

163 FIERER, CHARLES

Publisher

Dumfries

Publisher of the *Virginia Gazette and Agricultural Repository* (1791-93) at Dumfries, initially in partnership with Thomas Updike Fosdick (167).

Fierer has been described generically as a Hessian soldier who stayed in America; his story is more complex than that. Being born in the Electorate of Hanover (formally the Electorate of Brunswick-Lüneburg), Ensign Fierer was called to service in August 1776 by George III of Great Britain, who was also the electorate's sovereign. Thus he was not a mercenary, *per se*, but an officer in his country's army sent to America to fight for his prince. Fierer arrived in New York in the regiment of Wilhelm von Knyphausen before the Battle of Fort Washington in November 1776; after routing the fort's defenders, his regiment marched south in pursuit of the Continental Army after its hurried evacuation of the city. So Fierer was situated with his comrades at Trenton when Washington's forces overran the town on December 26th. He was taken prisoner and sent to Dumfries, Virginia, with a dozen other "Hessian" officers.

His fifteen-month confinement at Dumfries changed Fierer's worldview. When paroled in March 1778, he returned to New York, looking for an opportune moment to desert; when Washington's army returned to the area in August, he and a fellow officer crossed the lines and presented themselves at Washington's White Plains headquarters. When Congress did not ratify a proffered commission as captain in the Continental forces, Fierer returned to Virginia where he received a commission as a major in the Virginia line from then Governor Thomas Jefferson. Fierer served in the Southern campaigns that followed and was severely wounded, so had mustered out before Cornwallis's surrender. By November 1781, he was in Philadelphia seeking a position in the Confederation government, at exactly the moment that he was convicted *in absentia* of treason and desertion by a Hessian tribunal in New York City. His activities for the next few years cannot be readily traced, but he reported that he returned to Europe only to find that his actions in America had made him an outcast. By early 1788, he was back in America, landing in Norfolk destitute but actively seeking work.

Fierer apparently picked up some print trade skills during his travels, as he set up job-press office in Georgetown, Maryland, in late 1788. By February 1789, Fierer was publishing a weekly newspaper there – *The Times and the Patowmack Packet*. It appears that he was financed in the venture by Christian Kramer, a local merchant, but Kramer soon discovered that Fierer was unable to manage the paper's finances successfully; in April 1789, he published a warning against his former partner's business practices in William Goddard's *Maryland Journal*. Yet Goddard was the one tradesman who came to Fierer's aid. That fall, Goddard – now in Providence, Rhode Island – dispatched Thomas Updike Fosdick, the son of his cousin and a Revolutionary War veteran from Connecticut who was a trained printer, to join Fierer in Georgetown; by November 1789, the two were publishing the *Times* under the banner of Fierer & Fosdick.

Financial issues, though, still plagued the enterprise. By July 1790, one of their suppliers had filed suit for payment of a debt in the Montgomery County Court; it went unpaid still. Then they mortgaged their office equipment in June 1791, promising their patron a repayment on

January 1, 1792. Yet within a month, they closed had the newspaper, their main source of revenue. Subsequent actions show that they used the money received from the mortgage to move their press across the Potomac into northern Virginia, well beyond the reach of the Montgomery County sheriff. So by spring 1792, Fierer was *persona non grata* in Maryland, a warrant being issued for his arrest on sight there.

Fierer & Fosdick set up in the tobacco-port of Dumfries, some thirty miles to the south, and reissued their weekly as the *Virginia Gazette and Agricultural Repository*. It seems that their plan was to live in the reflected glow of George Washington (who lived at nearby Mount Vernon) by embracing his interest in scientific farming – something they believed was of general interest among Virginians, especially Washington's immediate neighbors. Hence their *Agricultural Repository* embraced this credo. Their financial state was not improved by the change in venue and focus. Sometime in the following winter, Fosdick separated himself from the venture and left Virginia, likely in November at the end of a two-year contract. Fierer carried on with the solitary help of an apprentice bound out to his office in October 1792, one John Rolls (514). But his problems were quickly compounded when his health began to fail. With the poorly-trained Rolls producing the *Repository* for him, his weekly was a typographical embarrassment, resembling an imprint from two-hundred years before rather than the slick products emanating from the larger American cities, such as nearby Alexandria. It was clear that talents and resources were not now available to Fierer, and the whole enterprise collapsed at the end of 1793.

Fierer lived just another year, dying in December 1794. What property he owned was sold at auction by his estate's administrators to satisfy his debts as his will directed; remarkably there was a small residue for his sister back in Hanover. His press and production supplies were bought by Colonel Willoughby Tebbs (526); he would soon use them to support the succeeding *Republican Journal* at Dumfries as partner to the practical printer James Kempe (247). Regrettably, Fierer's experience was not unique. Grand schemes were often undone by their architect's inability to manage money and people. In the end, the immigrant seems emblematic of the many Europeans who came to America in hopes of a brighter future only to find business failure in the early years of the Republic.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1755 Electorate of Hanover (now Lower Saxony, Germany).

Died: Dec. 9 1794 Dumfries, Prince William County, Virginia.

No record of wife or family found; his will only mentions his sister in Hanover, Caroline Maria Fierer.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Lercher, "Printer Soldier of Fortune" (1936).