

123 DAVIS, JAMES

Printer

Williamsburg

Printer in the Williamsburg office of William Parks (321).

Davis was a Virginia trained printer who established the first press in North Carolina in 1749. He apparently came to work for William Parks as an apprentice to in the 1730s; but by 1749, there seemed little prospect of him replacing Virginia's single press owner in the near term.

Meanwhile, North Carolina's General Assembly had undertaken a long-needed revisal of that colony's laws; after three years of work, a completed draft was now ready for the press and a decision on who to engage for its publication lay in the Assembly's hands. Rather than send the work to established presses in London, Charleston, or Williamsburg, they decided to follow the course that Virginia had in 1729: they sought a printer willing to relocate to their colony to print their laws. Davis willingly accepted the offer and set up a new press office in New Bern in 1749; still publication of those laws was not completed until 1751.

Evidence in the records of the Williamsburg printing office indicate that Davis remained dependent on Parks for supplies, a situation complicated by Parks' death in early 1750 while enroute to England to gather supplies for an identical project in Virginia. He now had to deal with both the new Williamsburg press owner, William Hunter (230), and the administrators of Parks' estate to finish his contract. Thus a second edition was required in 1752 when the numbers issued of the first proved inadequate to needs within the colony. The Assembly there took Davis to task for the delay, but recognized that it was partially self-induced, as they had not granted the printer any advance he could use to procure supplies from others. It may also be, as it was elsewhere, that Davis may have been distracted from completing his public work in preparing to publish a weekly newspaper – *The North Carolina Gazette* – in 1751.

Davis remained unchallenged in North Carolina until 1762; that year, the Lower House of the Assembly moved to have him replaced by Alexander Purdie (345), then foreman of the Williamsburg office of Joseph Royle (368), out of concern that Davis was too compliant to the Council and the Governor; defeated then, they tried again in 1764, but the Governor rejected their suggestion once again as Purdie did not reside in the colony. Undaunted, the Lower House now invited a Philadelphia printer, Alexander Steuart, to replace Davis. A rift between the Council and the Lower House now ensued over the printer's title; the Council appointed Steuart "His Majesty's Printer," while the House named Davis as the "Printer to the Colony." Though the work and salary was now divided, Davis retained the patronage of the legislature until April 1777, when a new revolutionary Assembly brought John Pinkney (325) to North Carolina out of the ruins of the Rind press office in Williamsburg. However, Pinkney's unexpected death within weeks of his arrival brought Davis back into that public office; he was still serving in that role when he died in 1785; his son Thomas continued his business, although not the public work.

Personal Data

Born: Oct 21 1721 Virginia, probably in Petersburg area.
Married: ca. 1751 Prudence Carruthers [in North Carolina?]
Died: in 1785 New Bern, Craven County, North Carolina
Children: James Jr. (b. 1753), John (b. 1755), Sarah (b. 1757), William J. (b. 1759). Thomas (b. 1761), Prudence (b. 1763), Susannah (b. 1766).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Thomas, *History of Printing*; Williamsburg Printing Office daybooks, 1750-52; Weeks, *Press of North Carolina*.