

**244 JORDAN, A. C. – [AUGUSTUS CAESAR JORDAN]**

**Bookseller & Publisher**

**Norfolk**

Bookseller and job-printer in Norfolk; publisher of the *Epitome of the Times; or Historical, Political, and Commercial Miscellany* there (1798-1802).

Jordan was the publisher of the first literary journal attempted in Norfolk, but his larger import in the port town was not as a journalist. Besides being a well-known merchant, he was a county magistrate, a captain in the local militia regiment, a director of the Norfolk branch of the Bank of Virginia, treasurer of the Masonic lodge, secretary-trustee of the Norfolk Academy, and secretary-treasurer of the Mutual Assistance Society that aided fire victims there. As Jordan died at just thirty-three, the number of civic and political positions he attained in such a brief period indicate he was a native of the Norfolk area and son of a respected family; however, the numerous Jordans then living there, all descended from one seventeenth-century progenitor, make determining his exact parentage difficult. It is quite evident though that he was one of three brothers who were named for figures in classical history – Alexander, Augustus Caesar, and Marcus Tullius Cicero (245) – and that all three held positions of considerable responsibility in the community in their lifetimes.

This Jordan first appears in the bibliographic record with publication of the *Epitome of the Times; or Historical, Political, and Commercial Miscellany* in March 1798. As Jordan's name appears in lists of unclaimed letters in Philadelphia's post office in the mid-1790s, it seems that he was sent there in his teenage years to train in the print trade and that he returned to Norfolk in the winter of 1797-98 to start publishing his twice-weekly *Epitome*. At that time, the only newspaper issued in the town was *The Norfolk Herald & Public Advertiser* of Charles Willett (445) and James O'Connor (317), two London-trained journeymen who had fled the suppression of "radical" printers and publishers there in the early 1790s. The two had just prevailed in a three-year-long contest with the *American Gazette* of William Davis (127), an ardent Federalist who had dispossessed Willett of his interest in that journal, so instigating the ensuing competition. With the end of Davis's paper in November 1797, their mildly-Republican journal was now consumed by the advertising notices that fueled the town's commerce, leaving little space for literary matter. Jordan evidently moved to fill that void by issuing a newspaper that offered such content.

However, Jordan quickly found the "enlightened" rationalism promoted by his journal under fire from Federalist critics. On August 4th, he was beaten while working in his office over a letter he had published; that letter criticized the commander of Norfolk's federal fort for his conduct in that command; the commander and a lieutenant appeared in the *Epitome* office demanding the identity of the author and set about to beat the man's name out of him; when Jordan refused, despite his injuries, the commander's lieutenant told him that "if he ever dared to publish any thing against the Government of the Military, or indeed any thing that he did not like, he would suffer ten times as much" and then ordered Jordan to print a paper that they would edit for him; he again refused, and the fort's commander drew his subordinate away before he could do Jordan any further harm. Jordan published a transcript of his deposition before local magistrates on the affair, which was widely reprinted in papers

throughout country – with Republican ones deriding the commander for his brutality and indifference to the freedom of the press, and Federalist ones justifying the beating as a way to keep seditious editors under control. In the ensuing months, Jordan wrote frequently and articulately against the Alien & Sedition Acts recommended by John Adams, so becoming a regular target for Federalist writers. It was an exertion that led Jefferson to later comment that Jordan's *Epitome* was the most literately-edited paper in the country.

This episode was central to the radicalization of the *Epitome* from then onward. Yet style and logic mattered as much to Jordan as did promoting Republican perspectives; as a result, he wrote much of the non-advertising content of his paper. But that unceasing effort also undermined his health; in 1801, Jordan contracted a prolonged illness that slowed his work through that summer into the fall, and probably contributed to his decision to close the *Epitome* in early April 1802. By then, his visibility and respectability brought offers of non-journalistic, civic duties that he felt obliged to accept as a good citizen, ones that would limit his contributions to the *Epitome*. So rather than lose control of his journal, or undercut its quality, Jordan closed his newspaper in order to focus on those other responsibilities.

His departure from the editorial fray prompted local Republicans to encourage Meriwether Jones (242), then the printer to the Commonwealth, to publish a replacement paper; Jones sent his shop foreman, William W. Worsley (462), to Norfolk that fall to conduct the new *Commercial Register*; however, that journal died the next January, when Worsley returned to Richmond, exhausted by the effort, replicating Jordan's experience.

Jordan now advertised his business as printer, stationer, and bookseller, and continued to do so until his death in 1810. In this role, he published works for all political and religious persuasions, reflecting his own sense of what entailed a free press. Most innovative among them were the first Norfolk city directories published in 1801 and 1806, the first of their kind issued in any Virginia city, compiled by writer Charles Simmons (386). In 1803, Jordan published three editions of *The American Primer*, a locally-crafted elementary textbook with a Jeffersonian focus; yet he also published in 1808 an edition of the Federalist-focused civics text *A Plain Political Catechism* by the Unitarian minister Elhanan Winchester, first issued in 1796 at the suggestion of Timothy Pickering, Secretary of State under John Adams who had enforced the Alien & Sedition Acts. In 1805, he published the minutes that year's annual meeting of the Baptist Portsmouth Association, after having published a tract excoriating the Baptist divine John Leland just a year before. Jordan also published an open letter to Robert Smith, Jefferson's Secretary of the Navy, from Daniel Bedinger, Naval Agent at the Norfolk Navy Yard, who was dismissed in 1808 in consequence of unfounded charges of corruption made by his politically-connected successor. And all the while, Jordan was the printer of choice for the town's two Masonic lodges and, from 1802 on, publisher of a self-titled almanac.

Yet these ventures were subsidiary to his trade as a bookseller once he ended the *Epitome*. Jordan imported large numbers of books from suppliers in New York and Philadelphia from 1800 onward, as well as from English and French ones; as a result, his store developed a reputation as the best source for French language titles in Virginia; despite that reputation, Jordan advertised the variety in his book-stocks, noting an "extensive assortment of Books

on Law, Divinity, Physic, Surgery, Natural History, Geography, Mathematics, Novels, School-Books, &c.," though not political works. That retailing plan seems to have buffered his store business from any negative associations with his political views.

The standing that his activities brought him was something Jordan evidently shared with his brothers. At about the time he was commissioned as a captain in the 2nd Battalion of 54th Virginia Militia Regiment, Augustus relinquished his seat as a director of the Bank of Virginia in Norfolk to his brother Alexander; in turn, he went on to a long and successful career as the bank's cashier, as well as an exchange agent and estate administrator. But Augustus made brother Marcus into his business successor; after the closing of the *Epitome*, he joined the business as a bookbinder, abandoning his small grocery business in Norfolk; then on his brother's death, Marcus assumed management and ownership of Augustus's bookstore, even as Alexander administered the estate.

Jordan's death in early 1810 was apparently unexpected, though surviving obituaries are surprisingly few and brief. Later advertising notices by the landlord who bought his house indicates he had married, as that residence, where his widow ("Mrs. A. Jordan") still lived in 1818, was offered for rent, suggesting she relinquished a life-tenancy right at that time. And while a known congregant of the local Methodist church, he was buried in the graveyard of St. Paul's Episcopal Church (then Christ Protestant Episcopal Church). Documents explicating this confusing end to Jordan's short life have yet to be uncovered.

### ***Personal Data***

Born:           ca. 1777   apparently in Virginia.

Died:        Mar. 21 1810   Norfolk, Virginia.

A wife evidently survived him, but no record of children yet found.

Sources: Imprints (esp. *Simmon's Norfolk Directory*, 1801 & 1806); Brigham; Tucker, *Abstracts*; advertising notices in *Philadelphia General Aurora* (1795-96); *Norfolk Commercial Register* (1802-03), *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger* (1804-10).