

## 261 LANIER, JAMES – [JAMES T. LANIER]

**Publisher**

**Danville**

Publisher of the *Roanoke Sentinel* (1819-22) at Danville.

Lanier was a planter and lawyer who helped to lead the early development of the town of Danville. The variety of positions that he held in both the public and private sectors there evince an individual determined to build the small village into a regional commercial center.

Born in 1792, Lanier served in a cavalry unit of the Virginia militia during the War of 1812, evidence of his elite origins, as is his 1814 marriage to a descendant of the Tabb family. He moved his young family to Danville from his Brunswick County birthplace between 1816 and 1818, after having lost an election for the House of Delegates in early 1816, just as had his father in 1812. It was the first of two noteworthy electoral losses for the well-connected Lanier, with the second coming in the 1825 congressional elections, when he easily carried Danville and Brunswick County but lost to a Jacksonian favorite-son of nearby Campbell and Halifax counties, Thomas Davenport. He was also a founder of the town's Masonic lodge in 1820. As a business leader, Lanier was a director of the town's first cotton mill, the Danville Manufacturing Company, in 1828 – evidently as both an adjunct to his sizeable plantation near the town and an advocate for shifting the region's agricultural focus from tobacco to cotton. By 1836, he was cashier of the Danville branch of the Farmers Bank of Virginia, which could finance such transitions, as well as being secretary of the Pittsylvania Academy and trustee of the Danville Female Academy. Additionally, Lanier conducted a legal practice there from 1833, as the federal censuses of the period list his occupation as a lawyer.

A key feature in Lanier's hopes and dreams for Danville was his early embrace of a weekly newspaper. That paper was the *Danville Courier*, which first issued on June 7, 1818. Its proprietor was a young Pennsylvania-born printer named Elhanan W. Reinhart (351), for whom this weekly was his first independent venture in the trade. As someone who lacked any previous ties to Danville or Virginia, it is clear he had been invited to move to this very small town – then a rude village of about 50 structures and 400 people – by local leaders intent on expanding the town's commercial reach via a weekly mercantile advertiser. Such a purpose was clearly stated in the *Courier's* prospectus:

"Politics will not be the primary object of the *Courier*. It will be devoted to Religion and Commerce, Manufactures and internal Improvements. It will be diversified with gleanings from works of literature and science with selections of a nature instructive and amusing."

As only the third number of this paper has survived (June 20, 1818), it is difficult to discern the substance of its content or any problems that may have accompanied publication of the *Courier*. But the appearance of Danville's second newspaper in August of 1819 is suggestive. Reinhart's subsequent career is marked by his evolution into a noted Jacksonian publisher between 1823 and 1831, while Danville's business community came to embrace a decidedly anti-Jacksonian perspective. With another mercantile advertiser emerging there just over a year after the *Courier* began publication, it seems that Reinhart had agreed to a simple one-

year contract in 1818 which expired in June 1819. Contemporary accounts indicate that he remained in Danville until 1822 and so printed the ensuing paper for its proprietor, James Lanier; as Lanier was a merchant-planter and lawyer, it is not a stretch to suggest that he was among those who unduced Reinhart to relocate; then when the year-long pact expired, Reinhart became Lanier's employee printing his new weekly – the *Roanoke Sentinel* – and remained so until Lanier passed it to other hands at the moment Reinhart left Danville.

As only the eighth number of the *Sentinel* has survived (September 25, 1819), it is difficult to discern the substance of its content or any problems accompanying its publication. Still, it is clear that Lanier had a deep commitment to this journalistic venture, as he immediately sought, and was granted, the post of postmaster for Danville, so allowing him ready access to the existing national information-distribution system; he retained that post throughout his association with the *Sentinel*. But reprintings of pieces from the *Sentinel* also evince his growing interest in political affairs, especially as they related to Danville's development. In the years before the 1824 election, Lanier supported John Quincy Adams for president over Virginia's newly-appointed favorite son, William H. Crawford of Georgia, because of the Treasury Secretary's backing of the Bank of the United States, which largely ignored small locales like Danville. So at the end of March 1822, Lanier conveyed the *Sentinel* to Thomas H. Clark and John Connor, apparently anticipating his forthcoming (unsuccessful) campaigns for the U.S. Congress as an anti-Jackson candidate.

Clark followed Lanier's lead, continuing to publish the conservative, Whig journal until his death in November 1829. That unexpected event brought Lanier back to journalism in short order. It seems that Lanier had helped keep Clark's paper afloat through the winter of 1829-30 and then acquired its office from the general's estate (and a partner named Cabaniss) in early 1830. Thus the *Sentinel's* first proprietor became that for the succeeding *Independent Statesman and Roanoke Commercial Gazette*, which first appeared May 14, 1830. The only issue of the *Statesman* known extant is that for July 23, 1830 (vol. 1, no. 11), leaving an end date for Lanier's new journal unknown. Another Whig journal issued there in June 1831 (the *Danville Reporter*), suggesting that the *Statesman* closed in late 1830 or early 1831, but a definitive date cannot be assigned without more evidence. So it seems that the continuum from the *Sentinel* to the *Statesman* ended in the winter of 1830-31.

The *Independent Statesman* was Lanier's last journalistic venture. By 1831, he had served on the Pittsylvania County Court for nearly a decade, so acting as Danville's resident justice. As a result, he was a pivotal figure in obtaining a city charter for the town from the General Assembly in 1832, and so was elected as Danville's first mayor in 1833. Yet that post was his last public office. After 1840, Lanier's relatively large slave-holdings (20-30) shrank by about two-thirds (8-9), suggesting his withdrawal from commercial farming, and by 1850, they seem limited to household servants alone. It appears that his well-known Whig views were increasingly out of step with the Democratic ones of his Southside contemporaries then. So it is probably fortunate that he did not have to address the secession question in 1861, for Lanier had died in September 1856 at his Danville home, surrounded by his large family.

**NB:** The use of middle initials by the several James Laniers then living in this neighborhood was necessary both to identify each man and to distance themselves from the James Lanier (no initial) who fled Danville after murdering four people in the town in summer 1840.

***Personal Data***

Born: May 5 1792 Brunswick County, Virginia.  
Married: June 8 1814 Martha Tabb Green @ Mecklenburg County, Va.  
Died: Sept. 20 1856 Danville, Pittsylvania County, Virginia  
Children: Reportedly eleven in number, but only eight names found in family histories: Augustus Frederick (d. 1815); Camillus Voltaire (b. 1816); Marcellus Volney (b. 1818); James Marsten (d. 1821); Robert Virgilius (b. 1822); Roberta Camilla Marcella (b. 1824); Lucius Lucullus (b. 1826); Martha Lucilla Tabb (b. 1828).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Clement, *Pittsylvania County*; Aaron, *Pittsylvania County*; 1825 election returns at *A New Nation Votes* (Tufts University Digital Collections); *House of Delegates Journal*, 1835; *Journal of the Senate*, 1836; Federal Decennial Census, 1830-50; genealogical data from Lanier family charts posted on Ancestry.com and Genealogy.com (November 2012).

Brigham made a distinction between the *Courier* and the *Sentinel* from concurrent references to each in Norfolk newspapers in 1820; yet Cappon did not report the *Courier* as a post-1820 title, nor is Brigham's *Courier* reference one conclusively associated with Danville. As the surviving copies of both journals are from different, consecutive years, it is more likely that they were successive iterations of the same paper. Given that they issued from such a small town, with limited readership and resources, the possibility of two papers publishing there at the same time is remote, if not implausible; hence, the representation here of the *Sentinel* as essentially a continuation the *Courier* with a change of ownership in 1819.