

127 DAVIS, WILLIAM

Editor & Publisher

Norfolk, Petersburg

Publisher the *American Gazette and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser* (1792-97), initially with Charles Willett (445); and later of the *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger* (1805-16) with John Cowper (110); proprietor of the *Independent Ledger* (1793) in Petersburg; also a cousin to Augustine Davis (119) of Richmond.

Davis was primarily a newspaper editor, one focused on promoting Federalist policies that were deemed fundamental to the survival of the maritime merchant trade in Virginia. It seems that he was born in the Williamsburg area, as his father was a brother to the mother of Augustine Davis, a journeyman trained in the office of Alexander Purdie (345) there, and later the state's public printer (1791-1798) in Richmond.

This kinsman's first foray into journalism came in July 1792 when he joined with a London-trained, practical printer named Charles Willett to issue *The American Gazette, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Weekly Advertiser*. The paper was intended to expand the limited advertising space available to local merchants in what was then a single-newspaper town; the venture proved a prescient one, as the weekly gained acceptance quickly, allowing them to increase its publication frequency to twice-weekly in early 1794. But as the national political divide emerged and quickly deepened, so too did the one between the partners. Willett had come to the United States as a result of his opposition to a government that espoused the anti-revolutionary ideas of Edmund Burke, an outlook that put him in the Republican ranks when partisan divisions emerged in the country after 1792. In late July 1794, the Federalist Davis ended their partnership and forced Willett out of the *Gazette* office. Almost immediately, Willett began publishing a new mercantile advertiser, *The Herald, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser*; that sheet soon brought about the end of their original advertiser competitor, *The Virginia Chronicle*.

Willett's new paper became, in time, the venerable *Norfolk Herald*, the principal advertising medium for the tidewater region until the Civil War, largely because of a moderate political tone that Davis could not and would not embrace. His first attempt at an openly political journal had been a failure and Willett's departure threatened the *Gazette's* survival as well. In 1793, while still a partner in the *American Gazette*, Davis moved to Petersburg to conduct a partisan paper there on his own, *The Independent Ledger and Petersburg and Blandford Public Advertiser*; however, by focusing on politics and not on advertising, the *Ledger* soon became untenable, closing after just two months. Davis now seems to have benefitted from the political polarization of the intervening months, and so was able to sustain the *Gazette* for another three years through advertising support from Norfolk's most ardent Federalist merchants. But that sustenance evaporated as the port's maritime trade declined with the Quasi-War with France. Davis was forced to close paper in November 1797.

The demise of the *Gazette* did not end Davis's journalistic career, though the closing did interrupt it for nearly a decade. In 1804, an avowed Federalist newspaper again appeared in Norfolk as a way for the mercantile community to voice its opposition to the foreign-trade policies of the Jefferson administration. Maritime trader John Cowper began publishing the

Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger in July that year; lacking print-trade training himself, he engaged the arch-Federalist editor George Lewis Gray (188) as his publisher. However, their partnership lasted just over a year, as Gray wanted a more visibility with northern Federalist journals than Cowper's could provide him. Needing a new publisher, Cowper turned to the still-resident Davis, whose experience with the *Gazette* and his compatible political views made him a perfect replacement for Gray.

The *Publick Ledger* now carried the colophon "Printed by William Davis for the Proprietor," and continued to so for the next twelve years. Cowper and Gray split responsibilities for its production; Davis ran the office on a daily basis, editing the paper's republished content and supervising production; Cowper wrote original commentaries and gave editorial guidance while managing its the finances. The two men continued together until September 1816, overcoming supply problems and fiscal obstacles associated with the War of 1812, to keep their anti-Republican journal alive. The partners, and so their paper, openly opposed that war, primarily, but not solely, because of its effect on the commerce of their hometown. The maritime trade had always been the reason of Norfolk's existence, especially trade with Great Britain and its Caribbean colonies; Cowper was especially anti-French in his outlook after the Quasi-War destroyed his family's trading concern. Thus they both believed that the ongoing efforts of Jefferson and Madison to cultivate trade alternatives were at the root of the problems in the Atlantic from 1798 onward. Seeing such foreign-policy initiatives as unconstitutional acts, Davis and Cowper were particularly enraged by the Embargo of 1807, believing it was a restriction on an individual's freedom as a maritime trader, as much as it was an impediment to the city's commerce. Thus the war with Britain was just another step on the path to a majoritarian tyranny in America.

Yet, even as their paper became more relevant to Norfolk's merchants, it became more marginal in national life. The general repudiation of the Federalists after the war, largely a result of the secessionist Hartford Convention in the winter of 1814-15, was evinced in Norfolk by a decline of the *Ledger's* advertising revenues – just as had been the issue in 1797 with Davis's earlier paper. By the summer of 1816, the partners decided to move on from their journalistic careers, closing the *Ledger* on September 17th. Remarkably, even the *American Beacon*, their new non-partisan competitor, mourned their paper's passing.

Davis appears to have become a small farmer in rural Princess Anne County (today Virginia Beach) just east of Norfolk. But the commonality of his name makes tracking him after 1820 essentially impossible. Being then about forty-five, Davis likely died in the 1840s.

Personal Data

Only clear picture of family in 1820 census shows Davis, his wife, and five or six children, all unnamed; he also owned nine slaves then. That data also suggests his birth date was in 1770s.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Wertenbaker, *Norfolk*; Tucker, *Norfolk Abstracts*; Norfolk newspaper notices, 1792-1816.