

**109 COURTNEY, JOHN, JR. – [REV. JOHN COURTNEY, JR.]**

**Printer**

**Richmond. Staunton**

Publisher of the *Political Mirror* in Staunton (1800) with John McArthur (285); journeyman printer for James Lyon (274) in Richmond; and later a job-printer there in partnership with John Dixon Jr. (141).

Courtney lived in the shadow of the greatness of his father, the revered Baptist elder John Courtney. The fact that the Elder never used the designation "Sr." has led to some confusion as to whether the two Richmonders were related, as many like-named individuals in this era used the Sr./Jr. appendage as a distinction between older and younger, as Samuel Pleasants (331) did to distinguish himself from an older uncle. But even as genealogical evidence is scarce, his later support by the Elder's church indicates a close connection to both minister and congregation.

The younger Courtney emerged as a trained printer in Richmond in the mid-1790s. He was briefly employed as an express rider by the Governor in 1795, but that appears to have been an interlude in an otherwise continuous print-trade career through 1808. And until the death of John Dixon Jr. in 1805, he seems to have been a key part of that printer's circle; indeed, one source indicates (from indirect evidence) that Courtney was with Dixon from 1791. That origin puts him in the middle of the assembling of a Republican press alliance in Richmond in 1799. Meriwether Jones (242) set up a new office in May 1799 to produce the work that was then expected of him as the state's public printer; when named to the job six-months before, he formed a partnership with Dixon Jr. to produce both the public work and a semi-official journal, *The Examiner*. That deal foundered when Dixon's office could not produce the required work on the schedule the two had agreed to – largely for financial reasons – making this new establishment a public necessity. Courtney became part of the Jones office when Dixon was compelled to reduce his staff with the loss of the newspaper.

The change put Courtney close to James Lyon when he arrived in Virginia that spring. A young printer from Vermont, his publisher father, Matthew Lyon, was at the center of a fierce political scandal in 1798-99. Then a member of the Congress, he was thrashed by a Federalist representative for his disrespectful attitude; he was then jailed for sedition for publishing an inflammatory pamphlet about the affair from his Vermont press. In the biased reporting of this event, as with other reportage, Jeffersonian leaders saw the need for new Republican papers throughout the country to counter the overwhelming dominance of the Federalist press. The young Lyon, a dedicated Republican like his father, was invited to come to Virginia to lead an effort to start several new papers in the state whose editorial content would be coordinated by him in Richmond.

By early 1800, Lyon had launched weekly journals in Petersburg (*The Republican*), Staunton (*The Political Mirror*), and Richmond (*The Press*) in a series of partnerships with experienced printers. Because of his experience in producing both Dixon's and Jones's newspapers, Courtney was recruited to conduct the Staunton office in partnership with Lyon's young cousin, John McArthur. However, these new journals were unprofitable; while the election of Jefferson was still in doubt, his supporters were willing to subsidize their publication as

part of the campaign; but once his victory was assured by the summer of 1800, the future of each was threatened. With the *Political Mirror*, Lyon pulled out of the concern in late June 1800, leaving Courtney and McArthur to determine that journal's fate. McArthur struggled for another two years to keep the paper alive; yet Courtney decided to return to Richmond almost immediately; he had just married a woman from the city and obviously wanted to set down roots close to their origins, if possible.

Over the next seven years, Courtney operated a Richmond job-printing office, most often on his own, and most often in service to the Baptist faith. But from May 1802 until October 1803, he did so in partnership with his former master, John Dixon Jr. During that alliance, they handled the overload of work that either Samuel Pleasant or Meriwether Jones could not complete on the schedules that they had promised; after their alliance ended, Courtney continued as a subcontractor for both publishers, most notably printing Pleasants' almanacs for 1804 and 1805. However, an extended illness struck Courtney in early 1805, slowing his production generally, and delaying specifically the publication of a hymnal for his father. By spring 1807, he had recovered sufficiently to undertake the rigorous task of printing the non-partisan *Impartial Observer* for Samuel Brooks (054), a local engraver and silversmith. But with that weekly's demise in July, Courtney's printing career began to draw to a close.

The scarcity of surviving imprints that Courtney produced after 1806 suggests his business was not as profitable as he wanted; he simply did not have that much work. It also suggests that he was drifting away from it, for in early 1808 he walked away from his business to take up a ministerial calling. That April he left Richmond, apparently for a summer of itinerant preaching, leaving his accounts and their collection in the hands of Thomas Burling (066), foreman in the press office of Thomas Ritchie (360). This move came just after the death of his mother, Jane, perhaps signifying the fulfillment of a dying wish from a mother to a son. Courtney later became an assistant at the First Baptist Church of Richmond, established in 1788 and nurtured for twenty years by Elder Courtney, who undoubtedly approved his selection. The founder's last seventeen years there (1808-24) were ones where the church saw rapid growth while his abilities steadily deteriorated. Courtney Jr. was one of at least four assistants brought into the church during those years, and his visibility grew as a result. In 1818, for example, he was one of two Baptist ministers chosen to attend the condemned murderer Robert Gibson on the gallows in an execution that was the largest public spectacle of its day in the capital.

It is clear that Courtney was well-known in his time, yet his fate is unknown. He remained associated with the Richmond church for some time, but any other information about his ministry is not recorded in reference works. In 1880, the church was supporting the blind and deaf ninety-year-old granddaughter of the Elder, Miss Lucy Courtney. With a birth date of 1790, she could have been a daughter to Courtney Jr., so deserving charity from the congregation as a result of the two ministers' lengthy dedicated service to their church. But any definitive proof of such a connection, as with Courtney's family history generally, is frustratingly lacking.

***Personal Data***

Born: c. 1777 in Virginia.

Married: May 8 1800 Sally Barker @ Richmond, Virginia.

Other vital statistics and family data not yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Hubbard on Richmond; *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*; Tupper. *First Baptist Church of Richmond*; marriage notice, *Virginia Argus*, 13 May 1800; advertisements in *Virginia Argus*, 1801-08.