

231 HUNTER, WILLIAM JR. – [BILLY HUNTER]

Publisher & Bookseller

Williamsburg

Publisher of the original *Virginia Gazette* (1775-1778) with John Dixon (140), his uncle, and then a Williamsburg bookseller (1778-81).

This Hunter was the "natural son" of Virginia's second official public printer William Hunter Sr. and Elizabeth Reynolds, who never married. And like his father, he maintained his loyalty to the imperial administration despite living in the heart of the Revolution in Virginia. It proved a problematic choice that alienated him from both his birthplace and his family.

When the senior Hunter died in 1761, young Hunter was legally recognized in his father's will, despite his illegitimacy, crafting a plan to support his son financially until he reached his majority in late 1773; his shop foreman, Joseph Royle (368), was given a half-interest in his Williamsburg printing office and the *Virginia Gazette* if he conducted both for the equal benefit of his minor son, who was given the other half-interest. As young Billy Hunter was then but seven, his father also directed that his executors send his son to Philadelphia, to the care of Benjamin Franklin, his close friend and partner in conducting the continental post office, for a formal education. That journey did not happen until 1764 when Billy reached the age of ten, living in his mother's James City County home in the interim; when he was finally dispatched to Franklin's care, he stayed in Philadelphia for just four years, returning to the Hunter family's base near Yorktown in 1768. Yet in that time, he developed a life-long friendship with William Franklin, son of Benjamin and then governor of New Jersey; his later Loyalist perspective suggests that the younger Franklin had more of a hand in Hunter's education than did the elder Franklin.

While Hunter was attending school in Philadelphia, his father's plan was undermined by the death of Royle in January 1766. He had married Roseanna Hunter, a sister to Billy's father before the father's death; now Royle attempted to live up to the conditions imposed on him by Hunter's will while providing for the needs of his wife and minor son William. He asked that his shop foreman, Alexander Purdie (345), assume his share of the business under the same conditions imposed on him in 1761, as an equal partner with Billy Hunter. Purdie balked at this, seeking a free hand in operating the office for his own benefit alone. So in June 1766, he formed a partnership with Williamsburg merchant John Dixon to divorce Williamsburg's printing office from the intertwined estates of Hunter and Royle. The firm of Purdie & Dixon bought the tools of the old Royle/Hunter office while leasing the building and grounds from the combined estates; they also acquired title to the original *Virginia Gazette* started by William Parks (321) and continued by his successors. This left Billy Hunter with an income, but without any potential control over the office and journal, so fulfilling the intent of Hunter's will, but moving away from its restrictions.

Dixon was the key to making this all work. As Royle's health declined, he had been named as Billy Hunter's guardian; now he financed Purdie's purchase of the office. He also approved the transaction by assuming the administration of the estates of both deceased printers, sorting out the many obligations between them and to Hunter's and Royle's legatees. While his participation allowed all involved to finally move toward a settlement of outstanding

accounts, Dixon also became part of the combined family: he married Roseanna Hunter Royle in 1766 and assumed responsibility for her son, William Royle. The marriage made Dixon an uncle to his charge Billy Hunter, apparently to the satisfaction of all concerned. Still, it took Purdie and Dixon fully eight years to resolve all of the entails, a full year after Billy Hunter reached his majority. At the end of December 1774, Dixon entered the final settlement of Hunter's estate, giving Billy the wherewithal to buy into the family business on his own; he assisted the process by dissolving his partnership with Purdie, so allowing Purdie to sell his interest to Hunter; Purdie, in turn, took the proceeds from the sale of his interest and started a new press and a new journal just down the street from the original Williamsburg printing office.

The new firm of Dixon & Hunter began publishing their iteration of the original *Virginia Gazette* in January 1775. But almost immediately, Hunter's loyalism fell into conflict with Dixon's nationalism, especially as they faced two weekly papers vocally espousing colonial resistance to imperial authority: Purdie's new *Virginia Gazette* and the *Virginia Gazette* of John Pinkney (325) founded after Royle's death by William (358) and Clementine Rind (356). Hunter was compelled to conceal his preferences for much of the ensuing war in order for their business to remain viable in the disrupted wartime economic environment. In 1777, he married a cousin, a daughter of his father's sister Polly and Rev. Joseph Davenport, a well-respected minister there, to establish, in part, his commitment to Virginia's sovereignty. Hunter even served in local government post in 1779 and 1780 after having signed the requisite loyalty oaths. But by the end of 1778, the tension between him and his uncle had reached the point where a parting was necessary. Hunter kept the printing office property and its book-stocks, so maintaining the location's known retail functions; Dixon took both the press apparatus and the *Gazette* and set up shop in a new location nearby. The situation evidently suited Hunter as he had now distanced himself from the views of a newspaper supporting the Revolution; so his book and stationery store survived, easily avoiding the necessity to relocate to Richmond in early 1780 when the state government moved there.

Hunter's life, nevertheless, took a dramatic and telling turn in early 1781. British forces under the command of the turncoat Benedict Arnold arrived in the tidewater, staging raids on Richmond and other patriot strongholds before settling into a fortified encampment near Portsmouth in March. There Arnold interdicted Virginia's trade while awaiting the arrival of Lord Cornwallis and his southern army from the Carolinas. Hunter read the new situation as a turning of the tide against the rebellion and began providing intelligence about Virginia forces to Arnold. But more significantly, Hunter joined the army of Cornwallis when it arrived in June, abandoning his business and his family. He would later say that he had "embraced the earliest Opportunity of joining his majesty's Forces" at that time, but both sides would suspect his motives, believing that he was more of an opportunist than a true believer. Unfortunately, Hunter soon discovered that his reading of military affairs that spring was wrong; the armies of Generals Washington and Rochambeau arrived to encircle Cornwallis's army at Yorktown in late August, while the French Admiral de Grasse cut off that army's planned withdrawal to New York in early September at the Battle of the Capes. So when that army finally surrendered in October, Hunter was obligated to leave Virginia, along with his new-found comrades, on the *HMS Bonetta*. He found refuge in British-held

New York City while his Williamsburg property was seized by the state.

Hunter would never again attain the lifestyle he had left in Virginia. In 1782, he travelled to London to file a claim for compensation for his lost property, which was evidently deferred until after a peace could be negotiated, even as he claimed support of an aging mother and two sons, all of whom still resided in America. Hunter would file again under the Loyalist claims clause of the Treaty of Paris, but did not receive the amount he desired, something more than £5000 Virginia currency, covering three properties, fifteen slaves, livestock, and his business. That second filing came after he had attempted to return to his birthplace in 1783; but when his vessel from Nova Scotia landed in Hampton, he was sent back to the Canadian Maritimes, "banished from his Native Country," never to return again.

After 1783, Hunter's track is difficult to follow. He apparently took on work as a journeyman printer in London, but did not rise to own a press there. In 1787, he was recommended for a £30 per year stipend as reparation for his American troubles, but the post-war government in London rejected the request believing that Hunter was one who "betrays a total Want of principles." He is last seen in 1789 working his father's old trade in London, his eventual fate unknown and perhaps unknowable.

Personal Data

Born: In 1754 Williamsburg, Virginia.
Married: In 1777 Eliza. Hunter Davenport @ Williamsburg (d. 1784)
Died: After 1789 in England, probably London.
Children: William III (b. ca. 1779); Joseph (b. ca. 1781).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; York County Records Project files and Williamsburg People files for both Hunters, Royle, Purdie, and Dixon; Kelly, "White Loyalist of Williamsburg," *CW Interpreter* (1996); Gibbs, "The Davenports," *CW Interpreter* (1997); Goodwin. *Bruton Parish Church*; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 3 & 4; notices in Williamsburg's *Virginia Gazettes* (1774-81).