

140 DIXON, JOHN – [JOHN DIXON SR.]

Publisher, Proprietor Williamsburg, Richmond

Publisher of the original *Virginia Gazette* in Williamsburg (1766-80) and in Richmond (1780-81); later publisher of the *Virginia Gazette and Independent Chronicle* in Richmond (1783-91), and Printer to the Commonwealth (1786-91). Partnered with Alexander Purdie (345), William Hunter Jr. (231), Thomas Nicolson (315), John Hunter Holt (223), and John Dixon Jr. (141), his son and heir; employed Daniel Baxter (027), Robert Mosby Bransford (049), James [1] Carey (079), Augustine Davis (119), William Prentis (340), William Alexander Rind (359), and John Courtney Jr. (109), among many unnamed others; administrator of the estates of both William Hunter Sr. (230) and Joseph Royle (368); husband to Royle's widow Roseanna, a sister of Hunter Sr.

John Dixon is one of the most recognizable figures in Virginia's early printing trade, even though he was not a practical printer. Rather he was a businessman, the scion of a well-respected merchant family, who was brought into the trade to help resolve a tangled web of legal entailments and financial obligations; the trade thus became a life-long occupation.

Beginnings

The death of Joseph Royle in January 1766 posed a dilemma for his designated successor, Alexander Purdie. If he wanted to own the sole Williamsburg press, he either had to accept the terms imposed on him by Royle's will or else chart a course around them. Dixon was the means that Purdie found to pursue an independent course.

Royle had inherited control of the printing office in 1761 from his master, William Hunter Sr. In his will, Hunter gave Royle a half-interest in the business provided he operate the office for the equal benefit of himself and the other half-owner, William Hunter Jr., his illegitimate minor son. Royle accepted those conditions as he did not see them as a burden; he was already a part of his master's family, having married Hunter's younger sister Roseanna; thus he most likely saw the guardianship of his new nephew's interests as a familial obligation. However, Billy Hunter was still a minor when Royle died just five years later, so needing a new set of protections from Royle's heirs. Royle built a similar conditional ownership of the press and paper into his 1766 will, designating Purdie as the new controlling partner. But Hunter's estate had not yet been settled, meaning Purdie would also be beholden to both estates if he accepted Royle's conditions. Instead, Purdie refused the conditions and leased the office from his master's estate in the short term.

In the next two months, Purdie formed a partnership with Dixon to buy the office and its assets outright from the estate. The sale initiated a process that brought both Hunter's and Royle's estates to a final, long-delayed settlement, with Dixon serving as administrator of both. So in very short order, Dixon became an owner of the printing office, collector of the foregoing firms' outstanding debts (many from customers still patronizing the office), and legal guardian of Billy Hunter. His partnership with Purdie would continue until his ward reached his majority at the end of 1774, with a final settlement of the Hunter and Royle

estates following in early 1775.

Such a far-reaching plan became necessary in early 1766, if Purdie's infant business and the Hunter/Royle family's sustenance derived from it were to continue. The political situation in the colony had persuaded one faction in the General Assembly to bring a second press to Williamsburg, that of the Maryland-born-and-trained William Rind (358), in an attempt to shape public opinion to their ends. Over the next few years, each Williamsburg press was supported by one of the opposing Assembly factions, with the royal governor increasingly marginalized in the contest. Rind was the voice of western expansionists, led by Richard Henry Lee, who opposed the limitations on expansion then a part of British imperial policy. Purdie & Dixon were supported by the old tidewater elite, led by the colony's treasurer Robert Carter Nicholas, who opposed restrictions on colonial commerce instituted by the British Parliament. Eventually the two factions found common cause in the Revolutionary effort; but for the moment, the two Williamsburg presses issued competing newspapers that advanced each faction's agenda.

Dixon was central to the eventual victory of the Purdie & Dixon office in that contest. First, their *Virginia Gazette* benefitted from Dixon's control of the Virginia postal system; he had been named as Royle's successor in that role by Benjamin Franklin, the colonial postmaster-general, a close friend of William Hunter Sr., who had charged Franklin with aiding his family and educating his minor son. Postmaster Dixon evidently impeded the distribution of Rind's *Gazette* to the advantage of the Purdie & Dixon journal. Second, his business connections helped diversify their business in ways that the Rind office could not; their firm sold an ever larger variety of imported books in Williamsburg, and acted as a business-agent for distant merchants. Moreover, their office produced large numbers of job-printing items, primarily blank forms, while publishing almanacs and pamphlets in bulk for resale at merchant-factor stores throughout Virginia. The Rind office, in contrast, produced little beyond his weekly paper and its contracted public work. William Rind died in August 1773, leaving his deeply-indebted press in the hands of wife Clementina (356); when she died in September 1774, the Purdie & Dixon office became the preferred press of both Assembly factions.

Transitions

Yet the lengthy partnership of Purdie & Dixon came to an end within months of Clementina Rind's death. With the dawn of 1775, Purdie moved out of the Williamsburg printing office and set up a new press nearer the capital; he was also named public printer for the colony, succeeding the Rinds. Dixon retained the assets of their concern, forming a new partnership with William Hunter Jr., who still had an interest in the office as his father's heir. Dixon also retained the services of three printers trained by Purdie in their old office: Daniel Baxter, William Prentis, and Thomas Nicolson – craftsmen that Dixon now relied on for their trade skills. The new Dixon & Hunter office was visibly larger than Purdie's was, but each thrived, a result of the growing customer base the two men had forged between 1766 and 1774.

Dixon, however, would now be forced into the background as the Revolution opened. His association with Billy Hunter would be his primary hindrance. Hunter's years in Philadelphia lead to a life-long friendship with William Franklin, Benjamin's Loyalist son and now royal

governor of New Jersey. So their office and journal – a continuation of the original *Virginia Gazette* of William Parks (321) – were suspect, and increasingly scorned by Virginians, as the war erupted and progressed. By the end of 1778, the partners were politically estranged as well, despite the familial ties that had brought them together in 1766, and so ended their alliance. Hunter apparently secured their firm's considerable book stocks and maintained a bookstore in the printing-office building, while Dixon kept the press, the *Gazette*, and the right to collect their firm's many debts in the dissolution. He also made Thomas Nicolson, then the shop's foreman, his tradesman-partner in the new arrangement. Billy Hunter suffered the most in this abrupt ending, finding scant patronage for his bookstore during the war. He left Virginia with Lord Cornwallis in 1781, impoverished and bitter, seeking the patronage and assistance of an exiled William Franklin in London.

By war's end, Dixon would also be out of the Virginia printing trade, albeit temporarily. The firm of Dixon & Nicolson struggled through the remainder of the war years, but so too did Alexander Purdie. Supply shortages and financial disruptions plagued both offices, as they did all Virginia businesses during the war. By early 1779, Purdie was under investigation by the Assembly for malfeasance in office as a result of growing delays in producing the public work created by those common problems; before he could be cleared, Purdie died, leaving his office and the government contract in the hands of his untried nephews John Clarkson (093) and Augustine Davis, who had apprenticed in the Purdie & Dixon office. The Assembly decided that splitting the public work between the two presses made the most practical sense in the short term, as they had also now decided relocate the seat of government to Richmond for the 1780 Assembly. That decision meant that the two remaining Williamsburg printing offices – the Rind office having dissolved in 1777 with the departure of that shop's foreman, John Pinckney (325), for North Carolina – now needed to relocate to Richmond as well. Clarkson & Davis claimed a financial inability to do so and lost the prized government contract at that next Assembly. However, Dixon & Nicolson were only granted a short-term appointment in their place, despite incurring the expense of moving their printing office to Richmond; then Governor Thomas Jefferson was seeking an alternative to both of the old Williamsburg presses in Philadelphia. Dixon apparently understood the transitory nature of their situation and so did not move his household to Richmond, sending just the press office there in Nicolson's care. This was still the situation a year later when Jefferson's chosen replacement, James Hayes (207), finally arrived in the state capital, just in time for his and Nicolson's press offices to be disrupted by invading British troops under the command of Benedict Arnold. In the wake of the raid, Dixon & Nicolson suspended publication of their venerable *Virginia Gazette*; when another paper issued from their old office in December 1781, Dixon had disassociated himself from Nicolson, with that newspaper being published by the printer in partnership with William Prentis, another former Dixon journeyman.

Richmond

Dixon did not return to the publishing business until the war was finally resolved by the Treaty of Paris. He still had significant commitments in Williamsburg, both personal and professional. He had served on the city's Common Council since the late 1760s, and served as a vestryman in the Bruton Parish church; he was also elected the borough's mayor in the

1770s. Dixon also owned property there and evidently invested in others' businesses. So he was in no rush to join the exodus to Richmond. In the summer of 1783, he finally committed again to publishing in the capital. Starting a new office in conjunction with John Hunter Holt, the son of Dixon's wife's sister Elizabeth, another of William Hunter Sr.'s siblings. Holt was also a trained printer and the former Norfolk newspaper publisher whose press had been confiscated by British troops in September 1775 at the order of Lord Dunmore, a result of his revolutionary polemics. Their new *Virginia Gazette and Independent Chronicle* was first issued that August, some twenty months after Dixon's last number of his previous journal with Nicolson. The arrangement between them was the same that Dixon forged with all of his partners from Purdie onward: Holt was the practical tradesman conducting the technical side of their firm, while Dixon financed the operation and conducted its business side.

This standing approach was challenged after the spring of 1786, when Dixon finally obtained appointment as public printer. The incumbent Printer to the Commonwealth, James Hayes, was then facing removal from office as a result of his declining performance. His five-year-long tenure in that post had been marked by a growing financial insufficiency dating to his arrival in Virginia; he lost his newly-acquired press and its supplies to the British while it was enroute to Richmond in 1780, and the replacement had been shuttled around the state in the face of the British predations that followed. By the time he finally set up a functioning press office in October 1781, he was so encumbered with debt he could not produce the public work without significant advances against his public salary; and while the Council of State had promised restitution for his lost press, the Assembly had not authorized such a payment, nor were they willing to allow any advances. As a result, Hayes lacked the fluid capital needed to produce the required work on the arbitrary schedule that the Assembly now demanded. Hayes's supposed malfeasance brought his dismissal in May 1786, with a successor elected in June. Dixon & Holt competed with Nicolson and Davis for the vacated position, with Dixon & Holt winning the appointment. But the Assembly also reduced the position's salary and authorized the Governor to employ as many printers as necessary to meet their arbitrary schedule out of those reduced monies. So while Dixon now realized the position he had sought since splitting with Purdie in January 1775, he had to complete the work in a setting where competitors drained off his compensation.

Dixon was also challenged by other factors. His newspaper would now be required to carry government notices and lengthy reports of legislative sessions, forcing Dixon to limit non-advertising content if he wanted to carry advertising from others; otherwise, he would see reduced revenues, further undermining his business in the face of a reduced public salary. When he became public printer in June 1786, four weeklies were published in Richmond and his competitors had no such impediments upon their journals. Still, even those offices were threatened by the fire in January 1787 that affected all of Richmond's printers. But more importantly, Dixon was tested by the loss of his most experienced hand, his partner and tradesman, John Hunter Holt. Holt died unexpectedly in June 1787, leaving Dixon dependent on transient hired hands under the direction of his nineteen-year-old son and heir John Dixon Jr. – who he now made his fifth partner. Thus Holt's death meant a dramatic decline in the experience base in his shop, resulting in a slowdown of production and a reduction in quality that was not rectified by the familial partnership. So when the General

Assembly assigned Dixon's office the additional task of publishing the laws of the newly-established federal Congress in late 1789, they created a situation which put that office into a downward spiral. Within months, he was under scrutiny from the state government for delayed and less-than-professional work, as had been Hayes. His five-year tenure as public printer was thus one of unending controversy.

Endings

In the spring of 1791, the Governor was poised to remove Dixon for missing a delivery date for the session laws of the most recent Assembly. He was guilty in this case largely because of a paper shortage that he had no control over, although the amateurish production of his journeymen seems also to have been a factor. While the Governor and his Council debated how to handle the situation, Dixon abruptly took ill and died. His son asked that the public work be kept in his hands to save the now-parentless family from destitution. But the councilors chose to assign that work to the one printer then in Richmond who had not been tainted by prior disappointments, Augustine Davis. Dixon Jr. does not seem to have actually been that poor, as he quickly resumed publication of his father's *Gazette* and continued doing so for another five years. Despite his controversial decline, Dixon was buried with the honors befitting his rank as a Colonel in the Virginia Militia in the yard of St. Paul's Church on the Capitol Square in Richmond, alongside his wife Roseanna Hunter Royle Dixon.

Through all the ups and downs, the untrained publisher made a life in the printing trade that has left a name that historians of the era readily recognize. While familial connections drove many of Dixon's decisions, it was his business sense that made it all possible.

Personal Data

Born:	ca. 1740	in either Williamsburg or Yorktown, Virginia
Married:	ca. 1767	Roseanna Hunter Royle @ Williamsburg, Virginia
Died:	Apr. 27 1791	Richmond, Henrico County, Virginia
Children:	Several; only named one is John Dixon Jr.	

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 4 & 5 (based on Dixon's York County Records Project files at Research Dept., CWF, and on papers of the Assembly and the Governor at Library of Virginia).