

## 105 COOK, JOHN L.

Printer & Publisher

Richmond, Petersburg

A Richmond-trained printer who published the *Virginia Apollo* (1807) in Petersburg with Nathaniel McLaughlin (294) and *Richmond Enquirer* (1828-36) with Thomas Ritchie (360).

Cook was a well-travelled printer who worked for nearly forty years in Richmond, Baltimore, Petersburg, and Washington – though rarely as a newspaper proprietor. Born about 1773, he was apparently trained in the Richmond office of John Dixons Sr. (140) & Jr. (141). He was a journeyman with Dixon Jr. when Meriwether Jones (242) was named as Virginia's public printer in 1798, and engaged the master to produce the semi-official *Examiner*. When that alliance failed the following May, and Jones set up an independent press, Cook was among his journeymen. As a result, he was also present when that office was transferred in 1804 to Thomas Ritchie and William W. Worsley (463) in starting the *Richmond Enquirer*.

About the same time that the *Enquirer* first issued, Cook joined with Seaton Grantland (186), another former Dixon & Jones hand, to solicit subscriptions for a non-partisan literary paper that they would publish independently: the *Lady's Museum and Weekly Magazine*. They apparently hoped to fill a niche had once been filled by the *Recorder* of Henry Pace (319); that weekly paper had been handed over to James T. Callender (075) in February 1802, who promptly politicized its content and so limited its distribution; Pace was forced to close his paper shortly after his former editor's death in 1803. However, offering a weekly paper from which "party politics and personal altercation will be entirely excluded" did not find much support in a city with three journals that claimed the right, center, and left of the political spectrum; it was never issued. Still, Cook & Grantland offered job-printing services for the rest of 1804, seemingly as a sideline to their employment with Ritchie & Worsley.

Grantland would continue as a job-printer in Richmond until the end of 1808, but Cook left the city at the end of 1804. He set up a new press office in Baltimore and immediately met George Bourne (043), an English evangelical minister who was looking for employment while he searched for an American pulpit. Cook apparently convinced Bourne to edit a new daily that he would print for them both; their *Baltimore Evening Post* began in March 1805. The arrangement lasted only until August when Cook sold his interest to Bourne and returned to job printing, probably producing the paper for his former partner; Bourne could not handle the business end of the newspaper and so sold the entire operation to Hezekiah Niles in November 1805, moving on to the evangelical career he has originally sought.

Having lost his largest customer in Bourne, Cook looked to Virginia for his next opportunity. In short order, he was back in Richmond working with Grantland again; there Cook was approached to produce the *Virginia Apollo* in Petersburg for Nathaniel McLaughlin. The two set out to publish a twice-weekly paper that would chart a middle course between the long-lived Federalist *Petersburg Intelligencer* of John Dickson (134) and the newer *Petersburg Republican* of Edward Pescud (324), while promoting investment in domestic manufacturing as a way to heal that partisan divide; the first number of the *Apollo* issued on April 15, 1807.

But their plan was hindered by the appearance of another new journal in Petersburg, one

that appeared just one week after the *Apollo's* first number: the *Virginia Mercury* of James L. Edwards (156) and Cincinnatus Stith (403); that paper was a less-expensive weekly one and so undercut the more-costly twice-weekly edition from the start; yet more importantly, the *Mercury* challenged both the *Intelligencer* and the *Republican*, which helped re-energize the supporters of those established sheets. Evidently McLaughlin & Cook quickly recognized the futility of the situation and ended their publication after seven weeks. The *Apollo* issued its last number on May 30th, announcing that it would be moved to Norfolk, suggesting that Cook was willing to continue the venture there. But that plan was apparently abandoned, as the paper was never issued there. It may be that the commotion experienced in Norfolk that ensued from the Chesapeake-Leopard affair just three weeks after the *Apollo* closed (June 22, 1807) brought an end to the planned move.

Where Cook went next is unclear, but it seems likely that he returned to Richmond to assist Grantland in producing the *Virginian* for Gerard Banks (019), and that when Grantland quit that production in March 1808, Cook returned to Baltimore to work with former colleagues there. What is abundantly clear is that he assumed responsibility for producing Baltimore's *Federal Republican* in April 1809, when it became a daily newspaper.

Cook's return to Baltimore would prove a challenge; having come from a line of Republican journals in Virginia, he now produced a highly-visible Federalist paper. Its principal owner, Alexander C. Hanson (1786-1819), was highly critical of Jefferson's embargo, so instigating this paper's creation; now he was even more critical of Madison as momentum for a war with Great Britain built. Hanson acquired Baltimore's *North American* in October 1809 and merged it with the *Republican*; Cook's name was not on the new combined masthead, but he was probably still its printer, at least for a while. Hanson no longer listed a printer for his paper, probably as a way to deflect anger aimed at him from a hired tradesman. The need for such anonymity can be seen in the attack on his office in June 1812; Jeffersonians there, angered by his support of Britain over America after the declaration of war in April, laid siege to his office with a cannon and swords; a supporter was killed and his press was destroyed, while he and his staff were escorted away to jail by armed militiamen.

Evidently Cook was not involved that violent night, as such an association would have destroyed his credibility among his Virginia friends, and there is no evidence that anyone there ever turned against him. Rather, it seems that as Hanson's tone became ever shriller in 1811, Cook left Baltimore for Washington. From later glowing comments about him in the capital's newspapers, he appears to have escaped to the office of the primary national voice of the Madison administration, the *National Intelligencer*. He was most certainly employed in Washington in August 1814 when the British fleet of Admiral Cockburn first sailed into the Chesapeake to attack Washington, for Cook joined the mobilizing forces there a week before the British landings and remained in service until the fall.

Yet, for someone in so visible a trade, Cook's employments cannot be traced from late 1814 until early 1824. The 1820 census shows him living in the city's Ward 6 with a household of five persons, all evidently immediate family. Given the growth of printing establishments in Washington after the war, that is not surprising; he seems either to be managing one of the newspaper offices there or running a job-printing business, as he reports himself as being

engaged in commerce. But whatever was the case, Cook was called back to Virginia by his old friend Thomas Ritchie in 1824. Ritchie's *Enquirer* office was then in dire need of an experienced manager and the old Republican could not think of a better choice than Cook. A new Whig journal published in Richmond was challenging the *Enquirer's* reporting, led by the able John Hampden Pleasants (330). Moreover, Ritchie was in the midst of campaigning for Jackson's election that fall. To face both concerns, he needed a reliable printer to attend to the production side of his business. Cook came willingly to Richmond, having to support, as Ritchie later reported, "a numerous family dependent upon his efforts." By 1830, his household had grown from five to twenty, with fourteen dependents under age twenty, a considerable financial burden. The new situation in Richmond would be a relief.

In 1820, Ritchie had taken on a partner for the first time since W. W. Worsley left in 1805; his choice was the state's adjutant general, Claiborne W. Gooch (182), a hero of the War of 1812. The partners worked amicably throughout the 1820s, but with the election of Jackson in November 1828 – long a goal for their *Enquirer* – Gooch retired from the business, with Ritchie signing promissory notes in excess of \$10,000 to buy him out. Both men saw a major disagreement brewing between them over a possible state constitutional convention to consider changes in the suffrage and representation clauses; Gooch opposed any changes, while Ritchie advocated liberalizing both. This was perhaps the greatest crisis Ritchie faced with his *Enquirer*, with Gooch being approached by some of Ritchie's oldest supporters to conduct a new paper in opposition to the *Enquirer* and the convention. Ritchie now turned to Cook for help once again. The week after Gooch departed, Cook became Ritchie's equal partner, reinforcing his role as the production side of the business, allowing Ritchie free rein to editorialize in favor of the proposed convention. The plan succeeded, at least in part, as a convention was called for the winter of 1829-30, one which did liberalize suffrage but did not alter elected representation in Virginia. Cook's loyal and steady hand on the press was something Ritchie never forgot. So when Cook died in 1836, he was among the most bereft.

The printer evidently developed some form of thoracic cancer in 1834; he spent two years fighting the disease, travelling to Philadelphia in search of a cure in the weeks before his death. However, none was found, and he passed away on a Friday morning in the spring of 1836. The *Enquirer* made no note of his passing in its regular issue the next day, but on the following Tuesday, the paper appeared bedecked with black leading and carrying a lengthy, emotional obituary written by Ritchie. He told his many readers he had "lost one of the best friends we had upon this Earth," then asked "how is it possible to part with such a man, without the deepest emotions of sorrow and respect?" It was an unusual and very public display of Ritchie's inner self. But more tragic was the large family he left behind; his widow promptly filed for the land warrant due her husband for his military service; she would now need its proceeds to help sustain Cook's sizeable family.

***Personal Data***

Born: Nov. 16 1783 Hanover County, Virginia.  
Married: Nov. 14 1806 Elizabeth O. Darrows @ Richmond, Virginia.  
Died: Apr. 22 1836 Richmond, Virginia.  
Children: John H. (1810-52), Francis (1813-1834), Sarah (b. 1814), William  
P. (1825-1849), Mary (b. 1827); 1830 census suggests others.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; Federal Decennial Census for 1820 & 1830; War of 1812 Pension Application Files; Ambler, *Thomas Ritchie*; Ames, *The National Intelligencer*; notices in *Richmond Enquirer* (1804-1828) and Baltimore *Federal Republican* (1805-10); obituary in *Richmond Enquirer*, 26 April 1836.