

110 COWPER, JOHN

Proprietor

Norfolk

Founder and proprietor of the *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger* (1804-16) with George Lewis Gray (188) and William Davis (127) as his partners.

Cowper was born and bred to the maritime merchant trade. His like-named father was a minor coastal trader when the Revolutionary War broke out; he served in the state's navy then, acquiring a hero's reputation for his exploits in evading larger British ships in the lower Chesapeake Bay; after the war, he parlayed his maritime skills and commercial sense into a small fleet of trading vessels that carried Virginia's produce to Europe and the Caribbean under the flag of John Cowper & Co. His was a family business that included his four sons: John, Joseph, William, and Robert. On his death in 1797, his eldest son John took the lead in managing the enterprise.

Son John became a ship's master in his father's merchant fleet as a young man, and that experience was ever a part of his thinking. Most important in shaping his world view, it seems, was a voyage he made in 1798 from Norfolk to Jamaica. His schooner was captured off Haiti by a French privateer and sold, ship and cargo, as a war prize; the family suffered a loss of more than \$11,000, which insurance did not fully cover. Cowper had been victimized by the undeclared Quasi-War between France and the United States, and so held a dim view thereafter of the French and their American supporters. On his return to Norfolk, he settled into the land-based oversight of the business, and threw himself into local politics; Cowper apparently believed that if Norfolk's merchants could be pulled into an effective lobbying force, national foreign policy – especially its trading policy – could be altered to make such self-interested predations, as he had experienced, a thing of the past. He was instrumental in forming a Chamber of Commerce there in 1800. Meanwhile, he worked his way onto the borough's Common Council as an alderman, from whence he was elected Norfolk's mayor in 1801. But once so empowered, Cowper discovered how little influence he and his friends actually had over the broader citizenry of this Southside region, and so of regional electoral politics. He also discovered that the mounting losses incurred by John Cowper & Co. from the ongoing conflict on the Atlantic could not be recouped without an end to that struggle; eventually, those losses forced the family's company into bankruptcy in late 1804.

Shaping public opinion now became central to Cowper's strategy. Recognizing that Norfolk's existing newspaper – the *Norfolk Herald* – was a mildly-Republican advertising sheet, he set out to alter that dynamic by offering a newspaper representing the perspective of the port's merchants and so influence political discussions and choices there. But lacking experience in publishing a political paper, he required assistance from someone who had such. He found one such individual in George L. Gray, formerly editor of *The Republican, or Anti-Democrat* in Baltimore; in early 1804, Cowper convinced Gray to come to Norfolk and start a new political journal that would press the Jeffersonian state and national administrations for merchant-friendly (i.e. Federalist) policies. Indeed, the timing suggests that the failure of Gray's Baltimore paper triggered Cowper's plan for a political paper in his hometown. Their new *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger* issued its first number that April.

The *Ledger* was clearly Cowper's paper, even as he delegated authority to his partner; Gray ran the office on a daily basis, editing the paper's content and supervising production of the thrice-weekly journal; Cowper wrote essays and offered editorial guidance. Their alliance was a successful and profitable one; but Gray rarely stayed long at any journal he edited. On July 26, 1805, the partners announced the dissolution of their fifteen-month-old concern on account of Gray's declining health, which "render[ed] a change in climate necessary." The change had already been effected ten days before when the paper's colophon was altered to show that it was "Printed by William Davis for the Proprietor." By September, Gray had left Norfolk in search of new challenges in New York.

Cowper's choice of Davis as his replacement was both a convenience and a reassurance to his readers that the *Ledger's* perspective was unchanged. A merchant like Cowper, Davis had been the founder and editor of the *American Gazette* in Norfolk from 1792 to 1797; but that paper had lost support as the Quasi-War began and closed, leaving the *Norfolk Herald* as the port town's only journal. Cowper now brought Davis back into the journalistic fray, with the two splitting their responsibilities as before with Gray. For the next decade, the two focused the *Ledger* on foreign affairs its effect on Norfolk's maritime trade. It evinced a special antagonism for France, the source of the Cowper family's financial woes, and any Republican politician or editor who demonstrated sympathy for the French Republic. This was something of a departure for Federalist journals of that day, in that Cowper and Davis did not routinely assume an outlook that defended trade with Britain, even as they spoke out against the Republicans over their years together by "ridiculing the policy of peaceful coercion and opposing the War of 1812." No doubt, the unavoidable need to reduce their publication rate from thrice-weekly to twice-weekly that resulted from war-time shortages sharpened their criticisms.

With the war's end, however, the situation in Norfolk changed; a non-partisan competitor, the *American Beacon*, emerged for both the *Ledger* and the *Herald*; trade there began to shift from its old foreign focus to a new domestic one; Cowper was drifting away from his paper through other pursuits; and Davis was tired of the grind of production. An end was clearly in sight.

In August 1816, Davis told Cowper of his intention to retire from the *Ledger* on September 1st; Cowper then informed his readers that unless a new proprietor could be found, the *Ledger* would cease publication with Davis's retirement. He still lacked the skills needed to produce the paper, but now he realized that a solitary paper in a single city could not effect the changes he had striven for since 1798, especially when advertisers now had a non-partisan alternative that reached into all corners of the political world. So when no suitable buyer came forth, Cowper closed his *Publick Ledger* with the issue of September 17, 1816, as promised. Neither he nor Davis ever published a newspaper again.

Cowper had begun the enterprise as a man with many hats, and even with its demise, he remained one. He was the vice-consul for several European states for the Virginia ports south of the Potomac, a director of the Great Dismal Swamp Company (as his father had been), and the secretary of the Marine Insurance Company of Norfolk – the primary employment that he took on after the bankruptcy dissolution of John Cowper & Co. Quite

simply, he no longer had the time or energy to manage a political newspaper, especially one becoming irrelevant in the post-war world.

Over the next thirty years, Cowper turned the Norfolk-based insurance company into the state's leading merchant-marine underwriter. That success gave him the wherewithal to acquire a small plantation near Hampton on the opposite side of the Hampton Roads; remarkably, that purchase led to a divestiture of much of his enslaved labor force as he did not now need the stevedores he once employed to unload his trading ships. Nor did he again seek elective office, though he did serve regularly on committees appointed by the city's government, particularly ones charged with resolving health issues. Thus when he finally died in 1847, he was remembered more for his business success than for his long-gone journal. Yet today, the surviving complete run of the *Publick Ledger* provides historians an optimum view of the mindset of Norfolk's early-Republic-era merchant community.

Personal Data

Born: In 1763 Lower Norfolk (now Nansemond) County, Va.
Married: Oct. 22 1801 Susanna Barron @ Norfolk, Virginia
Died: Feb. 9 1847 Hampton, Warwick County, Virginia
Children: Three recorded in 1820 federal census.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Tucker, *Norfolk Abstracts*; Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*; Wertebaker, *Norfolk*; Royster, *Dismal Swamp Company*; Norfolk directories, 1801-06; Federal Decennial Censuses, 1790-1830; newspapers notices in Alexandria, 1797-1801, Richmond 1802-34, and Norfolk *Publick Ledger*, 1804-16.