

151 DUNCAN, WILLIAM

Publisher

Norfolk

Founding publisher of the ill-fated *Virginia Gazette or Norfolk Intelligencer* (1774-75).

William Duncan was a Scottish-born merchant-factor in Virginia in the 1770s, evidently in the employ of Charles Duncan & Co. of Blandford (Petersburg), possibly a brother; that firm was established in the colony shortly after the French & Indian War. William is seen in Blandford, as well as in Alexandria and Norfolk, at various times during the Revolutionary War, though disappears from the historic record with the war's end. That trace is consistent with his known Loyalist sympathies, which are what brought him to journalism in Virginia. Yet nothing detailed is known of his personal life.

In the summer of 1773, Duncan published notices in the *Virginia Gazette* of Purdie & Dixon of his intent to publish a new weekly paper to be called *The Norfolk Gazette and Virginia Advertiser*. Those notices stressed that the paper would publish "nothing but what may be really useful and entertaining" so indicating his – and likely his peers' – annoyance with the increasingly politicized content of the three Williamsburg weeklies. As that content grew in size and scale, advertising space was regularly sacrificed, limiting those newspapers' ability to support the commerce that flowed through Norfolk in the hands of merchants like him. Duncan then set off for Britain to acquire a printing press and journeymen to operate it, while associates collected subscriptions in Virginia. When he returned in early 1774, Duncan brought with him an entire press office, headed by master-printer Robert Gilmour (179), who retained ownership of the press itself, and two journeymen, Alexander Cameron (076), Donald McDonald (286), all loyal Scotsmen.

On June 9, 1774, the first Virginia newspaper published outside of Williamsburg issued from Gilmour's press, now entitled *The Virginia Gazette or Norfolk Intelligencer*. The change in name was an assertion of an official authority for the journal in light of the increasingly unofficial direction of its Williamsburg competitors. Yet in doing so, the paper and press soon found themselves on the "wrong" side of developing political events, even as they successfully promoted the port's mercantile trade, as he had planned. By November, open letters to Duncan were being published in the three Williamsburg *Gazettes* decrying the *Intelligencer's* intent to "divide and weaken the Friends of American Freedom." One letter from Alexandria was signed by thirty subscribers to Duncan's *Intelligencer* demanding the cancellation of their subscriptions and settlements of their accounts.

Yet Duncan's primary problem became his open defiance of the restrictions that were part of the Continental Association passed by the first Continental Congress that October. After they went into effect on December 1st, Duncan came under pressure from the Norfolk committee charged with its enforcement. Rather than allow his mercantile advertiser to be closed by that group, he transferred editorial control of the paper in January 1775, though not its ownership, to John Brown (056), another Scottish merchant factor there. Brown's role was hidden from the general public, however, as the paper noted that it was published "for the proprietors" by Gilmour, Cameron, and McDonald. Still, Brown also ran afoul of the association that March; a ship arrived with slaves destined for his Norfolk auction house in

violation of import restrictions; he was found guilty of violating the association and forced to relinquish his editorial role at the *Intelligencer*. Duncan was now compelled to sell the weekly to an owner more attuned to the cause of the colonists, not that of the crown. At the end of March, he sold the newspaper to a new firm headed by John Hunter Holt (223) and dissolved the concern that had founded the paper a year before.

Holt was a son of New York's patriot printer, John Holt (222), and nephew of Virginia's late public-printer, William Hunter (230), so of impeccably "American" credentials. He retained the services of Gilmour and his crew in producing the paper, but kept a tight rein on the *Intelligencer's* non-advertising content. When Lord Dunmore, the last royal governor, left Williamsburg shortly after the transfer, Holt's commentaries on local events focused almost exclusively on Dunmore and his government on board ships anchored off Norfolk. Over the summer, those commentaries became ever-more scurrilous in their unsubstantiated claims, and by the end of September, Dunmore had had enough. He ordered a detachment of marines to seize Holt, the press office, and anyone there at that time; Holt was the only element that Dunmore's soldiers did not capture. Gilmour, Cameron, McDonald, and book binder Edward Cummins (112) were all taken aboard the *Eilbeck* and put to work printing items in support of the governor's attempted administration. Cummins would eventually be released, but the printers and their press went north to New York in 1776 to serve the commander of British forces in North American, Sir William Howe.

By that time, Duncan was traversing the fall-line towns between Alexandria and Blandford conducting what business he could for Charles Duncan & Co. But that work also proved difficult as economic conditions and old business relationships deteriorated. Just after the Norfolk press office was seized, Duncan published a notice in the *Virginia Gazette* of Dixon & Hunter warning of a blatantly illegal attempt by one John Schaw to usurp his legal right to collect the debts of his former publishing firm, William Duncan & Co. The following spring, a customer disclaimed responsibility for a note that he had given Duncan out of a belief that the merchant could not now live up to his end of the bargain that it represented. And in the summer of 1777, someone even stole his horse while he was in Blandford. So it really is not much of a surprise that all evidence of Duncan's presence in Virginia ends with the ending of the war. That void suggests that he left Virginia with the defeated Lord Cornwallis in late 1781, as so many other Loyalists did.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 4; Siebert, "Confiscated Revolutionary Press;" advertising notices in Williamsburg's *Virginia Gazettes*, 1767-80.