

223 HOLT, JOHN HUNTER

Publisher

Norfolk, Richmond

Publisher of the *Virginia Gazette or Norfolk Intelligencer* (1775) with support of stepfather, John Holt (222), and the *Virginia Gazette and Independent Chronicle* (1783-87) at Richmond as partner to his maternal uncle, John Dixon Sr. (140).

John Hunter Holt was a scion of a marriage alliance between two major merchant families in the late-colonial-era tidewater, one that also became part of the Virginia printing trade. His mother was Elizabeth Hunter, daughter of a Yorktown merchant, William Hunter, and half-sister of his eldest son, John Hunter, commissary for British forces in North America during the Seven Years War; she was also a full sister to William Hunter (230), then Virginia's public printer, and Roseanna Hunter, who married successively two Williamsburg printers: Joseph Royle (368) and John Dixon, her son's future business partner.

It appears that his father was an unnamed brother of John Holt; the records gathered by Colonial Williamsburg indicate that there were three Holt brothers – John, Thomas, and William – who owned mercantile businesses in Williamsburg in the 1750s as successors to Holt merchants based earlier in Yorktown. All three Holts survived the Revolutionary War, yet James Parker, John Holt's one-time partner, wrote that he had taken into training as a printer "his Brother's Son, who is Mrs. Holt's Sister's Son also" in 1764, who he identified in later correspondence as John Hunter Holt. That account indicates that Elizabeth Hunter had a sister who bore a child for a fourth Holt brother who died after that son's birth; as neither a marriage nor birth of such description is found in the records of the town's Bruton Parish Church, it would seem that John Hunter Holt was born out of wedlock, as was his cousin William Hunter Jr. (231), the "natural son" of the public printer. Subsequently, John Holt became that child's stepfather when he married Elizabeth Hunter in 1751 or 1752.

That marriage came just before John Holt's business collapsed in 1754. At that time he was a justice of the York County Court and a vestryman of the town's Bruton Parish Church; but debts both owed to him and by him to his suppliers instigating a flight from Virginia to avoid a court-ordered debt-execution in 1754. He fled to New Haven, Connecticut, with the aid of his brother-in-law William Hunter and Hunter's partner in the colonial post-office, Benjamin Franklin, taking his young family with him. There Holt's father built a problematic business relationship with Parker, a long-time Franklin associate who was then public printer for the New York and Connecticut colonies. During Franklin's extended residence in England (1757-62), he made Parker his proxy as deputy-postmaster for North America with William Hunter, so leaving Parker to settle the postal system's accounts with Hunter's estate after that Virginian's death in 1761. The situation was complicated by Parker's dependence on Holt to operate his New Haven office while thus engaged, even as Holt planned to move to Parker's more profitable and visible New York office then conducted by Samuel Parker, his nephew; he did so in 1760 with funds diverted from the postal system in his role as Connecticut's postmaster. The ensuing, drawn-out settlement of their affairs, forged in part by Franklin on his return in 1762, left Parker and Holt with separate offices in New York in 1766, when John Hunter Holt was about fifteen, conducting competing newspapers.

The paper the elder Holt published in New York after 1766 – the *New York Journal* – evinced "a vigorous Whig tone" which quickly made it the favorite of the dissident Sons of Liberty there. Yet his newspaper's influence spread far beyond New York. Its polemical style would have an effect in Virginia, as John Hunter Holt was then learning the journalism trade in his father's New York office. By early 1775, the young printer, then about twenty-four, was ready for his first independent assignment as a journalist and his father moved to establish him in Virginia, with the aid of old friends there, who had acquired a pro-imperial weekly in Norfolk 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, the young Holt became the paper's "principal Proprietor, and sole Manager of the Press," with his stepfather and his patriot friends becoming unnamed partners in the new firm of John Hunter Holt & Company. Holt 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. Indeed, Holt was more interested the "Variety and Novelty" that he hoped would "furnish Amusement to his Readers" than he was in its original mercantile purpose. But Holt would not long control the *Intelligencer* either, as he ran afoul of imperial dictates rather than the 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 *Gazette* of John Pinkney (325); throughout that summer, Dunmore and his wandering administration operated from ships anchored off Norfolk, drawing withering commentaries weekly from Holt in his journal, much in the style of what his father published in his *New York Journal*. At the end of September 1775, after a particularly coarse assault on the character of one of his Dunmore's lieutenants, the governor ordered Holt arrested and his press seized as a public nuisance. Dunmore 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 of Norfolk, producing job-printing for his "official" government, as well as a paper, the *Virginia Gazette* "printed by Authority," which filled Dunmore's oft-stated need for an official voice. Meanwhile, Holt stayed in Virginia, launching a campaign for restitution of "his" property by seizing Dunmore's few assets; he would only receive a horse for his vociferous efforts. In the end, Holt channeled his anger into military service, taking a commission in the 1st Virginia

State Regiment, serving for the duration of the war, mustering out at the rank of captain.

At war's end, Holt settled in Richmond, evidently drawn there by the prospect of a business partnership with John Dixon, who was now married to his maternal aunt, Roseanna Hunter. Dixon became part of the printing trade just before that marriage; he was administrator of the estates of both William Hunter and Joseph Royle as part of a plan to establish Alexander Purdie (345) in a press office independent of the entails included in the wills of Hunter and Royle. In 1766, he formed a partnership with Purdie to purchase the original Williamsburg printing office, an arrangement that continued until William Hunter Jr. (231), the primary beneficiary of his father's will, reached his majority in late 1774. Dividing their assets, Purdie moved out of the office and young Billy Hunter moved in, forming a partnership with Dixon, now his uncle as well, with his share of his father's estate. But the firm of Dixon & Hunter was haunted by suspicions of Loyalism as the Revolution proceeded in Virginia, a result of Hunter's long-standing friendship with William Franklin, the Loyalist son of Benjamin and the last royal governor of New Jersey. Their troubled partnership was dissolved after just four years, with Hunter taking the bookstore and Dixon taking the *Virginia Gazette* founded originally by William Parks (321). Dixon turned to Thomas Nicolson (315), his shop foreman, as his new partner. The two struggled through the remaining war years, with Nicolson alone moving their office to Richmond in 1780 when the government moved there, while Dixon stayed in Williamsburg. In late 1781, Dixon dissolved his alliance with Nicolson, so ending the run of the original *Virginia Gazette*, and retired from the printing trade. It was not until the summer of 1783 that Dixon finally committed to publishing again, this time with Holt.

The arrangement between the two was the same that Dixon forged with all of his partners from Purdie onward: Holt was the practical tradesman conducting the technical side of their office, while Dixon financed the whole and conducted its business side. Their new *Virginia Gazette and Independent Chronicle* first issued in August 1783. And while Holt served as its editor, its tone was far less polemical than had been seen in his Norfolk paper, evidently tempered by the absence of an easily ridiculed opponent.

Such tempering was also likely a calculated approach given that Dixon & Holt was now also lobbying for their appointment as printer to the Commonwealth, something that had been denied to Dixon during the war. The tenure of the incumbent, James Hayes (207), had been marked by a growing financial insufficiency dating to his arrival in Virginia in 1780, when he had lost a press and its supplies to the British while it was enroute to Richmond; thereafter, Hayes struggled to produce the government work out of a lack of financial resources and a series of unrealistic deadlines. And throughout that tenure, Richmond's other press offices were seeking his lucrative post for themselves, Dixon & Holt among them after mid-1783. Hayes's supposed malfeasance brought about his dismissal in May 1786, with Dixon & Holt winning appointment in a highly competitive election that June. But the Assembly also reduced the position's salary and authorized the Governor to employ as many printers as he deemed necessary to meet their arbitrary schedule out of those reduced funds. So while Dixon had now gained the post he sought since leaving Purdie in January 1775, the Dixon & Hunter press had to complete the public work in a setting where competitors diminished their compensation, so pressing Holt's resources and skills.

The reduced salary was not the only challenge faced by Dixon & Holt; their newspaper – one of four then published in the capital – was now required to carry government notices and lengthy reports of legislative sessions, forcing the pair to limit its non-advertising content if they wanted to carry advertising from other sources as well; otherwise, they would see reduced revenues from the paper, further undermining the financial base of their business. Just as the two partners began to come to grips with this fiscal reality, the entire Richmond printing trade was disrupted by a fire that tore through the heart of the city's commercial district in January 1787. While their office was undamaged, unlike others, their vital supply chain was interrupted and their potential advertisers impoverished.

Holt, however, did not live long enough to have had a significant role in their firm's recovery from these travails. In early June 1787, Holt developed a fever and died quite unexpectedly, just thirty-six years old. Lacking an immediate family, a settlement of Holt's estate does not appear to have been a high priority for Dixon or his wife; this may have been because of the recent death of Holt's father John, whose estate would not be settled until later that same year in New York. But when his late partner's estate was finally settled in September 1789, the settlement evidently sent Dixon's fiscal situation into a downward spiral. At just that same time, Dixon was ordered to publish the laws of the new federal Congress; so having paid out a significant sum to dissolve his partnership with Holt, he now had to invest in supplies for a new and unprecedented project. It was a situation that was still in doubt when Dixon died just eighteen-months later. So it seems that Holt's death, while tragic, kept him from having to save his extended family from financial ruin.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1751 Williamsburg, Virginia

Died: June 8 1787 Richmond, Virginia

Died unmarried and without issue.

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