

119 DAVIS, AUGUSTINE

Printer & Publisher

Williamsburg, Richmond

Printer and publisher from Williamsburg who dominated the first thirty years of the printing trade in Richmond, working for Alexander Purdie (345) and John Dixon Sr. (140), then with John Clarkson (093), Joseph Matthews Davenport (115) and Samuel Major (277); a partner to Clarkson, James [2] Carey (080), Samuel Pleasants (331), John Wood (456), Samuel Livermore (267), Charles Prentiss (341), Samuel B. Beach (468) and William Ramsay (348); employer of William Allegre (005), and Seymour P. Charlton (090); also father of Edmund (121), George (122), John (125), and Augustine (120) Davis Jr.; father-in-law of Samuel Shepherd (379); uncle of Thomas Willis White (442); and cousin of William Davis (127).

While Davis was born in Yorktown, little is known of his early life and education. He learned his trade in the Williamsburg office of Alexander Purdie and John Dixon, a partnership that dissolved at the end of 1774. Thereafter he worked for Purdie until his master's death in April 1779. At that point, the office devolved to Davis and John Clarkson, a Purdie nephew who was then the shop's foreman, as the firm of Clarkson & Davis.

In 1778, Davis married Martha Davenport, daughter of Williamsburg merchant Ambrose Davenport, who was brother to Purdie's second wife Mary (or Peachey). The union gave the young journeyman a familial association to his master as well as a working one. The Davis's long union resulted in seven children, five of whom developed their own connections to the Virginia printing trade: sons Edmund, John, George, and Augustine Jr., by working with their father, and daughter Maria, by marriage to Samuel Shepherd, a job-printer and publisher who became Virginia's public printer in his own right in the 1830s.

Williamsburg to Richmond

Clarkson & Davis secured most of the public printing contract in June 1779, as they had been doing the public work since Purdie's death. The partnership also continued publishing Purdie's *Virginia Gazette* as part of their duties. Even so, the state government's relocation to Richmond in early 1780 ended that arrangement. Unable to finance their move to the new capital, the pair petitioned the legislature in May 1780 both for reappointment and for assistance in relocating, but they were rebuffed. Without the revenue of the public work and without the advertising that post afforded their *Gazette*, business waned rapidly; the six-year-old weekly ceased publication at the end of 1780. Their printing office became a small job-printing shop largely in Davis's hands. He diversified, becoming a landowner in Williamsburg in fall 1782, taking control of his father-in-law's tavern, a property he owned until 1804. Still, it was the arrival of the Continental Army at Yorktown in mid-1781 that rescued his print-trade career: he printed for French regiments encamped nearby until their departure in 1782. With those funds, Davis was finally able to relocate his press and office to Richmond in the summer of 1783.

His tardy relocation meant that Davis found established competition in the new capital. There were then three other printing offices, all seeking the same public contract that he

lost in 1780. He slowly rebuilt his reputation and customer base there, which allowed him to establish another paper in 1786 – *The Virginia Independent Chronicle*. This venture was the hallmark of Davis’s career as a publisher. Known as *The Virginia Gazette* after August 1790 and as *The Virginia Patriot* after December 1809, his journal was thoroughly Federalist in its character and content, faithfully reprinting news and opinions from the foremost Federalist sources to the north. This perspective proved beneficial for him as, with the assistance of George Washington, he was the first printer in Richmond to start publishing *The Federalist Papers*. And when the state held its long-awaited ratifying convention in June of 1788, Davis was chosen as the convention's printer, where he built life-long relationships with pro-federal leaders such as John Marshall, the future chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. As a result, it made particular sense for the state government to engage him to publish the laws promulgated by the new Congress once it took office in 1789. This turn of events prompted Davis to seek another federal commission, that of Postmaster for Richmond, which he secured in early 1791 following the passage of the country's first Post Office acts. All of this work gave him a federal identity the other Richmond printers lacked.

Public Printer

These jobs positioned him perfectly to assume the role of public printer once again. He had applied for the position in 1787 and 1789, when the aging incumbent, John Dixon Sr., found himself in conflict with the Assembly over his performance. In that period, he obtained contracts for work that Dixon had not completed. So when Dixon died in April 1791, then Governor Beverley Randolph quickly appointed Davis as “printer to the Commonwealth,” an appointment the Assembly confirmed when they met that fall. That confirmation, while assured by his renewed solvency and performance, was likely enhanced by his further good fortune in winning first-prize in a Connecticut lottery in October 1791. A believer in banks, Davis had been among the first signers of a petition earlier that year that asked the federal government to establish a branch of the Bank of the United States in Richmond. Now, he invested his lottery winnings in the Bank of Virginia, the Federalist-dominated Assembly’s newest project. The formerly destitute tradesman was now a major figure in both the public and business life of the Commonwealth.

With his restyled *Virginia Gazette* now serving as the journal-of-record for the state, Davis decided to invest in a second paper to accommodate the growing demand for advertising in the city while fulfilling his role as the voice of the state and federal governments with his original paper. That second journal proved to be the city's first daily paper. In mid-1792, Davis convinced James Carey, the ne'er-do-well brother of Philadelphia publisher Mathew Carey, to come to Virginia to conduct *The Virginia Gazette and Richmond Daily Advertiser* for their mutual benefit. The journal's first number appeared on October 1, 1792, the first day of that year's Assembly session. But the daily foundered quickly from a mixture of Carey's incompetence and Davis's over-reach; Richmond, it seems, just was not yet ready for a daily paper, especially one mismanaged by Carey. So on December 7th, Carey trimmed his publication frequency from daily to thrice-weekly, plainly in recognition of the futility of the venture. Yet that reduction did little to stem the bleeding and the new *Advertiser* was finally closed on January 2, 1793, after just 70 numbers, five days after the Assembly session

ended. Carey promptly left Richmond, going south to Charleston to start a new daily there that March.

Davis was not deterred by the failure; rather, he now determined to finance a twice-weekly adjunct to his weekly *Virginia Gazette*, this one conducted by his reliable shop foreman, Samuel Pleasants Jr. The twenty-three-year-old printer was a York County native raised among the Quakers of Henrico County and probably trained in the Davis office after he moved it to Richmond in 1783. The two partnered to produce the replacement, one where Pleasants was the titular owner and Davis was the financial power – Samuel Pleasants and Company. Their new *Virginia Gazette and Richmond & Manchester Advertiser* first issued on April 15, 1793, "in consequence of Mr. Carey's removal from the city." Yet, while Davis thought he had started an allied paper in setting up Pleasants as a journalist, what he had actually done was create a formidable competitor. That year was a pivotal one in the development of partisan factions in the country, largely a consequence of the execution of Louis XVI of France and the activities of the minister sent to America by the new revolutionary government. With long-established connections to Washington and his cabinet, Davis was disposed to follow a pro-administration course in his weekly paper; at the same time, Pleasants was inclined to follow an opposition track, reflecting his Quaker ties to James Madison, among others. Accordingly, Davis and Pleasants became estranged politically, though not professionally; with the issue of October 16 1794, Pleasants became sole proprietor of his twice-weekly *Gazette*, leaving Davis to conduct his weekly *Gazette* as he saw fit; a year later, Pleasants embraced a new name for his paper, the *Virginia Argus*, a title identifying the most widely-read paper in the state over the ensuing two decades.

Those same political differences eventually came to play a role in assessing his performance as public printer. As Virginia grew in the 1790s, so too did the volume of work for the public printer and the scale of his compensation, thanks to Governor Randolph's successors: Henry Lee and Robert Brooke. Davis's good fortune created a perception that his growing wealth came at public expense. Moreover, by investing in banks and property, while publishing a Federalist paper, Davis was now one who both promoted and benefitted from the economic program of Alexander Hamilton. His improving fortune undermined his public credibility.

Before long, Western legislators began complaining of a lack of public documents in their distant districts, questioning Davis's conduct in office. In 1798, when the Assembly shifted to a Jeffersonian majority, they replaced Davis with Meriwether Jones (242), a Jeffersonian stalwart on the Council of State. Federalists denounced Davis's removal as simple political patronage, because Jones was not a printer. But Jones's study of the public work preceding that Assembly and his later conduct of that work demonstrated otherwise. Throughout his tenure as public printer, Davis produced unvarying quantities of the annual session laws, even while the number of counties grew. This constancy caused a decline in the number of imprints distributed per county, confirming western complaints. Jones also found that Davis had ceased to be a practicing printer himself while in office, relying on his shop foreman, Samuel Pleasants, to fulfill his contractual obligations – as would Jones. Accordingly, Jones increased the number of session laws produced after each session, but in doing so, he unleashed another controversy by escalating the expense of public printing at a rate faster than Davis ever had previously. Federalists saw the greater costs as a vindication of Davis.

So he remained an important link in the Federalist chain.

Jeffersonians responded to the Federalists' dependence on Davis by taking a different tack. They argued that he could not serve two masters at the same time. Either he was a federal official or a state one; to be both was a conflict of interest. Davis used this logic to assert his right to be the sole publisher of federal laws in Virginia, an argument that fell on deaf ears despite frequent repetition. Stymied, Davis used his *Virginia Gazette* to promote Federalist candidates in 1800, regularly reprinting defamatory stories from other Federalist journals and supporting the prosecution of Jeffersonian editors under the Alien & Sedition laws, particularly that of James T. Callender in Richmond itself. Once Jefferson became president, he struck back, ordering a review of federal postmasterships to eliminate major Federalist newspaper editors from their ranks. Hence, Davis was removed as Richmond's postmaster in February 1802. Now sans the federal post, he applied again for the state's public printing position that fall, only to be rebuffed by Jeffersonians backing Jones as before.

Political Editor

Davis's complaints about Jefferson and his new national party multiplied in the pages of his *Gazette* after his dismissal but they seem to have had little effect. Indeed, contemporaries noted that Davis often fell afoul of the Richmond Junto – the city's Republican leaders – in this period. They would send him pseudonymous articles exposing Jeffersonian faults only to find those stories refuted immediately and more flamboyantly in the pages of the Junto's paper: first in Jones's *Examiner*, then in the *Enquirer* of Thomas Ritchie (360). Davis tired of this game and engaged Federalist writers from beyond Virginia to energize his paper as its editor. In 1802, he gave refuge to John Wood, who had fled New York City after defaming both Federalist John Adams in 1801 and Republican Aaron Burr in 1802. Twice – in 1805 and 1816 – he brought Charles Prentiss, a fiery Federalist writer from Boston, to Richmond; each time, Prentiss returned north after just a year, disappointed by Virginians' response. A final try at this approach came in late 1809 when he made his old *Virginia Gazette* over into a new *Virginia Patriot* with New-Englander Samuel Livermore as its editor, but he abandoned the job as well after just a year, as did his successor in 1810, Samuel B. Beach. Thus by 1817, Davis was left with his son, George, as partner and editor, his other three sons having met premature, accidental deaths.

Yet even as his public prominence now waned, his wealth increased, allowing him to settle into a comfortable retirement. In April 1821, Davis sold his office and paper to his last shop foreman and partner, William Ramsay, though he retained ownership of the building. That property was part of a larger tract of four town lots that spread southward from E Street (now East Main Street) along 11th Street toward Shockoe Slip. The site today, just 700 feet SSE of the Capitol Building, has become the central plaza of an office tower complex. The rest of his days were apparently spent at his rural Henrico County home at Westham, where he died at age seventy-three in November 1825. Within a week, his wife Martha followed him. Both were buried in the Shockoe Hill Cemetery in Richmond.

Legacy

The legacy of Augustine Davis in Virginia's history lies not just in his imprints, and their political voice, but also in the network of associates that brought the printing and publishing business to many of the Commonwealth's market towns. Most notable among these many figures are nephew Thomas Willis White, later editor and publisher of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and son-in-law Samuel Shepherd, who continued William Waller Hening's (213) compilation of the laws of early Virginia; both learned their trade in Davis's Richmond office.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1752 Yorktown, York County, Virginia
Married: Feb. 28 1778 Martha Davenport @ Williamsburg, Va.
Died: Nov. 2 1825 Richmond, Henrico County, Virginia.
Children: Edmund, Augustine Jr., John. George, Maria, Matilda.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Hubbard on Richmond; York County Records Project files, CWF; Gibbs, "The Davenports," *CW Interpreter* (1997); Doehla, *Tagebuch eines Bayruether Soldaten* (1913), Henley Marriage & Obituary Index, Library of Virginia; *Journal of the House of Delegates, 1779-98*; *Journals of the Council of the State, 1780-98*; Archives Division, Library of Virginia (Executive Papers Received, 1791-98; Quarterly Reports on Bank of Virginia, 1897-1825, Papers of Second Public Auditor); Henrico County Deed Books; Mordecai, *Richmond in By-Gone Days*; notices in *Virginia Gazette* (C&D), *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, *Virginia Patriot*, *Virginia Argus*, and *Richmond Enquirer*, 1779-1825.

This entry is a modified version of the entry on Davis written for the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* in 2008, now a part of the online *Encyclopedia Virginia*.