

## 180 GIRARDIN, LOUIS HUE

Editor & Publisher

Richmond

Editor and publisher of the *Richmond Daily Compiler* (1815-16) with William C. Shields (381) and of *Virginia Argus* (1816) with John M. Burke (065); also prospective publisher in 1805 of the still-born monthly *Amoenitates Graphicae* with Frederick Bossler (042).

Girardin was a refugee from the French Revolution, sent abroad by its increasingly radical course. Born in Normandy as Louis François Picot, Vicomte de Vauloge, he was schooled at the Lycée of Rouen and then in Paris; the lesser-noble took a job afterward as a librarian in the household of a greater-noble fiercely loyal to Louis XVI. That affiliation brought his condemnation as a counter-revolutionary, compelling his emigration in 1790. In fleeing, the scholar changed his name to Girardin, his mother's family name, and found work as a farm laborer in Maryland. A practicing Catholic, Girardin sought assistance from the church's Archbishop in America, John Carroll of Baltimore; the prelate engineered his appointment to a teaching position at the new Georgetown College (now University) in 1793. But Girardin eventually left Georgetown to establish an academy of his own in Dumfries in 1798. His work in Prince William County brought him to the attention of the President and Visitors of the College of William & Mary, who invited him to join the faculty there in early 1803 as its Professor of Modern Languages, History, and Geography, succeeding Charles Bellini, who had held the chair since its creation in 1779.

Once in Williamsburg, Girardin came into regular contact with Virginia's *intelligentsia*, many of whom were also a part of the state's Republican leadership; that association also brought him into a long correspondence with Thomas Jefferson, who served at times as his patron. By 1805, Girardin had built links to the print trade community as well, and determined to publish "an early American 'Book of Knowledge'," called *Amoenitates Graphicae* (roughly, "picturesque images"). He secured the services of Frederick Bossler (also spelled Bosler and Bassler), a copperplate engraver then working in Norfolk, to produce the illustrations for his educative monthly issued from Richmond. While well regarded among the city's nineteenth-century memorialists, Girardin's journal issued only once, in its prospectus form, failing to find sufficient financial support to continue the elaborate venture.

The still-born magazine was an extension of Girardin's private lectures in botany and natural philosophy. Despite the magazine's miscarriage, he found his extracurricular efforts more remunerative than his academic appointment; he resigned from William & Mary in late 1806 and refocused his efforts on the Hallerian Academy in Richmond. He had been associated with that school since 1803 as the site for his private lectures when the college was out of session, and he eventually acquired the academy from its founder, G. L. Haller, in 1808; but now Girardin became its principal and expanded its faculty to include a French language instructor, an English writing master, a Latin and Greek instructor, and a teacher of mathematics and science, one John Wood (456), the one-time Federalist polemicist. In his years at the Hallerian, he also was involved in the production and distribution of biology textbooks and the French-language primers of Nicholas Gouin Dufief (1776-1834), another Revolutionary expatriate; the result was that for the next decade any new book translated

from French or serving as a text to teach that language seems to have required Girardin's endorsement when advertised in the city's papers. And when the literary weekly *Visitor* of John Lynch (273) and Charles Southgate (395) appeared in early 1810, he acquired an outlet for articles and poetry, particularly his still-cited Latin-language epic, *De Monomachia, sive Duello* (*Lines on dueling, addressed to the legislative*). Yet despite his growing eminence and the continuing success of his school, the Hallerian project came apart in the summer of 1811 when Girardin forced Woods out for his increasingly erratic behavior in the classroom. Their acrimonious parting played out in the pages of the Richmond's Federalist journal, the *Virginia Patriot* of Augustine Davis (119), Wood's former employer. In an apparent swipe at Girardin's Republican supporters, Davis backed his one-time editor's unscientific theories on geology and geography that had come to dominate Wood's lectures in place of the agreed and contracted curriculum. Each educator went their own way, with Wood embracing an editorial and teaching career in Petersburg.

Girardin also soon abandoned the Hallerian Academy, but for personal reasons rather than political ones. That fall, he translated into English a play written by the encyclopedist Denis Diderot (*The Father, or Family Feuds*) for the use of the Placide & Green Theater Company at the Richmond Theater. On the night after Christmas 1811, that play was the centerpiece of the evening's performances; Girardin took his wife Polly, whom he had met and married while in Williamsburg, and their young son Louis Jr. to the theater that night and then went home to attend to their even younger daughters after his piece had finished. Just after his departure, the over-crowded theater erupted in flames, taking seventy-six lives in just ten minutes, Polly and Louis Jr. among them. Girardin was devastated. Almost immediately, he put the academy into the hands of David Doyle, his former writing master, and went into seclusion. By February, he had sold the academy to Francis Power, moved out of his home near the Capitol, and relocated to Albemarle County, his late wife's birthplace. A year later he opened a new academy there, announcing its purpose and plan in a full-page notice in Richmond's *Virginia Argus*, the Republican standard published by Samuel Pleasants (331).

Girardin conducted the Milton Academy for about two years before he was drawn back to Richmond by a new journalistic project. Another schoolmaster there, Leroy Anderson (011), had started publishing a non-partisan paper in the capital in May 1813: *The Daily Compiler*. It was the city's first successful daily, but Anderson had tired of the editorial grind by spring 1815. His friends convinced him that a transfer of the paper to Girardin, whom he already knew well, would preserve the paper's impartiality and ensure its survival; so that summer Anderson handed over the reins of the *Compiler* to the Frenchman. Girardin was evidently persuaded to accept Anderson's offer because the daily came with a Philadelphia-trained printer as his partner, William C. Shields, who had joined Anderson (his brother in law) at the end of 1814. Their alliance, while profitable, lasted just a year, as both Girardin and Shields soon changed focus. In March 1816, their office was destroyed in a fire; though they were able to save their press and supplies before the building was consumed, the partners were pressed to find new quarters on very short and expensive notice. Soon thereafter, Shields made it known that he wanted to sell his interest in their firm so he could to join his brother, Hamilton Shields (380), in Norfolk as a partner in his successful *American Beacon*. Meanwhile, Samuel Pleasants had died in late 1814 and a coalition of Richmond tradesmen

had acquired the various parts of his estate; in April 1816, that group began to come apart with the withdrawal of Philip DuVal (155) from the combine. This left the new owner of the old *Virginia Argus*, John M. Burke, seeking an experienced and respected editor to maintain the newspaper's credibility, and Girardin was his solution. For a time that spring, Girardin held the editorial desk in both publications. In May, Girardin and Shields sold the *Compiler* to DuVal and Daniel Trueheart (420), foreman of the *Richmond Enquirer* office of Thomas Ritchie (360), allowing both men to move on to their new venues. For Girardin, the choice was an unfortunate one; Burke's empire collapsed financially that fall, with the *Argus* ceasing publication in October 1816, two years after its founder's death.

Still, Girardin was not without employment. Shortly before he left Albemarle to take on the *Compiler*, Jefferson – among others – prevailed upon him to finish the long-stalled *History of Virginia* begun in 1802 by John Daly Burk (063); only three volumes of his planned five had issued before Burk's death in a duel in 1808; the ensuing assignment of Republican editor Skelton Jones (243) to the project came to a disorganized end with his death in 1812; now Girardin was asked to sort out the scattered remnants of his predecessors' notes and forge a fourth and final volume. That work was largely complete by the time that he sold out of the *Daily Compiler* to join the *Virginia Argus*; but he was essentially sent back to the start when his manuscript, and a run of printed sheets produced from it, were destroyed in the Great Petersburg Fire of July 1815. Now free of his editorial responsibilities, Girardin quickly reconstructed his fourth volume; it was issued in December, completing the project at last, receiving a wave of laudatory reviews.

In early 1817, Girardin left Richmond again, this time for a farm outside of Staunton. While asserting that he had retired from journalism out of ill health, he quickly established a new school there, a "select Female Academy" with an eye to completing the education of his two daughters. The move proved to be his final parting from the print trade, but it did not help his health; he withdrew from the school in 1819, taking on only a few private students while he recovered. Still, his reputation remained untarnished, encouraging him to propose publishing another literary magazine, in Latin, to be called *Pro Orbe et Per Orbem* (*For the World and of the World*), soliciting Jefferson's patronage in August 1820; his proposal failed to find support, likely because of the journal's increasingly archaic focus.

Yet, the proposal drew the attention of the trustees of the troubled Baltimore College, who invited him to head the school in 1821. Girardin took on the challenge, and threw himself into the city's intellectual society, elected as president of the Maryland Academy of Science and Literature and as a trustee of the Baltimore Agricultural Society. But he also found the school was a losing proposition financially, its curriculum seen as more and more dated by contemporary standards. In 1823, he wrote to Jefferson asking him to use his influence to have him appointed as Librarian of Congress, so pulling him out of Baltimore and returning him to his French roots; but the plan was rebuffed in Washington. Thus it was a depressed and impoverished Girardin who died in Baltimore in 1825. His passing was generally noted with respect, with the *Baltimore American* describing him as "one of the most distinguished ornaments of our scientific and literary circles." Yet the brevity of published obituaries elsewhere suggests that Girardin's time had clearly passed in most Americans' minds.

***Personal Data***

Born: In 1771 near Dreux, Normandy, France.  
Married ca. 1804 Polly Cole @ Albemarle County, Virginia  
Died: Feb. 16 1825 Baltimore, Maryland.  
Children: Louis Jr. (d. 1811); Adeliade Caroline (b. 1808); Mary Ann (b. 1809).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; *Artisans & Merchants*; Meagher, *Education in Richmond*; Baker, *Richmond Theater Fire*; Philips, *Girardin and Dufief*; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; Scott & Wyatt, *Petersburg*; *Appleton's Cyclopeadia*; newspaper notices in *Virginia Argus* (1803-16), *Virginia Patriot* (1806-11), *Richmond Enquirer* (1804-25), *Norfolk American Beacon* (1816).