmore's recommendation. This was a post the pair retained until 1782, though not always in New York. In 1777, they accompanied Howe on his campaign to occupy Philadelphia, operating Gilmour's press there from September 1777 to June 1778; they returned to New York that fall with Howe, though they left the now-badly-damaged press in Philadelphia.

Finding new tools in New York, Cameron & McDonald printed for the British army there until about May 1780 when they joined Howe's successor, Sir Henry Clinton, in his assault on Charleston, South Carolina. Their stay in Charleston was fully two-and-a-half years long, allowing them to publish an official newspaper in that port, the *Royal South-Carolina Gazette*, in alliance with James Robertson, another Loyalist printer from Albany. When British forces finally evacuated Charleston in late 1782, following the surrender at Yorktown and as peace talks continued in Paris, the two journeyman-printers returned to New York, leaving Robertson to settle matters in South Carolina.

The loss of his military patronage at that time did not end Cameron's print-trade career, however. Immediately after returning to New York, McDonald took ill and died. Cameron now needed to find another situation and another partner in a place other than New York, which was also about to be abandoned by the British. In Charleston, he had come to know John Wells, a Loyalist printer who had been born and raised there, and who was now about to be cast out that state for his counter-revolutionary activities. Wells left Charleston in late 1782 as well, but bound for St. Augustine instead. There Wells continued printing his "royal" gazette for the colonial administration until the Treaty of Paris effectively traded Britain's Florida colony to Spain in exchange for the Bahamas Island chain. Wells relocated his office and paper to Nassau with the administration to serve a Loyalist community of about 8000 people who now settled in the islands. Cameron worked with Wells in Nassau, and probably with him in St. Augustine before that. Together, with Wells as the proprietor, and Cameron as his printer, the two issued the *Bahama Gazette* from August 1784 onward, providing the mercantile advertising that port town needed to survive and grow.

With the profits from that venture, Cameron finally set out on his own in the spring of 1789, producing a new *Royal Lucayan Gazette* with the patronage of the island colony's influential veteran governor, Lord Dunmore. In the Bahamas, the two Virginia refugees once again made common cause, but only for a short while. Cameron died in Nassau that fall.

***Personal Data***

Born: In 1750s Scotland

Died: Fall 1789 Nassau, New Providence Colony, The Bahamas.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Siebert, "Confiscated Revolutionary Press;" Hildeburn, *Printers and Printing in Colonial New York*; Sabine, *Sketched of Loyalists*; Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exile*; and Pactor, *Colonial British Caribbean Newspapers*.