

156 EDWARDS, J. L. – [COL. JAMES LEWIS EDWARDS]

Printer, Publisher

Petersburg

Publisher of the *Virginia Mercury* (1807-08) in Petersburg with Cincinnatus Stith (403).

Edwards was a Republican printer whose fealty to the principles of Jefferson and Madison led him subsequently to careers in the naval service and as administrator of federal military pensions, though apparently failing to find the wealth others did in pursuing such roles.

A native of Petersburg, Edwards was the son of a like-named father who had served in the Virginia line during the Revolutionary War. He trained as a printer in nearby North Carolina, apparently in the Raleigh office of Joseph Gales Sr., who then dispatched him to Halifax in early 1805 to print the *North Carolina Journal* for the heirs of its founder Abraham Hodge. In 1806, he moved to Georgia to print the *Savannah Republican* for its new proprietors, John F. Everett and Norman McLean; but that arrangement ended with the dissolution of that partnership in early 1807 following McLean's death. At that same time, the *North Carolina Journal* was put up for sale by Hodge's successor, William Boylan. At the recommendation of Gales, Boylan sold his paper to William Winston Seaton (373), a protégé of Thomas Ritchie (360) in Richmond who was then editing the *Petersburg Republican* of Edward Pescud (324), rather than to Edwards, his former employee. The result was that Edwards returned to Petersburg to publish a weekly there that would challenge Pescud's *Republican* as the true democratic voice of the Appomattox River Valley, and test the growing band of Republican journalists associated with Gales.

The first number of the *Virginia Mercury* issued on April 22, 1807, almost simultaneously with the first number of the *North Carolina Journal* issued by Seaton. But more importantly, Edwards was immediately faced with competition from another new Republican newspaper there, the *Virginia Apollo* of bookseller Nathaniel McLaughlin (294) and printer John L. Cook (105), another former Ritchie associate; their twice-weekly paper had appeared just a week before the *Mercury*, trying to forge a middle course between Pescud's *Republican* and the longer-lived Federalist organ of John Dickson (134), the *Petersburg Intelligencer*. Evidently aware of the changing journalistic milieu, Edwards issued his new journal in conjunction with Cincinnatus Stith (403); Stith was a contemporary from Dinwiddie County, son of the respected Col. John Stith, and possibly a childhood friend of Edwards; thus, the Stith family seems to have been the financial backers of this venture, as well as a crucial link to a part of the area's Republican constituency. Consequently, the *Mercury* survived into the next year, with the *Apollo* closing after just seven weeks.

The fact that only five numbers of the *Virginia Mercury* now survive means little can be said about its content and tone. But the insolvency that Edwards experienced after December 1807 suggests that he was unable to secure financing to replace Stith's initial contributions; he made a relatively early departure from the *Mercury*, probably in late October after a six-month commitment. Early in 1808, Edwards apparently attempted to enhance his financial situation by publishing *A Compendious View of the Trial of Aaron Burr* by William Thomson, a lawyer from Abingdon – so tapping into popular interest in that controversial event. Yet,

his project was an open challenge to a well-respected Petersburg attorney, David Robinson; he had been the official recorder of that trial for the Federal District Court in Richmond, and was then preparing his two-volume transcription of the trial's proceeding for publication in Philadelphia. What is more, Robinson was then also the chief legal educator in Petersburg, and had just taken in a recent student as his partner: Winfield Scott, later a military hero in the Mexican War; Scott was also brother-in-law to Thomas Field (162), the founder of the *Republican* and so the mentor of Edward Pescud, his successor. Hence, Edwards was defying the network behind that journal, as well as the litigious Robinson, who vigorously defended his rights under federal copyright law.

The combination of his financial difficulties and a growing estrangement from the region's Republican leadership apparently led Edwards to close the *Virginia Mercury* less than a year after it began; the last known issue is that for February 10, 1808, although the paper was cited elsewhere into March of that year, indicating a closure at about that time.

Edwards soon set out for the printing centers of the North where work as a journeyman printer would help him to pay off the debts he had accumulated in Petersburg. But he could not satisfy those debts without assistance from one-time supporters. By October 1810, he was at work in the composing room of Isaac Munroe's *Boston Patriot*; there he advertised the sale of his Petersburg press, now in Augusta, Georgia, where it was being used to print the *Columbian Centinel*. Its sale that winter did not retire his Virginia debts, leading Edwards to take another tack in August 1811; Edwards tried to collect \$1000 from Thomas Jefferson by asserting that the former president had promised such a princely sum to the founders of the *Savannah Republican* – James Lyon (274) and Samuel Morse – for services they had rendered to him, and that obligation had passed to him on the death of successor Norman McLean in 1807; Jefferson rejected the claim and suggested that Edwards take the matter up with Lyon, who was then still an active Republican editor in Carthage, Tennessee.

At about the same time, Edwards joined the Boston job-printing office that produced Merrill Butler's *The Scourge*, a weekly whose primary purpose was to lambast the city's Federalist politicians and publishers. That path brought a physical assault on Butler in November 1811 and a libel imprisonment in December. Undaunted, Edwards picked up Butler's fallen torch and started publishing its successor, *The Satirist*, in January 1812 using the same artwork on his masthead as had Butler. He too was soon indicted for libel for publishing a letter from Isaac Munroe, who was now intent on ruining his former employee. Edwards avoided a jail sentence, unlike Butler, by identifying his former employer as the source of the libel.

As this bitter contest reached its climax, Congress declared war on Great Britain. Edwards closed his *Satirist* almost immediately and enlisted in the U.S. Navy in solidarity with the Madisonian effort. That move proved to be the end of his career as a journalist and printer, so leaving the question of whether his Petersburg debts were ever paid unanswered.

Edwards would serve with distinction as a Marine Corps officer during the war, starting out as a lieutenant on the *U.S.S United States* under the command of Stephen Decatur; by war's end he had been decorated for bravery and elevated to colonel. That service brought him a clerkship in the War Department in Washington in 1816 where he apparently impressed his superiors. That fall's election made James Monroe president and he made John C. Calhoun

his new Secretary of War. Unhappy with the state of the department, and particularly with its handling of Revolutionary War pensioners, Calhoun put Edwards in charge of a complete reorganization of the pension system. He created a standardized application process that required more rigorous proofs of wartime service. Despite the controversy that his program created in Congress, it became the model for granting all federal pensions in the antebellum period. So when Congress put all departmentally-administered government pensions under the control of a unitary Pension Commission in 1833, Edwards was the consensus choice to conduct the new agency. It was a post he held until his retirement in November 1850.

In retirement, Edwards remained a visible presence in the capital, serving on several boards and civic committees, particularly in his twenty-year-long tenure as a trustee of Columbia College, today the George Washington University. But those years were also bittersweet, as his only son passed on before him. Edwards died at his Washington residence in September 1867 and was mourned prominently in the city's papers as one of the "oldest and most highly esteemed citizens" in the capital.

Personal Data

Born: May 25 1786 Petersburg, Virginia.
Married [1]: November 1810 Sarah Lewis @ Boston, Mass. (d. Oct. 1820)
Married [2]: November 1821 Ann Allison @ Trenton, New Jersey.
Died: Sept. 21 1867 Washington, District of Columbia.
Children: One son by Ann: John Lewis (1825-1857).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; reports of the 13th Congress, 3d session (1814) and 15th Congress, 1st session (1818); newspaper notices in *Boston Repertory* (1810-12) *Washington City Gazette* (1818-21) , *National Intelligencer* (1824-67) and *Alexandria Gazette* (1820-39); U.S. Navy Service Records, War of 1812.