

242 JONES, MERIWETHER

Printer & Publisher

Richmond

Printer to the Commonwealth (1798-1804); also publisher of *The Examiner* (1798-1804) at Richmond, initially with John Dixon Jr. (141), of *The Press* (1799-1800) at Richmond with Alexander MacRae (299), John H. Foushee (170), and James Lyon (274); and of Norfolk's *Commercial Register* (1802-03) with William W. Worsley (462); also brother of Skelton Jones (243), his successor at the *Examiner*.

Meriwether Jones had a relatively short career in Virginia's printing trade, but was someone who had an outsized impact on that trade as a result of both his political orientation and his familial connections. He was the son of Col. Thomas Jones (1726-86), a Revolutionary War veteran who long served as clerk of the Northumberland County court (1749-78); his older brother Catesby Jones (1760-1800) succeeded their father as court clerk (1779-1800), while commanding the county militia and serving as presidential elector in the elections of the 1790s; his mother, Sally Skelton (1730-85) was a sister of Bathurst Skelton (1744-70), whose widow, Martha Wayles, married Thomas Jefferson in 1772; his uncle, Dr. Walter Jones (1745-1815), was a life-long friend of Jefferson who served as a surgeon in the Continental Army, a delegate to the 1786 Annapolis Convention and the 1788 constitutional ratification convention, a long-standing member of the House or Senate in the General Assembly, and later a Virginia representative in Congress. His sisters married Monroes, Corbins, Andersons, and Lees, while among his more distant relatives were Bathursts, Catesbys, Cockes, and Carters – all major planter families in Virginia. Jones himself married Lucy Franklin Reade in 1783, a niece of Benjamin Franklin's wife Deborah Reade. After his father's death in 1786, they made their home at the colonel's estate, Spring Garden in Hanover County, later the home of Spencer Roane, the noted Virginia jurist.

His background nearly guaranteed that Jones would become both a civic leader and political figure in his own right. His published writings reflect a solid classical education, and family lore reports that he was trained for the law, as all of his brothers were, but no record of his practicing law has yet been found. In the 1790s, he was elected to several terms as one of Hanover County's delegates to the Assembly and served on the most powerful standing committees in that body, as well as the short-lived committee that determined the state's congressional districts following the first federal census in 1790. Jones also stood as an unsuccessful candidate in the 1795 Congressional election for the district including Hanover County. His final popularly-elected position was that as a delegate to the November 1796 Assembly; in that session, James Wood of Frederick County was elected Virginia's governor; that same Assembly then chose Jones to replace Wood on the Council of State.

Public Printing

Jones became a part of Virginia's printing trade as a consequence of that selection. The Council was then evenly divided between Federalists and Republicans, with Wood taking a neutral position. The body had an oversight role under the 1776 constitution, acting as a check on the governor's power when the Assembly was out of session, as well as serving as

investigative deputies for the governor aiding his administration. Jones took on the task of overseeing the government's contracts, a fiscal responsibility consistent with his preceding assignments in the Assembly. Of particular concern for him was the conduct of the public-printing concession, as it was for others on the Council, such as Wood. Officials in Virginia's western counties – then the most rapidly-growing and largely Republican regions of the state – made frequent complaints to the governor and his council about their inability to obtain copies of vital public documents needed by their county courts. Those complaints led the ensuing Assembly session of 1797-98 to convert the concession granted to the state's public printer from its original (1730) status as an ongoing sinecure into a position that was elected by them annually. In expectation of being asked by the 1798-99 Assembly for an assessment of the performance of the incumbent printer, Augustine Davis (119), Wood asked the Council to study the legally-mandated production required from a public printer generally, and the specific conduct of Davis in the meeting those requirements.

Jones conducted the study and his report was telling. First, he discovered that Davis – who had held the post since 1791 – had become essentially an absentee manager, and not the practicing printer that he had once been; thus Davis knew only the general outlines of what his office produced for the government; Jones could only obtain a detailed accounting of what that office did produce and how quickly from Davis's shop foreman, Samuel Pleasants (331). From that accounting, he discovered that the Davis press produced fewer copies per county of each Assembly's session laws – the main focus of the complaints received – than had Virginia's first public printer, William Parks (321), even as the total number of copies that were produced grew. Moreover, distribution of those laws was hampered by an ill-considered requirement imposed in 1783 that those session laws be signed for by a sitting legislator who would then deliver them in his home district. As production was completed only after those legislators had already returned home, many of the county courts did not receive those laws until long after their promulgation, if at all. With this report in hand, the Council asked Davis to increase the scale of his production; when he refused to do so without greater compensation, he was fired.

In November 1798, Wood and the Council chose Jones to replace him, a selection confirmed shortly thereafter by the Assembly. This abrupt change in the state's public printer, coming in the midst of the political controversies attending the Alien & Sedition Acts, was seen by most as pure political patronage, a Republican Assembly rewarding one of their own out of the public treasury. But while Jones was an avowed Republican, he was also an advocate for an informed electorate, meaning open communication between public officials and citizens, as were many of his Council peers and the Assembly members who elected him annually for the next five years. Still, Virginia's Federalists – who championed Davis and his newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser* – saw such justifications as window-dressing for Republicans' punishment of an opposition editor, citing Jones's lack of training as a printer. Yet Jones and his backers had planned for this eventuality. In short order, he joined with a practical printer, John Dixon Jr., to establish a press office to produce the required work. In doing so, Jones instituted a program to increase the quantity of session laws available after each Assembly and to distribute them more efficiently to the county courts that needed them. This plan increased the costs of production for the state, which brought intensified

criticisms from Federalists about the waste of public monies that the change from Davis to Jones had created, but his new approach quickly brought an end to the complaints from western counties about obtaining imprints needed to guide their courts.

The one fault in Jones's plan was his choice of a printing partner. The Dixon press office had been hard pressed financially since long before the 1791 death of its founder, John Dixon Sr. (140). After Dixon's death, his son had started and ended publication of his newspaper four times in order to financially reorganize the family business. Joining with Jones in December 1798 offered Dixon the promise of regular revenue, unlike his continuing condition. But he promptly fell behind in producing the imprints that brought Jones into the trade, bringing a quick end to their affiliation. Jones dissolved their partnership at the end of May 1799 and embarked on the route taken previously by Davis: he became an untrained owner-manager who employed trained journeyman-printers to complete the work contracted by the state. His program worked, with only a few glitches, for the remainder of his tenure in office.

Political Publisher

With his appointment as public printer, Jones was essentially obliged to publish a paper to carry the government's official notices, if much of his limited salary was not to be spent on advertising in other journals. The choice of Dixon as a partner gave him immediate access to one, *The Observatory or A View of the Times*. This journal was the most politically-oriented one that Dixon had produced in the 1790s, trying to establish a more influential presence than the advertising-laden *Virginia Argus* of Samuel Pleasants, despite Pleasants's growing influence then within the state's Republican leadership circles. Jones & Dixon transformed the *Observatory* into *The Examiner* with Jones's election as printer to the Commonwealth, and from that start, Jones was its dominant personality. In his introductory essay, Jones asserted his right to withhold the names of his correspondents as a "valuable privilege ... to which *truth* and *liberty* are *infinitely* indebted" – so asserting that anonymity revealed truth and prevented reprisals. In the long run, such an editorial policy made Jones a lightning rod for Federalists for his entire journalistic career. But such a turn was fitting, as the license to publish for the public lay with Jones and not Dixon, and Jones had to meet the demands of his constituency in the Assembly to retain that license. So when the two men parted ways six months later, Jones retained the position, the paper, and a press and types, while Dixon used a second press to conduct a small job-printing office, never again publishing a paper.

Jones built his independent office by hiring trained journeyman printers, some from the old Dixon office, and some from the old Davis-Pleasants shop, which had produced the public work previously. In the next five years, three key tradesmen emerged from his office: John L. Cook (105), Seaton Grantland (186) and William W. Worsley, all of whom appear to have been Richmond-trained and all of whom went on to conduct presses of their own. With his tradecraft problems resolved, Jones turned to political friends and his brothers to produce copy for his *Examiner* as the 1800 presidential election approached. It seems that brothers Jekyll (a Richmond lawyer) and Bathurst (his successor as delegate from Hanover County) contributed anonymous essays for the journal, while his brother Skelton (also a Richmond lawyer) wrote for the *Examiner* under his own name. But the most startling addition to the venture was that of James Thomson Callender (075). His polemical contributions to the

Aurora of Benjamin Franklin Bache in Philadelphia brought the Scottish émigré a threat of prosecutions under both the Alien and Sedition Acts; so he fled Philadelphia just before Bache's death in September 1798, finding refuge with Senator Stevens Thomas Mason in Loudon County. In May 1799, shortly before Jones parted from Dixon, Callender appeared in Richmond and went to work writing for the *Examiner*; it proved to be an association that Jones would later to regret.

This operation was supported financially by Virginia Republicans including Jefferson himself. Yet those leaders also needed to expand the number of newspapers in the state that would champion Jefferson's election in 1800 in the face of the dominance of Federalist-oriented mercantile advertisers in Virginia's principal commercial centers, such as Davis's *Virginia Gazette*. Consequently, Jones's office became the hub for a cooperative effort to start and sustain such papers throughout the Commonwealth. At the center of this effort was editor-publisher James Lyon (274); he was the son of the Vermont printer-turned-congressman Matthew Lyon, who was convicted in late 1798 "under the sedition law, for a letter written before the law was made, and publishing an extract from a letter written by Joel Barlow, on the public affairs of the nation." Facing similar legal problems, the younger Lyon accepted an invitation to come to Virginia to coordinate and edit a series of periodicals that would support Republican candidates in the coming elections. Arriving in Richmond in early 1799, Lyon was quickly involved in putting together a multi-part publication plan.

The first part was launching a monthly magazine that would provide common matter for all of the country's Republican journals, as well as the Virginia ones Lyon would start the next winter. In late April, he circulated proposals for publishing the *National Magazine, or A Political, Historical, Biographical, and Literary Repository* – the first monthly magazine to be published in Virginia; the first number of that serial was issued from Jones's Richmond press on June 1, 1800. The next piece was starting a book-printing concern, which created an independent press for the *National Magazine* and Lyon's later journals as well. But the third and final part was the most important of all – to commence publishing new Republican newspapers throughout the state. In each of these ventures, Lyon was the editorial partner to a print-tradesman in each locale, so dispensing a consistent partisan message. The first of these papers was *The Republican* at Petersburg, with Thomas Field (162) as its resident printer, issuing in December 1799; it was followed in January 1800 by *The Friend of the People*, published in Richmond, and by *The Scourge of Aristocracy*, published in Staunton by John McArthur (285), Lyon's cousin. The *Baltimore American* noted Lyon's accomplishment, remarking that "this gentleman, in the term of one year, has established no less than four Republican presses, from any of which more *truths* are issued in one day than the whole federal faction can *digest* in a month."

Yet behind this all was Jones and the capital's Republican leadership. They now set out to publish a "national paper" to be called *The Press*, utilizing a stock-based company managed by three trustees: public-printer Jones; Alexander MacRae (299), a respected lawyer and local militia colonel; and Dr. John H. Foushee (170), son of the city's foremost Republican leader, Dr. William Foushee. *The Press* was to be produced in three editions – thrice-weekly, weekly, and biweekly – with content being drawn from the *Friend of the People*, the *National Magazine*, and Jones's twice-weekly *Examiner*, then the state's journal-of-record,

as well as from any other publication that was deemed suitable by the trustees. How long this campaign newspaper survived is unclear, as only two issues of the weekly edition and one of the biweekly edition are known extant, both published before the third number of Lyon's *Friend of the People* appeared in early February.

Meanwhile, the first volume of Callender's notorious *The Prospect Before Us* was issued by the combined Republican presses of Richmond in January 1800; still, it was not until May that Callender was indicted by a federal grand jury on three counts of seditious libel for the content of that initial volume; that June, he was tried and convicted in a questionable trial directed by Justice Samuel Chase, an arch-Federalist long determined to apply the federal sedition law in defiant Virginia, and was sentenced to six months in jail with a \$200 fine for his criticisms of Adams. As the book was printed in parts among several Richmond offices, Jones avoided prosecution for its publication, unlike Callender, who felt betrayed by that evasion. But more importantly, the polemicist was rebuffed by Jefferson and his associates in his demands for compensation for services rendered following the election, and so soon turned against Virginia's Republicans.

Once Jefferson's election became certain, the ancillary ventures in Jones's office fell away; Lyon abandoned his journals in Petersburg and Staunton to his local journeyman partners, while he moved his Richmond newspaper to Georgetown, D.C., in August, evidently in expectation of becoming the national voice of a new Republican administration. This rapid contraction left Jones with considerable debt and few options for recovering his financial stability. His *Examiner* now represented the far left end of a local newspaper continuum shared by the moderately Republican sheet of Samuel Pleasants (*Virginia Argus*) and the moderately Federalist one of Augustine Davis (*Virginia Gazette*). During the campaign, a competitor on the far-right end of that continuum appeared, but that oppositional *Virginia Federalist* of William Alexander Rind (359), son of the Williamsburg Rinds, foundered out of a lack of financial support and relocated to friendlier climes in the District of Columbia after just fifteen months. Yet despite its brief residence, Rind's paper would create a life-long image of Jones as a duelist. James Rind (357), the journal-publisher's younger brother, was a Richmond lawyer recruited for that effort and frequently contributed items for the paper as an anonymous correspondent. In March 1800, after an exchange of personal insults by Rind in the *Federalist* and Jones in his *Examiner*, Jones challenged Rind to a duel; the two met on the morning of April 8th, with Rind suffering a non-fatal, but incapacitating bullet wound to his abdomen; carried from the field, he never fully recovered from the injury. Thereafter, Jones found that a "pair of loaded pistols [were] as necessary on his desk as the ink stand and pens," or so his friend Samuel Brooks (054) later claimed.

Nevertheless, it was another new Federalist journal that tested Jones most. In July 1801, a British émigré named Henry Pace (319) began publishing a new apolitical literary weekly in Richmond: *The Recorder or Lady's and Gentleman's Miscellany*; but within months both the paper and its proprietor were in dire straits financially. At the same time, Callender, who had been freed from jail for his 1800 libel conviction, had fallen out with the Republicans – and with Jefferson in particular – for failing to provide him with a press and paper as "just" payment for his services and as compensation for his imprisonment. He approached Pace in late 1801 with the suggestion that if Pace gave him control over the editorial content of his

troubled weekly, the two could profit handsomely in the bargain. The strapped Pace quickly agreed. So as 1802 dawned, Callender took control of the paper and immediately launched a vituperative assault on his former partners in the pages of the *Recorder*, starting with Jones. Callender accused him of corruption in office, describing his continuing protestations of poverty as bald-faced lies – even though Jones had to borrow endlessly to fund his office, as Callender well knew – as well as finding Jones guilty by association with similarly corrupt family members. Despite the falsity of the published charges, Jones still felt it necessary to leave Richmond for a time in mid-1802 to allow tempers to cool after his brother Skelton was involved in a duel that took the life of Armistead Seldon, a Richmond Federalist. Absent his regular foil, Callender turned his attention to Jefferson, publishing in October 1802 his notorious report of an illicit sexual liaison, complete with a bastard child, between the now president and Sally Hemings, one of his enslaved servants. Shortly thereafter, Callender was physically assaulted, at least twice, in the streets of Richmond; the *Recorder* office was vandalized by college students; and both partners were brought before judicial authorities to answer for a breach of the peace. Pace parted ways with his libelous editor in June 1803, finally bringing the public attacks on Jones, his family, and his supporters to an unsettling end; Callender drowned in the James a month later in a drunken stupor, disgraced.

In the midst of his war with Callender, Jones attempted to expand his business into Norfolk, apparently in an effort to link together businesses in both towns through his newspapers, just as Federalist publishers like William Prentis (340) of Petersburg were also attempting then. In summer 1802, Jones dispatched his foreman, William W. Worsley, to Norfolk to conduct the press of the new *Commercial Register* as a full partner. While the *Register* drew sufficient revenue from Republican merchants there, Worsley soon discovered that Jones was too distracted by the Callender affair and his other interests to produce the editorial material that he had promised in their new venture. Jones was acting as a real-estate agent and land speculator throughout his tenure as public printer, as well as the organizer of the horse races staged by the Richmond Jockey Club. But the last straw for Worsley came in January 1803, when Jones was named to a committee to divide Richmond into three wards (along with Foushee and MacRae, among others) and conduct elections for the reorganized government; exasperated, Worsley promptly quit the Norfolk venture, dissolving their five-month-long partnership, closing the *Register*, and returning to Richmond to work again as a journeyman printer. Unchastened, Jones continued to accept other non-publishing tasks, as seen later that same year when he was named a trustee of the Richmond Academy.

Yet even as all these diversions ensued, Jones remained committed to the production and distribution of public imprints in line with the Jeffersonian tenet of an informed citizenry. From 1799 to 1801, he added to his annual workload publication of the Acts of Congress for that year, and continued to have the right to publish those of subsequent Congresses from 1802 onward. But to do so, alongside his regular work, required Jones to borrow cash in anticipation of his salary; the records of the public treasury are replete with directives from Jones assigning his pay to his creditors. His commitment to the public, it seems, outweighed that to his own fortunes, and his family would feel the effects of that choice.

Endings

By the summer of 1803, Jones was free of his tormentors, but the fight had gone out of him as well, a result of declining health. While he never evinced a strong constitution, Jones was now withering away, visibly and noticeably, to a disease that sapped his strength as well. That August, he transferred ownership of the *Examiner* to his brother Skelton, his editor for the preceding few months, and began lobbying Jefferson for appointment to a less arduous and more remunerative Federal position than that of his state one. He was clearly moving away from the printing trade by then, as the number of printers subcontracting the public work from him grew after 1802, suggesting just how much the departure of Worsley had reduced his office's capabilities. Of particular note is his employment of John Courtney Jr. (109), who had risen to owning a press as partner to John Dixon Jr. in the job-printing office that he established after parting from Jones. In March 1804, Jones was offered the post of the Federal Commissioner of Loans for Virginia; he accepted on March 31st, resigning his public-printing appointment that same day; Virginia's Council of State offered the post to Samuel Pleasants four days later, who promptly accepted it, now formally assuming title for the role he had filled informally for Davis earlier.

Many saw this change as a move to ensure Jones's financial solvency in the future. Not yet forty then, it was still obvious to those around him that his years of public service had left him nearly bankrupt. But Jones did not live long enough to see any accumulation of wealth in his new-found position. In August 1806, while on a trip to the springs of southwestern Virginia to recover his health, Jones died as a result of his continuing illness. His disordered and intestate estate was assigned to George William Smith, a Richmond lawyer who was then a member of the Council of State as well. Much of his estate was sold to pay his debts, with his country home just outside Richmond going under the gavel the following January.

Many nineteenth-century histories reported that Meriwether Jones died in yet another duel near Warm Springs, but such was not the case. His family was one full of duelists, and his brother Skelton had killed a man in a duel in 1800, but this Jones participated in just two duels in his lifetime, and after the Rind affair only as a second to an elderly man challenged by a younger, stronger opponent. That myth was confirmed by an obituary in Richmond's new *Impartial Observer*, written by his friend Samuel Brooks (054), who reported that a "pair of loaded pistols was as necessary on his desk as the ink stand and pens" were. Yet the same was also said of Henry Pace, who never dueled, when he died. That report has helped establish Jones in the public imagination as a volatile individual when the truth is, as one historian has noted, that he was "a man of tumultuous times and political fervor" who died an untimely death ill-befitting the heroic persona he had projected during his life as well as did a chivalrous death in an affair of honor.

Jones's widow Lucy provides an interesting coda to this tale. In 1808, she remarried, taking George William Smith as her second husband, having developed a close attachment to the attorney as a result of his administration Jones's estate. However, her new marriage only temporarily relieved her bereavement. Smith died tragically in the Richmond Theater Fire of December 26, 1811, presiding over a benefit performance just three weeks after being

named as successor to James Monroe as Virginia's governor.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1766 Northumberland County, Virginia
Married: in 1783 Lucy Franklin Reade @ Hanover County, Virginia.
Died: Aug. 9 1806 Warm Springs, Bath County, Virginia.
Children: Only one son, Walter Flood Jones (1790-1841).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 5; Christian, *Richmond; Mordecai, By-Gone Days; Captain Roger Jones of London and Virginia*; notices in *Virginia Argus* (1798-1806), *Examiner* (1798-1804), *Recorder* (1801-03); and *Richmond Enquirer* (1804-06); obituary in *Richmond Impartial Observer*, August 23, 1806.