

272 LYFORD, WILLIAM G. – [WILLIAM GILMAN LYFORD]

Printer, Publisher

Lexington, Staunton, Richmond, Norfolk

Publisher of the *Virginia Telegraphe & Rockbridge Courier* (1804) at Lexington with Samuel Walkup (426); of *Candid Review* (1805-07), *Political Censor* (1808-09), *Republican Farmer* (1809-10) successively at Staunton; and reading-room proprietor (1810-28) in Norfolk.

Lyford was more an economic journalist than he was a publisher, forging a forty-year-long career compiling and distributing data on commerce and trade in the Chesapeake port cities of Norfolk and Baltimore. But that calling was preceded by a decade working actively as a printer and newspaper publisher in Virginia. Born and raised in Exeter, New Hampshire, Lyford learned the printing trade before he left the north, probably in the Exeter office of the accomplished and prolific Federalist publisher Henry Ranlet, given his later proclivities.

His first appearance as an independent publisher came in February 1804, when he became the partner of the Lexington merchant Samuel Walkup in publishing his *Virginia Telegraphe and Rockbridge Courier*; as Lyford married there just three weeks before the firm's creation, it is clear that he was already in Walkup's employ for much of 1803, and possibly from the weekly's commencement in November 1802, when he was eighteen. But Walkup evidently found religious publishing more edifying than he did weekly journalism, for in October 1804 he stopped publishing his two-year-old *Telegraphe* to concentrate on publication of the new bimonthly *Virginia Religious Magazine* for the Lexington Synod of the Presbyterian Church.

Lyford left Lexington for Staunton to purchase the office of *The Phenix* of Ira Woodruff (458), who had bought this successor to the *Staunton Gazette* of John Wise (455); he was about to suspend the paper out of financial difficulty, so leaving the largest Shenandoah Valley town south of Winchester without a mercantile advertiser. On January 4, 1805, Lyford began issuing the *Candid Review and Staunton Weekly Register* there in its place. Avowedly Federalist in its perspective, befitting its setting in "Old Federal Augusta" County, Lyford's *Candid Review* survived until the fall of 1807, when declining economic conditions associated with the ongoing maritime war in the Atlantic both restricted his revenue and ruined the paper mill supplying his needs, just as a viable bilingual Republican competitor emerged, the *Staunton Eagle* of Jacob D. Dietrich (135).

By May 1808, Lyford had reorganized his business sufficiently to start up a new journal, the *Staunton Political Censor*, with which he intended to censor Jefferson and Madison for "the stagnation of all business [which] ought to incite the farmer, the merchant, the mechanic, and indeed every other person, to inquire into the cause." Exactly a year later, Lyford gave his weekly the mocking title of *Republican Farmer*, saying that he had had to shed the function of a censor because of the "boasted virtue and wisdom of the chief [Madison]" which made his paper's "ensorious name and office" unnecessary; he noted that,

"as we are to abandon all intercourse with the trading world, and devote ourselves to pursuits of agriculture; and as my paper will be appropriated to the information and amusement of our virtuous yeomanry, the name of "Republican Farmer" will be alike characteristic of the times, and the object of my paper."

While the title change aptly expressed Lyford's frustration with the Republicans' rejection of merchant-friendly policies in favor of farmer-focused ones, it conformed to his subscribers' views and did not undermine the journal's viability. Indeed, Lyford appears to have quickly grown in social stature, being a founding member of the town's Union Chapter of the Grand Masonic Lodge of Virginia in the spring of 1805, just weeks after his arrival. Nevertheless, the deaths of three of his infant children during his Staunton years evidently soured him on the locale. In early May 1810, shortly after the birth of his third son, Lyford sold his business to Isaac Collett (100), another Federalist publisher from beyond Virginia's borders, and took his family east to Richmond. Collett continued as the paper's publisher until 1823, when he sold the business to Kenton Harper (203), who remade the *Republican Farmer* into the *Staunton Spectator*, a journal that survived until the First World War.

In Richmond, Lyford apparently worked as a journeyman printer while attempting to issue a new journal there. Drawing on the growth of freemasonry in Virginia then, as well as his personal interest in the fraternity, that September he proposed publishing a *Freemasons' Magazine and Miscellaneous Library* monthly from Richmond. He indicated that publication would commence on January 1st of 1811 "in case sufficient encouragement offers to justify the undertaking" were found before the end of November. But as no such monthly was ever issued, Lyford evidently fell short of his subscription goals. This still-born effort proved to be Lyford's last journalistic venture in Virginia.

Instead, he relocated to the bustling port of Norfolk, where he took on a subservient role as the manager of a commercial reading room there – the Steamboat Hotel Reading Room. While seemingly a step down for him, in fact, the change set him on an advantageous course for the rest of his life. As keeper of a register of the ships transiting the port and manager of a hotel that catered to the masters of those ships, Lyford was now in a position to compile shipping news and cargo data that he would share with newspapers in Norfolk, Alexandria, Baltimore, and Richmond as a paid correspondent. By 1816, he had also begun acting as local agent for a series of merchant-ships sailing from New England ports. These activities gave Lyford the capital and reputation to establish his own "Commercial Reading and News Room;" the varied and numerous papers received from Atlantic and Caribbean ports, as well as the correspondence and conversations he had, meant Lyford was soon an influential broker of maritime news on the East Coast.

Lyford's reputation led to important commercial publications written by him and printed by others. The first of these issued in 1822, an authoritative record of exchange rates between the various ports of the Atlantic rim: his *Mercantile Exchange Tables*. That same year saw publication of his detailed report on a sensational murder trial held in Norfolk, an imprint consistent with his already respected reporting on piracy and theft in those Atlantic coast ports: *An Account of the Apprehension, Trial, Conviction, and Condemnation of Manuel Philip Garcia and Jose Demas Garcia Castellano*, produced by Christopher Hall (198).

In 1828, Lyford was asked to bring his knowledge and expertise to Baltimore. In early June, the keeper of the "Exchange Commercial and Reading Rooms" there, one Joseph Escavaille, died of an apparently of a long, wasting disease; the influential *Baltimore Gazette* of William Gwynn quickly launched a campaign to bring Lyford to Baltimore to replace him; but once

Lyford reached Baltimore in July, Escavaille's widow reneged on an agreed deal, selling her husband's interest to a group of businessmen there instead, who then engaged Escavaille's deputy, Thomas Neilson, as their new reading-room manager – a case of locals favoring locals over outside competence. Still, Lyford turned the disappointment to his advantage, buying into Baltimore's triweekly *Commercial Chronicle* of printer Sheppard C. Leakin and lawyer Francis H. Davidge, and serving as its "commercial editor." A year later, after Davidge had sold his interest in the *Chronicle* to Samuel Sands of the competing *Marylander*, Lyford withdrew from the journal and took on managing the Fountain Inn on Light Street. In short order, he had recreated his former Steamboat Hotel situation of shipping register, reading-room, and merchant accommodations in this new setting; he also returned to his role as a correspondent for distant papers, such as the *Norfolk Herald* of his long-time friend Thomas G. Broughton (055). Thus, after nearly three years of effort, he was able to divest himself of the hotel operation and pursue the ship-register and reading-room business alone, moving its location around the port annually until about 1834.

Once established in this independent concern, Lyford also returned to publishing. In 1836, he issued the *Baltimore Address Directory*, an alphabetical listing to which he "prefixed a statistical article, developing some of the resources of Baltimore." The following year, he published a *Western Address Directory*, providing – as Gwynn reported – the information needed to "open the channels of communication, and increase our knowledge of the resources, the products, and the capabilities of that broad and important region." The success of these works, as well as Lyford's reputation for compiling accurate information, brought calls to publish a weekly that would provide more timely mercantile intelligence than could these directories. In March 1838, *Lyford's Baltimore Price Current* made its first appearance. While its utility was quickly recognized, the paper was problematic financially, as subscribers were few in number, largely a result of his journal's content being promptly republished in other newspapers; *Lyford's Price-Current* almost went under at the end of its second year (March 1840), and publication was suspended at the end of its seventh year (March-May 1845) for want of subscribers; but Lyford continued the effort until illness forced his retirement in January 1850.

Throughout his many years as a compiler and reporter of commercial data and news, Lyford was invariably described as "industrious" and "indefatigable" by his correspondents. Such attributes extended to his role in civic affairs in Baltimore as well, In 1835, he purchased the celebrated Baltimore Museum of Rubens Peale (1784-1865), conducting it until he began his *Price Current* in 1838; and then in 1844, he was one of the twenty-two charter members of the Maryland Historical Society. But eventually age and infirmity caught up with Lyford. He appears to have withdrawn from most of his activities after the January 1850 closing of his weekly, though he remained a presence in his reading room. Lyford finally succumbed to "a protracted illness of two years" on Sunday June 6, 1852, leaving behind only two daughters who had attained adulthood, both of whom were themselves visited by tragedy being widowed and remarried multiple times.

Personal Data

Born: Feb. 19 1784 Exeter, New Hampshire.
Married: Feb. 2 1804 Margaret Mitchell @ Lexington, Virginia.
Died: June 6 1852 Baltimore, Maryland.
Children: Mary Ann (1804-67); Willson Rush (1806); George Mitchell (1807);
Juliet Cecelia (1808); William Gilman Jr. (1810-26); Margaret
Mitchell (1812-90).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Welch, *Francis Lyford of Boston*; Brown, *Freemasonry in Staunton*; Waddell, *Annals of Augusta County*; Scharf, *History of Baltimore*; Maryland State Archives authority records on Lyford, Gwynn, Leakin, and Davidge; newspaper notices in *Norfolk Herald* (1810-52), *Norfolk American Beacon* (1815-34), *Alexandria Gazette* (1816-52), *Baltimore Federal Republican/Baltimore Gazette* (1808-38), *Baltimore Patriot* (1817-52), *Baltimore Commercial Chronicle* (1828-29), *Baltimore Sun* (1837-52), and *Washington National Intelligencer* (1816-52).