

222 HOLT, JOHN

Publisher

Norfolk

Publisher of the *Virginia Gazette or Norfolk Intelligencer* (1775) with his son John Hunter Holt (223); brother-in-law of William Hunter (230) and uncle to William Hunter Jr. (231).

John Holt is unique in the Virginia printing trade as he was an expatriate Virginian, living in New York, who helped to forge an anti-imperial press in Norfolk through his son. In his early days, he was a conspicuous and active figure in the daily life of Williamsburg; born in the colonial capital, Holt was one of several major merchants of that surname there; in 1751, he was made a justice of the York County Court and a vestryman of the town's Bruton Parish Church; the following year, he was elected as mayor of Williamsburg. But Holt's business collapsed in 1754 under the weight of debts both owed to him and by him to his suppliers, so instigating a flight from Virginia to avoid a court-ordered debt-execution.

Holt fled to New Haven, Connecticut, with the aid of his brother-in-law William Hunter, then Virginia's public printer, and Hunter's partner in the colonial post-office, Benjamin Franklin. Hunter had close connections with the Holt family; his sister Elizabeth had married Holt five years earlier, and his 1751 acquisition of the Williamsburg printing office had been financed by Holt's cousin Samuel, also a merchant there. At the same time, Franklin was expanding his network of affiliated offices by setting up James Parker, once his apprentice and now the government printer in New York, as official printer to the Connecticut colony. Holt was sent north to New Haven as Parker's partner and as postmaster for Connecticut. However, the relationship between Holt and Parker began to come apart in the late 1750s. Franklin went to England in 1757 as agent for the Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Georgia, and New Jersey assemblies and stayed there until 1762; in his absence, he assigned management of his half of the colonial postal system to Parker. In late 1757, Hunter joined Franklin in England and stayed more than two years; in his absence, Hunter assigned his half of the postal system and his press to John Stretch (407), his foreman and bookbinder. Parker and Stretch had problems coordinating their activities, so often drawing Parker to Philadelphia to act in Franklin's stead, leaving the New Haven office in Holt's hands. Over time, Holt developed an interest in relocating to New York City, then booming from trade supporting the French & Indian War, finally doing so in 1760 over Parker's objections. Franklin attempted to mediate, but only a dissolution of their partnership could resolve the ongoing differences. So Franklin gained Parker's appointment as printer to the New Jersey government in 1762, when his son William was made governor of that colony, as compensation for losing his Connecticut post. The situation forced Holt to relinquish physical control of Parker's press and to acquire another one. The replacement came from Virginia in the form of a press bought for Hunter by Samuel Holt. After Hunter's death in August 1761, Joseph Royle (368), his successor, purchased it from Holt as part of the sale of the Williamsburg printing office; Royle now disposed of his surplus press to Holt's benefit. Thus Hunter effectively installed his troubled brother-in-law in the printing trade in two different Northern venues.

From 1760, Holt published a newspaper in New York that evinced "a vigorous Whig tone." As part of the partnership dissolution, Parker retained an interest in Holt's weekly *New York*

Gazette, evidently as a way to repay monies still owed him. But with the final settlement of accounts in late 1766, Holt began a new paper there, the *New York Journal*, leaving the moderate *Gazette* in the hands of Parker's nephew Samuel. Holt's *Journal* quickly became the voice of the dissident Sons of Liberty in the city, but its influence spread far beyond New York. Its polemical style would have an effect in Virginia, as his stepson, John Hunter Holt, was learning the journalism trade in his New York office then. In March 1775, the elder Holt would dispatch his well-trained stepson to Norfolk to take over control of a paper there that he and some of his old Virginia friends had acquired from its Loyalist owners.

The first Virginia newspaper published outside of Williamsburg – *The Virginia Gazette or Norfolk Intelligencer* – issued from the press of Robert Gilmour (179) in June 1774. He had been brought to Norfolk by William Duncan (151), a Scottish merchant, to print a mercantile advertiser in support of the port's commerce; however, their paper was soon under attack for its backing of imperial policies then opposed by the patrons of Williamsburg's three *Virginia Gazettes*. In January 1775, Duncan ran afoul of local efforts to enforce trade restrictions that were part of the 1774 Continental Association, one of the first measures of resistance to imperial authority authorized by the Continental Congress. He was forced to yield control of the paper to another merchant, one John Brown (056), even as Gilmour remained owner of the press itself. Brown did not long control the journal either, as he was found guilty of importing slaves in violation of the Association's ban on such in March 1775.

At this point, Holt became an option for patriot leaders in Norfolk. In sending his stepson to the port town, Holt and those leaders became the unnamed partners in John Hunter Holt & Co., which took control of the *Intelligencer* about April 1, 1775, so compelling Gilmour and his Scottish journeymen – Alexander Cameron (076) and Donald McDonald (286) – to print a journal that now did not reflect their political views. But the junior Holt would not long control the paper either, as he ran afoul of imperial dictates rather than continental ones that had ensnared Duncan and Brown. Lord Dunmore (153), Virginia's last royal governor, had fled from Williamsburg just after Holt's arrival in Norfolk, a result of his plans for suppressing the nascent rebellion in Virginia being leaked to the Williamsburg paper of John Pinkney (325); throughout that summer, Dunmore and his wandering administration operated from ships anchored off Norfolk, drawing withering commentaries weekly from the younger Holt in his paper. At the end of September 1775, after a particularly coarse assault on the character of one of his lieutenants, Dunmore ordered Holt arrested and his press seized. The governor snared the press alone, but acquired two willing printers for that press in Cameron and McDonald. For the next six months, the journeymen worked on board a ship in Dunmore's "fleet" off Norfolk, producing job-printing for his "official" government, as well as a paper, the *Virginia Gazette*, "printed by Authority," serving Dunmore's need for an official voice. Meanwhile, young Holt remained in Virginia, taking an officer's commission in the 1st Virginia State Regiment, serving for the duration of the ensuing Revolutionary War.

The elder Holt never left New York through all this, even while he was one of the venture's principal backers. Rather, Holt became the printer to the Revolutionary government of New York. In November 1775, he benefitted from the destruction of the office of Loyalist printer James Rivington by a gathering of the Sons of Liberty from Connecticut; the timing of that

attack is suggestive, coming just eight weeks after Dunmore's seizure of the Norfolk press. But Holt's embrace of the Revolution meant that he was forced out of New York City itself by the subsequent British occupation (1776-83). Still, he continued to print for the new state government until his death in 1784. His wife, Elizabeth Hunter Holt, continued the business until 1786, when she turned it over to Eleazer Oswald, a revolutionary War hero who Holt had trained before the war and who had married their daughter Elizabeth, so reinforcing its patriotic credentials.

As a result, Holt was recognized by his peers as a key player in the Revolutionary era press, as seen in Isaiah Thomas's *History of Printing in America* (1810), a reputation that has been frequently buttressed by subsequent generations of American historians. Yet few of those scholars have noted his influence in Virginia, even as they report his Virginia roots.

Personal Data

Born: In 1721 Williamsburg, Virginia.
Married: In 1749 Williamsburg, Virginia.
Died: Jan. 30 1784 New York City, New York.
Children: John Hunter (b. ca. 1752); Elizabeth (b. ca. 1753).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 4 & 5; York County Records Project files and Williamsburg People files for both merchant Holts, Hunter, Royle, and Parks, CWF; Parker correspondence in *Benjamin Franklin Papers*; Hildeburn, *Printers and Printing in Colonial New York*.