

183 GRAHAM, JAMES

Editor & Publisher

Lynchburg

Founder and sole publisher of the *Lynchburg Star* (1805-14).

Graham was evidently a well-respected figure in Lynchburg in the early 1800s, but little trace of him outside of the imprint record can be found. He was a practicing physician in the town by 1796, when a fellow doctor named him as an administrator of his estate and willed his library to him as partial compensation. Such an assignment suggests that he was already a mature adult of considerable social standing at that time.

Graham was one of many physicians who indulged in a journalistic sideline to their medical practice, just as did his cross-town contemporary Samuel K. Jennings (236). But unlike the Methodist minister Jennings, Graham brought a secular perspective to his paper. Indeed, the imminent demise of the long-lived *Lynchburg Gazette* in 1805, in the midst of a religious fervor unleashed the preceding summer by Lorenzo Dow (148), was evidently the trigger for Graham taking on his newspaper. The *Gazette* had issued there since June 1797, but the unexpected death of its most recent proprietor, John Weaver (433), in February 1805 left that journal's fate in question. In the short term, his brother Matthew (543) continued its publication – as the firm of M. W. Weaver & Brothers – until the printer's intestate estate could be settled that fall. In August, Weaver's heavily mortgaged press office was sold at auction to Graham; he allowed the Weaver brothers to continue using that press until such time that he marshaled a sufficient number of subscribers to publish a new weekly with that press, the *Lynchburg Star*.

In doing so, however, Graham determined to offer a Republican journal and not a Federalist one like the preceding *Gazette*. It was a tall order.

"Of the magnitude and importance of the undertaking, we are well aware. We fully know the force of caprice—the inanity of professions—the instability of friendship—and how versatile is public opinion—but we as well know that mankind, if entertained, instructed, and even chastened occasionally, will liberally require the virtuous effort."

It took Graham the better part of two months to gather those subscriptions, which allowed the *Gazette* to continue into September 1805; it finally ceased publishing just before he issued his new weekly on October 31st.

That initial number began a publication run that extended into at least May of 1814, a remarkable duration given the Federalist sympathies of Lynchburg's mercantile community that Graham now depended upon for advertising revenue. So it is evident that his primary readership lay in the Republican hinterland around Lynchburg, and not in residents of the town proper. Yet Graham also tempted fate by taking umbrage at the revivalist camp meetings that arose frequently in the Lynchburg area over the ensuing years for their emotionalistic rejection of rationality and science. He proclaimed that his *Star* would remain "unawed, and unaided, by either Monk, or Minister," in order to provide "a fair, honest, and impartial narration of facts and circumstances" as the proper way to "improve and promote

the condition and happiness of mankind."

Graham kept that promise by deviating from Republican norms frequently enough not to alienate local Federalists. In spring 1810, he published a commentary supporting a proposed reform of the Virginia legislature that would reduce the number of representatives in the General Assembly, a plan deemed undemocratic by the state's Republican leadership. That same year, he supported the establishment of a branch of the Bank of Virginia in Lynchburg when those leaders were trying to scale back that institution because of its policies favoring manufacturing and merchants, not farmers. That support was not because he sought favor among the merchant class there, but rather because that bank was the only chartered one in the state then; thus when the Assembly created the Farmers' Bank of Virginia, Graham promptly invested in numerous shares of the new bank's stock.

Still, events in Graham's personal life seem to have caught up with him. During the War of 1812, his wife died, leaving him with just an unmarried daughter for companionship; her declining health appears to have contributed to his decision to close his *Lynchburg Star* in the spring or summer of 1814. He was also facing an increasingly popular competitor in the *Lynchburg Press* which first appeared in 1809 employing the sectarian pen of Jennings. So the aging Graham gave up the fight and closed his *Star* forever. Other newspapers would try to follow in the *Star's* footsteps only to find even shorter lives.

Despite his retirement, Graham's post-editorial life was ever more difficult and desperate. In 1816, his only daughter, Ellender, died, so leaving Graham without aid as his health also went into decline. He was forced to remove to an unnamed brother's farm in Rockbridge County, just outside of Lexington. But things did not improve with the change. Rather the "aged man, universally esteemed and beloved" put a gun to his head and shot himself in February 1819. The local Episcopal church refused him burial in its graveyard, for the sin of suicide, forcing his brother to bury the old doctor near his farm's homestead.

Personal Data

Died: Feb. 6 1819 Lexington, Rockbridge County, Virginia

Only daughter died 1816; no other data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cabell, *Sketches of Lynchburg*; Potter & Potter. *Lynchburg*; Asbury, *Lynchburg*; Campbell County Will Books; obituary in *Alexandria Herald* 26 Feb. 1819.