

188 GRAY, GEORGE L. – [GEORGE LEWIS GRAY]

Editor & Publisher

Norfolk

Editor and publisher of *Norfolk Gazette & Publick Ledger* (1804-05) with John Cowper (110).

Gray was a well-known Federalist polemicist in the early years of Jefferson's presidency. His origins are not known but a series of connections to Boston suggest that Gray came from New England, if not the Boston area itself. The first of those links was Charles Prentiss (341), a Federalist editor originally from Reading, Massachusetts. In January 1802, he had founded the highly-partisan *Republican or Anti-Democrat* in Baltimore after a two-year alliance with William Alexander Rind (359) in the *Washington Federalist*. After eighteen months with that paper, Prentiss sold his interest in it to Gray, who he evidently already knew and may have worked with him in Washington. This was Gray's first opportunity to own a journal, but the positive reception that his proprietorship received indicates that he was a known quantity in the Federalist circles. Still, Gray's ownership was just seven months long, marked by both sharp exchanges with nearby Republican papers and rapidly declining fiscal means. In December 1803, believing that re-launching his partisan paper as a daily would save it, Gray advertised for subscribers and advertisers for such a venture; when few responded to his repeated pleas, he was forced to close the *Anti-Democrat* on the last day of 1803; two weeks later he issued a "valedictory issue" before leaving Baltimore forever.

Part of Gray's problem, and perhaps most of it, was the large number of creditors that he had inherited from Prentiss, having misguidedly taken on his predecessor's debts as well as his assets. In November 1803, Gray was one of dozens of petitioners to Maryland's General Assembly asking for relief from the inflexible conditions of that state's insolvency laws, all claiming unlucky circumstances; the resulting legislation allowed those petitioners to put all of their assets into the hands of an administrator who would manage their affairs and pay their bills, rather than be forced to surrender those hard-won assets to their county sheriff for a traditional auction sale. Whether Gray accepted those conditions is unclear, as he left Maryland in relatively short order after that Assembly closed in February 1804, suggesting that he took his few assets beyond the state's borders, leaving his unpaid debts behind.

Gray soon found a new situation in Norfolk. John Cowper, a well-established maritime merchant trader, wanted to start a Federalist journal there that would openly challenge the foreign and commercial policies of the Jefferson administration, particularly its support for the French Republic. Lacking experience in conducting such a paper, Cowper needed trained assistants to help him, and Gray was a suitable candidate; he had successfully managed the production of a thrice-weekly paper like the one Cowper now proposed and had a solidly anti-Jeffersonian reputation. Indeed, the timing of the plan suggests that the failure of the Baltimore paper had triggered Cowper's February 1804 decision to begin such a paper. In July 1804, their new *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger* issued its first number. Still, the *Publick Ledger* was clearly Cowper's journal, even as he delegated considerable authority to his partner; Gray ran the office on a daily basis, editing the paper's content and supervising its production; Cowper wrote essays and offered editorial guidance, while managing its finances. Their alliance was a successful and profitable one from the start; but Gray soon

tired of his subordinate situation, despite its remunerative appeal. On July 26, 1805, the partners announced the dissolution of their fifteen-month-old concern on account of Gray's declining health, which "render[ed] a change in climate necessary." The change had already been effected ten days before when the paper's colophon was altered to show that it was "Printed by William Davis for the Proprietor." William Davis (127) had owned and edited Norfolk's first overtly-political newspaper, the *American Gazette*, and Cowper brought him back into the partisan fray in Gray's stead. By September, Gray had left Norfolk in search of new challenges in New York.

Gray's activities over the next two years are uncertain though it is clear he was in New York at least part of that time. In late 1807, Gray embarked on a voyage to Calcutta (also known as Kolkata today) from that northern seaport, suggesting that his years there had not been as profitable as he had hoped and that he was now on to a new adventure. Enroute Gray became ill and so disembarked at Cape Town in the British Cape Colony in South Africa to recover his health; but when he continued to decline, Gray embarked on a ship bound for Boston hoping "to give his last sigh in the bosom of his family." However, he was put ashore at St. Helena Island when it became evident that he would not survive to voyage to Boston. Gray died on the island on March 24, 1808 "in his 31st year." The only newspapers that took note of his passing, once they finally learned of it, were Federalist ones, who all recounted the tragic tale that he had "left a young family, of whom he was the sole support ... and an aged and almost heart-broken mother to mourn over the disappointment of all her earthly hopes." His chosen destination is the final suggestion that Gray was from the Boston area, although no further evidence for such an origin has yet been found, nor have the identities of his bereft family members.

Personal Data

Born: In 1776 Possibly near/in Boston, Massachusetts.
Died: Mar. 24 1808 St. Helena Island in the South Atlantic
Left a "young family," names yet undiscovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; *Laws of Maryland. Assembly of November 1803*, notices in *Publick Ledger* (1804-05); full Baltimore *Federal Gazette* obituary reprinted in *The American Register* (Philadelphia, 1808).