

## 115 DAVENPORT, JOSEPH MATTHEWS

Printer

Williamsburg, Richmond

Printer in the office of Alexander Purdie (345) in Williamsburg (1773-79), who later worked in Richmond in the offices of Augustine Davis (119) and Samuel Pleasants (331).

Davenport was a son of Williamsburg who was intimately connected with the printing trade there from birth. His grandfather was Joseph Davenport, clerk of the York County Court on which William Hunter (230) served (1759-61); Hunter also witnessed the clerk's will in 1761. Six of his eight children had ties to either Hunter, Joseph Royle (368), or Alexander Purdie. The printer's father, George Davenport, was an attorney who was clerk for two committees of the House of Burgesses, who served as administrator of Royle's estate, which had been appraised by merchant Anthony Hay, husband of his aunt Elizabeth. His uncle Joseph Jr. was an Anglican minister who married Hunter's sister Mary, and his uncle James had witnessed Hunter's will. His aunt Peachey married Purdie in 1772, while his uncle Matthew's marriage bond was secured by Purdie. And when his father died in 1773, John Greenhow, husband of his aunt Mary, was appointed his guardian.

Given these familial associations, it is not surprising that Davenport was quickly bound out to the press office of Alexander Purdie, then a partnership with John Dixon Sr. (140), and still entangled with both the Hunter and Royle estates. So it seems that he continued there after Purdie's death in April 1779, working with his second cousin Augustine Davis and John Clarkson (093) through at least 1780.

Davenport is clearly seen in that office in November 1777 when he became a key part of an investigation by the House of Delegates. Purdie became printer to the newly-independent Commonwealth in April 1776, and so was required to produce whatever imprints the state ordered of him. As winter approached in 1777, the General Assembly passed an emergency law forbidding the resale of clothing and cloth already in the state, intending to claim as much of that merchandise as it could in order to clothe the Virginia line that winter. They ordered Purdie to print the law, and the warrants needed to execute it, in secrecy, thereby preventing merchants from hiding such goods from the county sheriffs, the state's seizure agents. But the secret was leaked in Williamsburg by one of Purdie's slaves. Local merchant John Hatley Norton, a known speculator in the supplies often required by the government, learned of the secret act from a customer; he soon appeared at the printing office door demanding to see the printed act as confirmation. All of Purdie's workers who were then present – Clarkson, Davenport, and Samuel Major (277) – refused Norton, but still the secret was out. The House of Delegates set out to discover how the disclosure happened, quickly tracing its spread to Norton; yet he claimed that he had heard it from Davenport when "the boy" had visited his store in search of candles. The House chose to believe Purdie's staff and not the duplicitous Norton, though they took no further action against anyone.

After this 1777 investigation, Davenport's activities can only be presumed, as he does not again appear in the public record until his death in 1793. But that appearance was still within the Purdie circle of tradesmen. On Purdie's death, his office devolved to his nephews

Clarkson (via first wife Mary) and Davis (via second wife Peachey); after the government removed to Richmond in 1780, only Davis followed, and then not until 1784; in Richmond, Davis built a business as printer of both the federal record and a weekly advertiser, as well as being the city's postmaster; in 1793, he backed his shop foreman, Samuel Pleasants, in his new weekly *Virginia Gazette and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser*; Davenport was working for Pleasants when he died and Pleasants printed his only published obituary. Thus it seems clear that Davenport remained in Williamsburg until 1784, accompanied Davis to Richmond then, and had just shifted to Pleasants's new office when he died. This inference is supported by the 1780 death of the only other Purdie employee, Samuel Major; he had left the Clarkson & Davis office and was enroute to Richmond to work for others when he died, so leaving the old Purdie press more dependent on Davenport than ever.

That Davenport could so quickly vanish from the well-documented life of the old colonial capital is indicative of the disruptions of the Revolutionary era. That he had not emerged as a press-office proprietor in his own right by 1793 suggests that time simply ran out for him, as the real growth in Virginia's print-trade came in the years after his death, not before.

#### ***Personal Data***

Born:            In 1758    Bruton Parish, York County, Virginia

Died:    Nov. 24 1793    Richmond, Henrico County, Virginia

No record of wife or children yet found.

Sources: York County Records Project files, CWF; Gibbs, "The Davenports," *CW Interpreter* (1997); *Journal of House of Delegates*, 1777-78; obituary in *Pleasants' Advertiser*, 25 Nov 1793.