

## 167 FOSDICK, THOMAS UPDIKE

**Printer & Publisher**

**Dumfries**

Printer and publisher of the *Virginia Gazette and Agricultural Repository* (1791-92) at Dumfries in partnership with Charles Fierer (163).

Though associated with Connecticut, Fosdick was a native of New York, coming from Shelter Island, the isle between Long Island's eastern peninsulas. That region's principal center of commerce was across Long Island Sound in the port of New London; Fosdick was an expert mariner from an early age from traversing that passage, and joined Connecticut forces there at the start of the Revolutionary War. He served, at his request, in the militia company of Capt. Nathan Hale of Coventry, and so was a part of that unit's guerrilla exploits prior to Hale's execution in late 1776. In August 1776, a week before the Battle of Fort Washington, Fosdick drew a commendation from Washington himself for an attempt to drive a fire-ship deep into the British forces assembling for that assault; he was captured in that subsequent action, one ironically led by the Hanoverian regiment in which his future partner, Charles Fierer, served; he was later paroled and so served with distinction as a ranger in the 1777 campaign that ended with the rout of British forces at Saratoga. As the war moved south, Fosdick returned to garrison duty guarding New London and was apparently part of the 1781 fighting there that ended with the burning of the town by British forces.

Where Fosdick acquired his print-trade training is unclear, but two possibilities exist. He may have been schooled in New London during the war years, in the press office of Timothy Green III – called such to differentiate him from his father (Timothy II) and great uncle (Timothy I), printers all – who published accounts of his wartime exploits then. Yet he also may have trained in Providence, Rhode Island, after the war, where his uncle John Updike resided; he was brother-in-law to John Carter, a Benjamin-Franklin-trained printer who then published the *Providence Gazette* in partnership with Sarah Goddard; she was, in turn, both a relative of the elder Updike and the mother of William Goddard, who had founded that journal in 1762; he sold the *Gazette* to his mother in 1766 before moving south, landing in Baltimore in 1773, so publishing the *Maryland Journal* there during the war years. In either case, the thirty-five year-old war hero was working in the Goddard-Carter office in 1789.

William Goddard had helped establish Charles Fierer in his printing office in Georgetown, Maryland in late 1788, advertising the new venture in his *Journal*. He probably also assisted in starting Fierer's *The Times and Patowmack Packet* in February 1789, in conjunction with Frederick, Maryland, publisher Matthias Bartgis (024). Both men were evidently impressed by the course of Fierer's life, which began in Hanover as an impressed soldier in the army of George III, made him a prisoner-of-war in Virginia in 1778, and then turned him to aid the American cause by service in the Virginia line. However his trade experience was limited, at best, and by summer 1789, Fierer was foundering, in desperate need of both competent help and further financing. Goddard had returned to Providence to marry at that time, and so came in contact with Fosdick in the *Gazette* office, either as a newly-minted journeyman or as a practiced printer. Goddard apparently convinced Fosdick to join Fierer in Maryland and help save the infant enterprise.

Fosdick arrived in Georgetown in about November 1789. Subsequent events indicate that he signed a two-year-long agreement with Fierer. But Fierer's business was already so deep in debt that a recovery could not be effected. By July 1790, one of Fierer's suppliers had filed suit for payment of a debt in the Montgomery County Court; it still went unpaid. Then he mortgaged the office's equipment in June 1791, promising his patron a repayment on January 1, 1792. Yet within a month, Fierer & Fosdick had closed the newspaper, their main source of revenue. It appears that Fierer was planning for Fosdick's departure that fall, as well as relocating his business beyond the reach of the Montgomery County sheriff, as they now used the proceeds from the mortgage to pay for moving their press office across the Potomac into northern Virginia.

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 the plan was to live in the reflected glow of George Washington (who resided at nearby Mount Vernon) by supporting his interest in scientific farming – something they believed was of general interest among Virginians, especially Washington's neighbors. Thus the *Agricultural Repository* embraced this credo. However, the firm's financial state was not improved by a change in either venue or focus. Fosdick separated himself from the venture at the end of his two-year contract in November 1791 and left Virginia. Fierer carried on alone, adding help in the form of an apprentice bound out to him in October 1792, one John Rolls (514). But his problems compounded when his health began to fail as well. With the neophyte Rolls printing the *Repository* for him, it was clear that talents and resources were not now available to him; hence the enterprise collapsed at the end of 1793.

By then, Fosdick was back in New England. In the later years of his life, he conducted a large family farm on Shelter Island; as he does not appear in the record of the American printing trade once he parted company from Fierer, that departure was likely also the moment that he returned to his birthplace. Over the next twenty years, he lived a comfortable life among his family, revered for his Revolutionary exploits – which could then be called to mind by the simple mention of his name. Fosdick died at his New York farm in August 1811.

#### ***Personal Data***

Born:	Mar. 5	1754	Shelter Island, New York.
Married	June 17	1780	Sarah Howe @ Shelter Island, New York.
Died:	Aug. 14	1811	Shelter Island, New York.
Children:	One son, Thomas U. Fosdick Jr. (b. 1784).		

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Lerch, "Printer Soldier of Fortune;" Caulkins, *New London; Shelter Island Presbyterian Church; Officers of Continental Army; Wheeler, Maryland Press*. His death date varies by source; date reported here is from his military pension record, as is birth date.