

## 162 FIELD, THOMAS

### Publisher

### Petersburg

Publisher of the *Petersburg Republican* (1800-1805), initially with James Lyon (274).

Field was a trained printer who arrived in Petersburg from his apprenticeship in Frankfort, Kentucky; though no definitive proof has been found, he may have been a Petersburg native who joined William Hunter, another native son, in Frankfort to learn the printing trade while publishing Hunter's *Palladium*, founded in 1798. That office had a major change of ownership in late 1799, at which time Field evidently returned to Virginia to conduct a new political weekly in Petersburg: *The Republican*.

In taking on this venture, Field had become part of the publishing network of James Lyon. Son of the persecuted Vermont congressman and publisher Matthew Lyon, he had been invited by Jefferson and his inner circle to come to Virginia to establish a series of journals with openly Republican perspectives in advance of the 1800 presidential election. He would start such papers in Staunton, Richmond, Georgetown, and Petersburg, as well as a monthly party magazine in Richmond. Field was Lyon's resident printer-partner in Petersburg.

As such Field was quickly embroiled in controversy. In late April 1800, he was assaulted in the town's market house by John Cross, a boot-maker offended by a letter published in Field's paper attacking his integrity; warned that Cross was armed and looking for him, Field armed himself, and so shot and killed Cross while defending himself during the assault; several of the town's more notable Federalists stood by and allowed the assault to continue but who immediately arrested Field for murder once his assailant died. The Hustings Court bound him over for trial on manslaughter charges instead, though he remained jailed until his trial in September. Lyon was thus forced to come to Petersburg to take charge of their office, bringing with him the notorious polemicist James T. Callender (075), now also his employee; Callender was arrested in Field's residence, in his absence, for the "libel" he had recently perpetrated with *The Prospect Before Us*, published in Richmond a month before.

These affairs, along with the concurrent exile residence of John Daly Burk (063) in adjacent Amelia County, gave Petersburg a Republican identity that effectively hides the Federalist inclinations of its most prominent citizens; Field and his colleagues drew on support in the town's hinterlands rather than from within its borders. As a result, he was able to continue the journal without Lyon's financial assistance once Lyon removed to Washington in mid-1800, even increasing its publication frequency to twice-weekly then – and it remained so until Field disposed of the paper in October 1805.

Among those supporting Field's journal was Capt. William Scott, a Revolutionary War officer who had settled in Dinwiddie County upon marrying into the prominent Pegram family. His son was Winfield Scott, later the hero of the Mexican War, who became a good friend and a business associate of Field. The printer eventually married Scott's youngest sister Susan, a short-lived union that seems to have driven Field out of journalism. Field apparently arrived in Petersburg already married to a woman named Tabitha; but in August 1804, she died at the age of twenty-three shortly after giving birth to a son who also died. In his grief, Field

seemingly found solace in the hearth of the Scotts' Laurel Branch estate, for almost exactly six months later he married Susan Scott, then just seventeen. Tragedy struck Field again the following September, though, as Susan was killed when the horse pulling her "buggy" down Sycamore Street in Petersburg bolted, throwing her from the carriage. Her death antedated Field's sale of the *Republican* by just three weeks. The buyer was Edward Pescud (324), co-owner of his cross-town rival, the Federalist-oriented *Petersburg Intelligencer*. The printer Pescud had purchased that paper from its founder, William Prentis (340), in January 1804 with fellow Prentis journeyman John Dickson (134); by October 1805 however, the collision of Dickson's Federalism with his Republicanism had Pescud looking for a straightforward way out of their arrangement, and Field's *Republican* gave him one. So Field retired from journalism, deep in mourning for his recently-departed wives, but guaranteeing his political newspaper would continue as originally conceived.

Field withdrew from public view for the next three years; when he reemerged in September 1808, it was to announce a change in profession. In that time he had studied for the law and was now licensed to practice in Virginia's courts. Field had also taken over the Petersburg law office of Winfield Scott, with Scott assigning all of his open cases to Field, retiring from legal practice and joining the U.S. Army to pursue a career that would conclude more than fifty years later with his command of Union forces at the opening of the Civil War.

In contrast, Field remained in the Petersburg area for the rest of his adult life, conducting a legal practice that embraced the county courts in Chesterfield, Dinwiddie, and Brunswick counties, as well as the courts that sat in Petersburg proper. He remained a key figure in Republican party circles as well, serving of the state-wide committee selecting the electoral ticket for the presidential elections through 1824, and playing a major role in conducting the party's local Fourth of July celebrations until at least 1825. Field also served on a series of tax-assessment boards appointed by the governor between 1817 and 1823 that realigned the Commonwealth's land-tax system by reassessing property values, suggesting that the bulk of his legal practice involved real-estate transactions and probate settlements. He may also have served as a county-level official, either as sheriff or a justice, as he brought his brother's son to Dinwiddie from Madison County to serve as a deputy sheriff there in 1824. That standing gave Field a leading role in the reception given for the Marquis de Lafayette when he visited Petersburg that same year, as would be expected of such a prominent local civic leader.

His turn to the law in 1808 also means that Field becomes less visible over time. Part of the problem is that his practice was in two of Virginia's infamous "burned counties" – places where the official record has been lost, usually to a courthouse fire or war-time predations; Dinwiddie and Chesterfield both fall into that category, a product of the Civil War, and Field practiced law in both counties. His visibility also fades, it seems, from his having reduced the scale of his legal practice in 1830, as he closed his Dinwiddie office that July. Concurrently, there is a decrease in his appearance in state government records after that date. Hence, the place and date of Field's death is unknown, though those state records suggest that it came about 1832, as he is no longer seen in surviving archival sources after that year. It is a truly invisible end for a personality who had been so visible in his lifetime.

**NB:** Scott family genealogies do not list a Susan as a daughter of William; yet contemporary accounts clearly indicate that she was, and she had been born after Winfield, who is usually listed as the youngest offspring; she is confused with her sister Martha, who married Lewis Pryor of Albemarle County in 1802, likely because Field did subsequently marry a woman named Martha – apparently Martha Winfield Harper, daughter of Susan Scott's oldest sister Elizabeth and James Wells Harper Jr. – in about 1825.

***Personal Data***

Born:	ca. 1780	possibly Petersburg, Virginia.
Married [1]:	ca. 1799	"Tabitha" probably in Kentucky. (d. 1804)
Married [2]:	Feb. 7 1805	Susan Scott @ Dinwiddie County, Va. (d. 1805)
Married [3]:	ca. 1825	"Martha" @ Dinwiddie County, Virginia.
Died:	ca. 1832	Dinwiddie County, Virginia.
Children:	At least one son who survived to adulthood: Thomas W. Field.	

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; Wyatt, *Petersburg*, Durey, *Callender*; newspaper notices in *Richmond Enquirer* (1800-1825), *Petersburg Intelligencer* (1808-1830); authority file, Library of Virginia; genealogical notes from *Tyler's Quarterly*.