

093 CLARKSON, JOHN

Printer, Publisher

Williamsburg

Printer in the office of Alexander Purdie (345) during the 1770s; proprietor of Purdie's office after his death with Augustine Davis (119); publisher of the third *Virginia Gazette* (1779-80).

Clarkson is an ephemeral figure, despite familial ties to one of the most recognizable names in the early Virginia printing trade. Alexander Purdie was Clarkson's uncle, apparently from the family of his first wife Mary; her maiden name was not recorded, and after her 1772 death Purdie married into one of Williamsburg's best documented families, the Davenports, where no Clarksons are found. He was thus also related by that marriage to his future business partner, Augustine Davis, a nephew of Purdie's second wife, Martha "Peachey" Davenport. Yet even given this proven pedigree, we do not know Clarkson's birth or death dates, or whether he ever married and had children.

His training in the printing trade evidently came during Purdie's partnership with John Dixon (140) between May 1766 and December 1774; he was noted not long thereafter as the fully-trained foreman of Purdie's subsequent solo office. Thus Clarkson helped print both the original *Virginia Gazette* of William Parks (321) – which had passed to Purdie & Dixon as part of Dixon's administration of the entangled estates of William Hunter (230) and Joseph Royle (368) – and the third *Gazette* begun by Purdie in January 1775. This grounding gave Clarkson some credibility with the political leadership often resident in Williamsburg. In 1776, he was dispatched with Purdie by the Committee of Safety to interview a journeyman printer who had been visiting the off-shore fleet of the self-exiled royal governor, Lord Dunmore (153), to determine his loyalties. In late 1777, Clarkson's testimony during a legislative investigation of secrets leaked from the Assembly's deliberations helped identify the source of that leak.

That credibility, however, did not protect Clarkson from intense scrutiny and harsh criticism from the Assembly on Purdie's death in April 1779. With the death of Clementina Rind (356) in 1774, Purdie had finally been named the official printer for the colonial government, a post denied him in 1766; the conventions of 1775 and 1776 designated him as their official printer, leading to his election as printer to the new Commonwealth once independence was declared. But as the ensuing war with Britain dragged on, Purdie's performance in that role deteriorated, largely as a result of supply problems, particularly of paper. By the winter of 1778-79, his primary press was in such disrepair that he was forced to petition the Assembly for assistance in procuring parts. As a result, the Assembly thought that his office was now public property, and not a part of Purdie's estate, when he died. Clarkson had to defend his uncle's business practices, and prove his ownership of the office's tools, in an investigation that preceded the election of Purdie's successor as public printer, an election that he and his new partner, Augustine Davis, hoped to win. In the end, the investigating committee determined that while the state did not own any part of Purdie's office, it was not fully up to the task of producing the public's work with any dispatch. Fortunately for the firm of Clarkson & Davis, neither was the competing firm of John Dixon & Thomas Nicolson (315) up to the task. Purdie's successors were allowed to retain his title, but they split the

public work and the salary with Dixon & Nicolson.

The same Assembly that investigated Purdie's conduct also decided that removing the state government to Richmond was now imperative. Hence, both Williamsburg printing offices were expected to relocate as well, to continue producing the work contracted to them. When the Assembly next met there in May 1780, the Clarkson & Davis office was still in Williamsburg; the partners petitioned for their reappointment as public printers, and for financial assistance in relocating, claiming an inability to pay the now-exorbitant rents which Richmond property owners expected for their buildings. The Assembly turned a deaf ear to their pleas, temporarily engaging Dixon & Nicolson while governor Thomas Jefferson sought a permanent replacement in Philadelphia. Stranded in the abandoned capital, the future was now bleak for both tradesmen. They continued Purdie's *Gazette* until the end of 1780, but it was a shadow of its former self; by summer, it had become a small half-sheet, two-page paper largely devoid of advertising; it ceased publication on December 29, 1780.

Clarkson seems to have turned to real-estate speculation in the emptying town, leaving Davis to attend to their small bookstore & library and to produce what little press work they were offered. Yet the partners were handed a windfall in September of 1781. French forces under the command of the Comte de Rochambeau arrived as part of Washington's siege of Yorktown and remained in the neighborhood until the promulgation of the Treaty of Paris in 1783. That presence provided the Clarkson & Davis press with job-printing work for the next two years. The profits realized from that unexpected work allowed Davis to move the press to Richmond in 1784. However, Clarkson did not join him there; indeed, there is no trace of him in the historical or bibliographic record after he paid an annual property tax assessment in Williamsburg in 1782. For someone who was so intimately associated with the conduct of the Revolution in Virginia, this rapid disappearance from public view is curious.

Personal Data

Born: by 1758 Virginia.

Died: after 1782 Virginia?

No record of a wife or offspring yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 4 & 5; York County Records Project files for Purdie, Clarkson, Davis, Dixon, Nicolson, Hunter, Royle, and Parks, CWF; Journals of the House of Burgesses, 1766-75; Journals of the House of Delegates, 1776-80; Journals of the Virginia Conventions, 1775-76.