

134 DICKSON, JOHN

Publisher

Petersburg

Publisher of *Petersburg Intelligencer* (1804-14), initially as partner to Edward Pescud (324).

John Dickson conducted one of the more visible Federalist journals in Virginia for a decade. He was a native of the Commonwealth, likely from the Petersburg area, and was evidently trained in the *Petersburg Intelligencer* office by William Prentis (340), its Williamsburg-born founder. From his arrival in the river-port in 1786, Prentis operated a press that supported the town's commerce; his weekly was largely an advertising vehicle, issued from an office that produced large quantities of job-printing as well. He sold some books, but published little more than an annual almanac, just as his Williamsburg masters had. It was a model that Dickson would successfully emulate.

When Prentis chose to retire from the printing business in late 1803, it was a twenty-two year-old Dickson who stepped up to the challenge. He forged a partnership with Edward Pescud, another of the office's printers, to buy the business from Prentis; their master may have even financed the purchase, as he remained in the city after his retirement, becoming mayor of Petersburg shortly after the sale. In introducing themselves to their readers in January 1804, Dickson & Pescud promised that the *Intelligencer* would be "conducted upon the same principles as when under the management of Mr. Prentis" – a prudently-voiced Federalist organ. While seemingly an acceptable course for Pescud at the outset, it was a perspective he did not share; a year later, when the competing *Republican* was offered for sale by its founder, Thomas Field (162), Pescud left the *Intelligencer* to acquire it.

The loss of his partner did not noticeably effect Dickson's business. Indeed, Dickson would claim that its patronage had never "flowed more warmly than at the present period." This prosperity came despite a serious challenge to the *Intelligencer's* survival in late 1807 and early 1808; the unnamed paper mill on which he was dependent was destroyed, making a constant supply of needed paper uncertain. For about six months, Dickson reduced the size of his paper by almost half, with an attendant reduction in its advertising. When his supplier was about to restart production in June 1806, he pointedly asked his contemporaries, who had formed a "Manufacturing Society of Petersburg," whether building a paper mill there was not an obviously profitable project. In publishing such a comment, the influence of his former master, an advocate for developing local manufacturing, can be clearly seen. Prentis was obviously Dickson's mentor politically as well. He appears often in reports of meetings of the port's Federalists, as its recording secretary, with Prentis in the chair.

Soon, however, Dickson encountered an obstacle that he could not overcome. After mid-1811, he was longer seen in reports of any Petersburg meetings, suggesting a withdrawal from public life. Then on June 1, 1813, he placed an advertisement in Washington's *National Intelligencer* offering his office for sale that ran for several weeks. The reason, he said, was his "long and continued ill-health" which forced him "to relinquish my present pursuits." It was an inopportune time to be selling a Federalist paper, as the country was then immersed in a war with Britain that most (if not all) such journals opposed. He evidently received no serious offers, as the *Intelligencer* was still issued under his name when he died in July 1814.

The country's Federalist journals all noted his passing, as well as the lengthy illness that had preceded it. But the most personal notice was carried by the *Petersburg Republican*; Edward Pescud wrote that while he felt keenly obliged to report the passing of his former partner, he lacked the ability to do his friend's life justice in print, hoping that "some zealous and more adequate pen" would take up the task.

His wife, Anna, was named administrator of Dickson's estate, selling his business and chattel property (a slave, a horse, and "cows") in an auction barely six weeks after his death. The profitable *Intelligencer* was sold to the partnership of Francis G. Yancey (463) and Thomas Whitworth (443). Whitworth was a local entrepreneur who financed the deal for the printer Yancey, a printer then in Dickson's employ. Yancey would conduct the paper until 1833, continuing a succession of master-to-journeyman transfers that saw just three principal proprietors of the *Intelligencer* over its first fifty years of publication.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1782 Virginia.

Married: Oct 15 1807 Anna Rose @ Petersburg, Virginia.

Died: July 11 1814 Petersburg, Virginia.

Wife was estate administrator; no record of children found.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Wyatt, *Checklist for Petersburg*; notices in *Petersburg Intelligencer*, 1804-14, the *American Commercial Advertiser* (Baltimore), 1813-14, the *National Intelligencer*, 1814; obituary in *Petersburg Republican*, 14 July 1814.