

141 DIXON, JOHN JR.

Printer & Publisher Richmond

Richmond-based publisher of *The Virginia Gazette and Public Advertiser* (1787-93) with his father, John Dixon Sr. (140); of *The Richmond Chronicle* (1793-96) and *The Observatory or A View of the Times* (1797-98) independently; and of *The Examiner* (1798-99) as partner to Meriwether Jones (242); later partner in a job-printing firm with John Courtney Jr. (109).

Dixon was a trained printer who began learning the trade in his father's Williamsburg press office under journeymen Thomas Nicolson (315) and William Prentis (340), themselves sons of local businessmen as well. When the state government relocated to Richmond in 1780, his father's press office was moved to the new capital by Nicolson and Prentis, while Dixon Sr. remained in Williamsburg; being just twelve at the time, it is uncertain whether Dixon Jr. stayed with his family in Williamsburg or accompanied the office as an apprentice and so became a part of the succeeding Richmond office of Nicolson & Prentis in late 1781. But when his father began publishing a new paper there in August 1783, he was most certainly a part of that new press office, as Dixon Jr. is not mentioned in an account of the Nicolson & Prentis office from that year.

His father's new weekly – *The Virginia Gazette and Independent Chronicle* – was published jointly with John Hunter Holt (223), the former Norfolk publisher whose press was seized by Lord Dunmore in 1775 in consequence of his defamatory newspaper stories. And as he was the tradesman-partner in that new arrangement, Dixon Jr.'s training came to a close under him. Holt died in June 1787, making Dixon Jr. now his father's lead craftsman at the age of nineteen. Father and son continued the *Independent Chronicle* in conjunction with Holt's estate until late September 1789, when a settlement finally ended the original partnership. On October 3rd, the newspaper appeared under the banner of John Dixon & Company as *The Virginia Gazette and Public Advertiser*; the son was the father's supporting company.

The new firm, however, was not an untroubled arrangement. Holt's death meant a dramatic decline in the experience base of the Dixon shop, resulting in a slowdown of production and a reduction in quality that was not rectified by the familial partnership. From June 1786 on, the shop faced two conflicting jobs: the newspaper and the production of the printer of the Commonwealth. Holt had evidently handled their newspaper's production, while Dixon Sr. oversaw the public work, both with the help of hired hands. The loss of Holt increased the effort of producing the paper to the detriment of the public work. Thus when the General Assembly assigned the Dixon 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. By spring 1791, Dixon Sr. was in danger of losing the public contract as a result of both missed deadlines and slipshod work. As the governor and his Council of State considered what to do that April, John Dixon Sr. died unexpectedly. His son was left to pick up the pieces. He appealed to the Governor Edmund Randolph to be allowed to continue in his father's place, pleading the possible indigence of the now parentless family. His plea fell on unsympathetic ears and the public contract was withdrawn in early May.

Still, the Dixon press was essentially saved by the loss of the public work. Young Dixon could

now focus the family press on the newspaper as its main function. For the next two years, it was issued by him as partner to his father's estate, before devolving to his hands alone with the settlement of that estate in February 1793. At that point, he instilled the paper with a more political bent as *The Virginia Gazette & Richmond Chronicle* rather than as just a *Public Advertiser*. That change allowed its survival for another three years, but not to fully thrive in an increasingly politicized setting. By keeping a moderate tone, as his father had, his paper was gradually marginalized. In April 1793, an avowedly Jeffersonian newspaper appeared in Richmond; the cumbersomely named *The Virginia Gazette and Richmond and Manchester Advertiser* would eventually become *The Virginia Argus* in 1796 and its proprietor, Samuel Pleasants (331), one of that party's leaders in the city. His *Argus* explicitly opposed the long-lived Federalist-oriented *Virginia Independent Chronicle and General Advertiser* issued by Augustine Davis (119), the successor to Dixon Sr. as printer to the Commonwealth. By the summer of 1796, Dixon Jr. had recognized the futility of his approach; he closed his slowly-dying *Chronicle* and retired to job-printing while considering his next journalistic venture.

That next venture was more openly political while trying to elevate the level of discourse, to recapture, it seems, the lost idealism of the Revolutionary era. Dixon's new *The Observatory or A View of the Times* (later simply *Dixon's Observatory*) issued its first number in July 1797, just ten months after the closing of the *Chronicle*. Evidently his new journal was only a slight improvement over his former one, but its existence and orientation offered an opportunity for him to become part of the state's public-printing outlet once again.

In fall 1798, the newly elected Council of State set out to reform the public-printing sinecure because of complaints about insufficient quantities of session laws and official circulars. Councilor Meriwether Jones was tasked to investigate the situation and found that while the incumbent printer, Augustine Davis, produced more such imprints than had any of his predecessors, he actually produced fewer copies per county, which was the cause of the complaints. When the Governor and his Council suggested that Davis should increase his production, he demanded a raise; Davis was promptly replaced by Jones. While most Federalists saw the move as political patronage, Jeffersonians had come to see the post as a managerial one, not the producer one it had been until this time, and Davis simply had not followed their directive. Jones immediately fashioned a partnership with Dixon to produce the public work, as well as to publish a twice-weekly "official" gazette, obviously expecting that Dixon's prior experience suited him for the task, a view the printer did not challenge. Thus *Dixon's Observatory* became *The Examiner* on December 3, 1798 under the banner of the firm of Jones & Dixon. However, Dixon's shop now faced the same internal conflict that had beset his father's press: producing the paper impeded the public work, and vice versa. Within six months, Jones had decided to form his own press office, with his own employees, to complete the public work in the fashion the Council had ordered when he had submitted his report on that vital position. To do this, Jones would buy Dixon out of their newspaper and move its production to his new office, leaving his tradesman-partner behind.

Faced with a choice between starting another new journal in competition with three others in Richmond or returning to job printing once again, Dixon chose the less expensive option. He reduced his staff – with a few joining Jones – and began seeking contract work. With the reduced overhead and lowered expectations, Dixon maintained a comfortably profitable, if

far less prominent, business in the capital. In May 1802, he joined forces with one of his former journeymen, John Courtney Jr., in an apparent attempt to increase his capacity as a sub-contractor for the larger offices in Richmond, particularly for that of Samuel Pleasants. But their firm dissolved in October 1803, when the demise of the press office of Henry Pace (319) altered trade arrangements in the city, as the death of such businesses often did.

Dixon did not long outlive this last partnership dissolution. He died quite unexpectedly in May 1805 at his Richmond home, just thirty-seven. His obituary in the *Enquirer* of Thomas Ritchie (360), who had acquired the Jones press office a year before, reported that he was "a gentleman whose urbanity of manners and amiable disposition endeared him to all who had the pleasure of his acquaintance." However, it did not note that that his untimely death had left his wife Sarah widowed for a second time.

Personal Data

Born:	in	1768	Williamsburg, Virginia
Married	Aug. 25	1792	Sarah Valentine @ Henrico County, Virginia
Died:	May 22	1805	Richmond, Henrico County, Virginia.
Children:	Stepdaughters Frances Keeling Valentine and Ann Moore Valentine		

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 5; obituary in, Richmond *Enquirer*, 24 May 1805; genealogical data from Dixon family charts on Ancestry.com (September 2012).