

090 CHARLTON, SEYMOUR P.

Printer, Publisher

Richmond, Norfolk

Printer in the Richmond office of Augustine Davis (119); later a publisher of the *American Beacon* in Norfolk (1816-19) with the brothers William C. (381) and Hamilton Shields (380).

Charlton was trained in the printing trade in Richmond, suggesting that he was related to Edward Charlton (089), a journeyman there about the time of his birth. His apprenticeship in the office of Augustine Davis gave him experience in newspaper production in printing Davis's *Virginia Patriot*; that placement also put him close by at least one of the founders of Norfolk's *American Beacon* before its birth in 1815; Samuel Shepherd (379) was Davis's son-in-law and a job-printer then in the state capital. William C. Shields was also a part of the Richmond print-trade community then, working in the office of the *Daily Compiler*, founded by his brother-in-law Leroy Anderson (011); Anderson apparently convinced both William and Hamilton Shields to relocate to Virginia from their native Philadelphia in 1810 to take up ventures with connections to his Richmond and Williamsburg schools: Hamilton as schoolmaster of an academy in Smithfield that fed students into Anderson's schools, and William as a journeyman in the Richmond press offices Anderson used to publish imprints he produced. When Anderson retired from the *Compiler* in early 1815, William became a partner in the succeeding firm that published that daily; his brother Hamilton took note of the *Compiler's* ready success and profitability, and determined to reproduce the *Compiler* model – a non-partisan daily advertiser – in his new residence of Norfolk. In April 1815, Hamilton Shields induced Shepherd to join him in the new venture; their *American Beacon and Commercial Diary* appeared that August, after a delay caused by their press-maker.

Shepherd decided to return to Richmond at the end of *Beacon's* first year, suggesting that his Norfolk residence was intended to be limited. And indeed, the ensuing reorganization evinces a determination for the Shields brothers to unite their interests in Norfolk at that time. In May 1816, William Shields sold his interest in the Richmond *Compiler*; that August, he removed to Norfolk and bought Shepherd's interest in the *American Beacon*; the Shields brothers then invited Charlton to join them there as an equal partner. Shepherd wrote in his valedictory address that Charlton was a clear gain for the *Beacon* rather than a loss, as he had "practical experience ... for several years, in the best offices in the state," which suited him for the rigors ahead. The realigned firm of Shields, Charlton & Co. continued as before, publishing the *Beacon* without interruption until the end of 1819, when Charlton sold his share to Henry Ashburn (015), the office's principal printer, and retired from journalism.

The departure was amicable, as seen in the effusions of gratitude and respect uttered by all four men in letters taking up nearly half of a page in the first number issued by the firm of Shields, Ashburn & Co. Still, the reasons for his retirement were unstated, though there are hints of two possibilities. On September 29, 1820, Charlton died of a "nervous fever" after a three-week-long illness; from the description of that illness in the obituary published by his old partners, he may already have been sufficiently disabled by illness in December 1819 to continue the grind of producing a daily paper. But a more likely reason for his retirement comes from the majority of that long obituary; he was an active Baptist evangelical with a

brother already ordained as a minister of that faith. Charlton's eulogizer, clearly one of the Shields brothers, noted that his devotion to his faith far surpassed his exemplary devotion to secular pursuits, such as the *Beacon*. So it seems that he had left the paper to preach the gospel on the Southside, and so chanced upon a fatal disease while doing that. It took him from his avocation, "cut off in the flower of his age," at just twenty-five.

Personal Data

Born: In 1795 In Virginia.

Died: Sept. 29 1820 Princess Anne County (now Virginia Beach), Va.

No wife or children noted, only two sisters and two brothers.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; notices in Norfolk's *American Beacon* of partnership changes, 26 Aug 1816 & 1 Jan 1820, obituary 30 Sept. 1820.