

## 230 HUNTER, WILLIAM – [WILLIAM HUNTER, SR.]

### Printer & Publisher

### Williamsburg

Official printer to the Virginia colony (1750-1761); publisher of the original *Virginia Gazette* (1751-1761); and deputy postmaster general for British North America (1754-1761).

The tenure of William Hunter as Virginia's public printer was arguably the pinnacle of the colonial-era printing monopoly, providing faithful service to the colonial administration as was the original intent of the office. Moreover, Hunter's life was an exemplar of the role that familial connections played Virginia society. From orphaned beginnings, his extended family, including associates gained through his sisters' marriages, proved essential to his long-term success. That success allowed him posthumous control over both his family's and his business's fortunes well into the Revolutionary era.

Born in Yorktown, William Hunter was the son of an Elizabeth City County merchant, also named William Hunter (d. 1742), and his second wife Mary Ann (d. 1743). He was also half-brother to Col. John Hunter (1723-1795), the Hampton merchant who became commissary for British forces in North America during the French & Indian War, as well as confidante to Robert Dinwiddie, the colony's resident Lieutenant Governor. Shortly after their parents' deaths, his sister Elizabeth married John Holt (222), a merchant then soon to be mayor of Williamsburg; Hunter and his sisters – all minor children – moved into the Holts' home. By that time, Hunter was apprenticed to William Parks (321), Virginia's first public printer. He had reached maturity by 1749, when he was reported as Parks' shop foreman in the records of the House of Burgesses. Thus when Parks died in April 1750, the responsibility for the government's printing immediately fell to Hunter.

Hunter fulfilled that legacy with the brotherly assistance of John Holt and John Hunter. His first task was printing the collected laws of Virginia, ordered by the General Assembly in November 1749. Through his half-brother's merchant connections, the needed materials were quickly procured and the volume published six months ahead of its mandated March 1753 deadline. In January 1751, Hunter resumed publication of the *Virginia Gazette*, which he had suspended once news of Parks' untimely death reached Virginia from the England-bound ship on which he died. Later that fall, he also issued his own edition of the *Virginia Almanack*. Both imprints had become essential elements in the Williamsburg printing office's financial vitality in the first two decades of its existence. Then in July 1751, Hunter bought the entirety of Parks' operation with loans brokered by Holt, largely from his brother Samuel. This nearly seamless transition from Parks to Hunter led Governor Dinwiddie to formally nominate him as the next public printer. The Assembly concurred in March 1752, setting his salary £20 higher than that paid to Parks previously. Notably, this was also the moment when the relationship between Dinwiddie and John Hunter flowered, as the governor held power-of-attorney over the merchant's affairs during a 1752 trip to England.

William Hunter also reinvigorated the office's connections with Benjamin Franklin, begun by Parks in publishing the works of George Whitfield and in their joint ownership of a paper mill near Williamsburg, now defunct. As early as August 1751, Hunter was consulting with Franklin, then Pennsylvania's postmaster, on plans to rebuild the continental postal system.

At that time, the system was rudimentary, as well as inefficient, the result of its becoming a source of income for its successive conductors – all heirs of the former royal governor Alexander Spotswood, who had established the system in 1722 – rather than the public service it should have been. The pair saw a chance to realize such a purpose when the incumbent colonial postmaster general, Elliot Benger, died; each applied to London for his job. That August, they received a joint commission as "Deputy Postmasters General" for the mainland North American colonies, likely aided by John Hunter, who was then in England. Their commission was an equal partnership, with Hunter responsible for the postal system south of Annapolis and Franklin for that to the north. Over the ensuing year, they made joint inspection trips to both assess the system's deficiencies and to plan for their correction. However, these tours came to a premature end when Hunter's health failed.

In July 1754, Hunter developed a fever while waiting in New York to meet up with Franklin, who was then attending the Albany Congress; his illness postponed the New England leg of their planned tour for a few weeks. But in Boston that October, Hunter had a recurrence of his "summer fever" which resulted in his spending that winter in Boston recuperating. When he finally returned to Virginia in the spring of 1755, Hunter's condition worsened. By September, he had decided to seek treatment in England and announced his intention to leave Virginia later that fall; but a relapse detained him again. When Franklin visited Virginia in March 1756, he found his post-office partner weak and thin, though improving. Hunter finally embarked for England that June, where he would reside for the next three years. In those years, he was a frequent resident of Franklin's London abode, who was then in the midst of a five-year-long stay as agent for the Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Georgia assemblies; the situation forged a strong bond between the two printers.

This three-year period coincided with peak of the French & Indian War in North America, when Hunter's Williamsburg office was inundated by demands for the imprints needed to direct a colony at war. During his absence, Hunter's office was run by his book-binder, John Stretch (407). However, the war created supply shortages and ever-increasing demands that Stretch had difficulty meeting. Producing the treasury notes that the government needed to pay for men and provisions became a significant problem. Between May 1755 and October 1760, the colony's treasury issued nearly £540,000 in paper currency, all of it printed in Williamsburg, most of it by Stretch. By mid-1757, demand for new notes dominated the office's output, to the exclusion of most other work. Most telling were delays in printing the "session laws" recording recent legislation deemed necessary to the conduct of the war.

Gradually, tensions rose between Stretch, Dinwiddie, and the Assembly over the conflicting priorities, all while Hunter was absent from his Virginia obligations. Dinwiddie had angered the Burgesses in controversies over the Pistole Fee and the Two Penny Act, which came shortly after London's attempts to alter the laws published in the 1749 collection. Hunter understood his need for Dinwiddie's support and so he had not published anything harmful to the governor's policies in his *Gazette* while still in Williamsburg. But once he departed, it seems that Stretch shifted his attention toward the Burgesses, the ones who actually paid for the office's public work. Indeed, the only political pamphlets produced by Hunter's office were published during his English sojourn; these were the gentry's justifications for the 1758 law allowing payment of clerical salaries in currency at a fixed rate, and not in tobacco

at its inflated market price, which led to the Parsons' Cause lawsuits of 1763. Likewise, the *Gazette* apparently became a forum for dissenting views, leading Dinwiddie to complain of "the dastardly Spirit of our Common People." The governor's pleas to be relieved from a clearly deteriorating situation were realized in January 1758. His final report in London that summer brought pressure on Hunter to return to Virginia and reassert control over his renegade printing office. Meanwhile, tensions crested in Williamsburg following Dinwiddie's recall when Stretch presented an "extravagant" bill for printing treasury notes that year; incensed, the Assembly paid only one-third of the amount billed.

Hunter finally returned home in July 1759. Later accounts indicate that two journeyman printers came with him: Joseph Royle (368) and Alexander Purdie (345). Shortly thereafter, Stretch left Williamsburg for Annapolis, indicating that Hunter had promptly purged his office of both objectionable personnel and attitudes on his return. Such an assessment is buttressed by the fact that Hunter was appointed as a justice of the York County Court within days of his return, and that his salary as public printer was raised from £300 to £350 when the Assembly met that November, both of which required gubernatorial consent. Evidently, Hunter satisfied the needs of the imperial administration and so was rewarded for that service.

The operation of Hunter's printing office was less dynamic than had been seen in the Parks years. Besides his paper and almanac, his press produced little beyond what the colonial government commanded. The few exceptions were religious tracts, largely sermons by Samuel Davies, and new editions of John Tennent's popular *Everyman His own Physician*. Yet, Hunter did not cease being an entrepreneur on his return; he simply picked up where he had left off in 1754. With Franklin's assent, he planned for a weekly extension of the post south to Charleston, South Carolina. His profitable book-selling business grew from contacts made in England, evidently also with the advice of Franklin. Introductions in England to the Associates of Thomas Bray brought Hunter a commission in 1760 to "open a Negroe school" in Williamsburg. He also partnered with merchant James Tarpley in 1759 to set up a new dry-goods store in a building that became Alexander Purdie's printing office in 1775.

In light of this renewed vitality, Hunter's sudden death on August 14, 1761 was a surprise to many. Death, however, did not end his influence. In his will, Hunter recognized his "natural son" – William Jr. (231) – born to Elizabeth Reynolds before his English journey; hence he left a half interest in his office to his foreman, Joseph Royle, if Royle operated the office for the equal benefit of himself and young Billy Hunter until the son's majority. He also directed that his son should be sent to Philadelphia for an education supervised by his friend and partner Franklin; as result, Billy Hunter and Franklin's son William became life-long friends, with both men evincing deep-seated Loyalist sympathies during the Revolution. Moreover, Hunter's estate was sufficient to cover his outstanding debt while leaving enough to fulfill his bequests, unlike that of his predecessor Parks. He made substantial monetary gifts to his surviving sisters. With a substantial dowry, Roseanna Hunter would marry two printers: first Joseph Royle, and then John Dixon. The bequest that Elizabeth Hunter Holt received in New York allowed John Holt, her husband, to establish an independent press there that became voice of New York's Sons of Liberty; the couple also raised a son, John Hunter Holt (223), who returned to Virginia in 1775 as Norfolk's patriot printer. Sister Polly Hunter – his

travelling companion in England and so a favorite of the Franklin family – had married into Williamsburg's Davenport family, becoming wife to Rev. Joseph, and bearing a son – Joseph Matthews Davenport (115) – who would work in the office of Alexander Purdie. And from the proceeds that he received in the dissolution of his brief partnership with Hunter, James Tarpley bought the brass bell that hangs in the steeple of Williamsburg's Bruton Parish Church – as a tribute to Hunter as an Anglican patron.

***Personal Data***

Born: before 1730 Yorktown, Virginia

Died: Aug. 14 1761 Williamsburg, Virginia

One son, William Jr., by Elizabeth Reynolds, out of wedlock.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 2 & 3; York County Records Project files for Parks, Hunter, Royle, and Purdie, CWF; Gibbs, "The Davenports," *CW Interpreter* (1997); notices in Hunter's *Virginia Gazette* (1751-61); *Official Records of Robert Dinwiddie*; *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*.

This note is a modified version of the Hunter entry written for the online *Encyclopedia Virginia* in 2010.