

274 LYON, JAMES

Editor & Publisher

Petersburg, Staunton, Richmond, Alexandria

Editor and publisher of Jeffersonian newspapers in Alexandria, Petersburg, Richmond, and Staunton (ca. 1800), largely as an absentee, with a series of journeymen as his partners.

Lyon was the eldest son of the Vermont printer-publisher turned Republican congressman, Matthew Lyon (1750-1822). An Irish émigré who landed in Connecticut in 1765, his father was ever an antagonist of the Puritan elite there, inducing his relocation to Vermont just before the Revolutionary War. The press and paper he ran at Windsor brought him election to Congress in 1797, so putting him squarely in the center of the ugly debate over the Alien & Sedition Acts in 1798; he was severely beaten on the House floor during that debate by a Federalist representative from Connecticut, Roger Griswold, for both his opposition to the legislation and the lack of deference he showed to the Federalist leadership; Griswold went unpunished while Lyon was excoriated in Federalist newspapers. While seeking reelection in 1799, he was jailed for sedition under those same acts when he had son James publish an account of the incident and his views on the Adams administration's involvement in the affair; he was reelected to Congress from his jail cell, despite overt attempts by Federalist rivals to prevent such an outcome. In that second term, Lyon took part in of the week-long session in February 1801 that resolved the electoral tie between Jefferson and Aaron Burr.

The younger Lyon arrived in Virginia as the prosecutions of Republican editors like his father continued. While a case record has yet to be found, it appears that he too was about to be tried for sedition under an indictment issued from the federal district court at Rutland for his part in publishing his father's campaign pamphlet. Although just twenty-two at the time, Lyon had been a practicing printer from an early age, having trained on his father's press. In 1793, he founded an independent journal in Rutland, *The Farmer's Library*, selling that paper a year later. By early 1797, he was conducting a job printing concern in Waterford, New York, just north of Albany on the Hudson River. With his father's election to Congress, he returned to Fairhaven, Vermont, to manage his press, becoming involved in Vermont's sedition prosecutions as a result. Lyon's ensuing journey to Virginia was thus both an escape from the clutches of Federalist adversaries there and a chance to attain a national political standing among Republicans similar to that of his father. (He was convicted *in absentia* in 1800 for libeling a militia captain before he left Vermont.)

Virginia Days

Lyon was a skilled political writer whose talents Virginia's Republican leaders now wanted to employ. In the face of the dominance of the Federalist press nationally, they hoped to build a Republican information network that could counter the established Federalist one in the coming 1800 presidential election. 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 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 such magazine to be published in Virginia; the first number of that serial was issued from the Richmond press of Meriwether Jones (242), Virginia's public printer, on June 1st. 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; among its first titles was the most controversial one produced in Richmond in 1800: *The Prospect Before Us* by James Thomson Callender (075); Lyon and Jones escaped prosecution for sedition for their part in its production, while Callender, infamously, spent most of 1800 in the Richmond city jail for his temerity in challenging the Adams administration.

Yet the third and final part was the most important one of all – to commence publishing new Republican newspapers throughout the state. In each of these ventures, Lyon would serve as the editorial partner to a print-tradesman in each chosen 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; the first number of that sheet issued on December 19, 1799; it was followed on January 1, 1800, by *The Friend of the People* in Richmond; then lastly came *The Scourge of Aristocracy* in Staunton, with John McArthur (285), a maternal cousin, as printer. 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."

Still, the inauguration of the *Friend of the People* was not a solitary event in Richmond; it was actually the foundation for a multiple-title journal issuing from the press of Meriwether Jones – adding another layer to this already multi-layered scheme. In November 1799, the capital's leading Republicans met at the home of Col. Park Goodall to form a proprietary association to publish a "national paper" to be called *The Press*. The company consisted of 200 shares of \$5.00 each, providing a capital base of \$1000. *The Press* was to be produced in three distinct 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 publication's managers. That responsibility was vested in three trustees elected at that initial meeting – 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, who had chaired that organizational meeting. The trustees promptly put Lyon in editorial control of this off-shoot as well.

As the 1800 campaign progressed, however, the perceived need for these various papers waned proportionately to the growing confidence in Jefferson's victory, meaning that the funds behind each one of them began to evaporate. At the same time, Lyon's interest in the project, as well as his energy, also waned. In June, he withdrew from the Staunton journal, leaving John McArthur to fend for himself; he survived until mid-1802 thanks to a grant of the license to publish the laws of Congress in 1801 and 1802. Next, Lyon withdrew from the Richmond paper following the July 5th number, having published ten issues since January, rather than the expected thirteen.

Within a month, Lyon had moved his family, and his *National Magazine*, to Georgetown,

D.C.; there began publishing a new weekly paper – *The Cabinet* – on August 26, 1800. At the same time, he restarted publication of the *Friend of the People*, describing it as "a political paper" designed "for the purpose of carrying Virginia politics into the New England States; to reflect the bright rays of light and truth from the South, into the dark regions of the North." Then in December, Lyon withdrew from the *Republican* in Petersburg, leaving that paper to the devices of Thomas Field alone; of all of the journals started in the winter of 1799-1800 by Lyon, this twice-weekly sheet was the most viable, given its siting in a known Republican stronghold, which allowed it to survive into the 1830s. This last withdrawal marked the end of the project to offer a series of Republican newspapers in Virginia.

Washington Days

Shortly after commencing his new weekly *Cabinet* in Georgetown, Lyon proposed publishing a national edition of that paper in conjunction with James D. Westcott (437), the Republican publisher of *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser*. He seems to have expected his *National Cabinet* would become the voice for the incoming administration, having also moved the production of his monthly *National Magazine* there as well. Lyon was soon frustrated in his plans, however. In October 1800, the Philadelphia journalist Samuel Harrison Smith (1772-1845) moved his *Universal Gazette* to the District as well; in short order, that journal became a weekly ancillary to his newer *National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser*; once in office, Jefferson chose to use Smith's *Intelligencer* as his official organ – in part because Smith's paper had been less malicious during the campaign than had Lyon's (and William Duane's rival Philadelphia *Aurora*), and so not as badly tainted in Federalists' eyes. Thus Lyon was forced to merge his now-struggling *Cabinet* into the *National Magazine* in October 1801 and wait for a new opportunity to return to the national editorial spotlight; at that same time, he offered the new journal to his Virginia subscribers as a substitute for long promised issues of his old *Friend of the People* – one with the title *The Franklin, or a Political, Agricultural, and Mechanical Gazette* – although apparently that alternative issued only once.

Meanwhile, Lyon embraced a series of new ventures that he evidently hoped would aid in his return to political journalism. Early in 1801, he had proposed opening a circulating library in Washington near the Executive Mansion; it opened in June with local bookseller, apothecary, and teacher, Richard Dinmore (139), in charge. He also formed the Washington Print and Bookselling Company (also known as the Franklin Press) that spring, an equivalent to his prior Richmond book-publishing concern, to produce Republican-oriented imprints in the District. As that press would require copious amounts of paper to operate efficiently while competing for such with the government, Lyon also proposed opening a paper mill in the District; as one later appeared on Rock Creek called Lyon Mills, that project came to fruition, though how much of it was Lyon's doing is unclear. Then in January 1802, he closed the *National Magazine* to reorganize his affairs in advance of producing a literary weekly in conjunction with Dinmore; their new *American Literary Advertiser* issued that March from their press, promoting the same authors whose works that same press proposed publishing. And through all this, Lyon was seen as a candidate for clerkships in the new administration, as the *Washington Federalist* of William A. Rind (359) complained frequently, so extending

an animosity between them started by Rind's former *Virginia Federalist* in early 1800. That view was simply reinforced when Jefferson wrote recommendations for him, such as one to Postmaster-General Gideon Granger, saying that Lyon was

"... a young man of bold republicanism in the worst of times, of good character, son of the persecuted Matthew Lyon. Tho' of real genius, he has not succeeded in his newspapers, owing to his making them vehicles of other kinds of information, rather than of news, which is not within the general object in taking newspapers."

Despite their inherent problems, Lyon was still more interested in regaining the national editorial spotlight than he was in these ancillary ventures, and a new opportunity presented itself in the fall of 1802. James D. Westcott, now publisher of Alexandria's thrice-weekly *Columbian Advertiser* (formerly *The Times and District of Columbia Daily Advertiser*) made it known that he intended to retire from the newspaper business and focus solely on job printing. Recognizing Westcott's proven Republican journal as a route back to prominent political journalism, Lyon convinced Dinmore that they should buy his paper; on November 22, 1802, their new *Alexandria Expositor and Columbian Advertiser* issued its first number; shortly thereafter, the pair moved their *Literary Advertiser* across the Potomac as well.

Southern Days

Even as this new Alexandria venture began to flourish, Lyon was looking for opportunities beyond the District of Columbia. His father had moved to Kentucky in mid-1801, founding the town of Eddyville at the confluence of the Cumberland and Ohio Rivers; there he built a considerable business building boats and barges for the western river trade; he also brought his Vermont press with him, expecting that his son would join him there as its operator in support of his continuing political ambitions; that fall, the patriarch returned to Congress as a representative from Kentucky, much to the Federalists' disdain. However, son James was then considering other Southern venues.

In August 1802, Lyon launched another newspaper partnership with one Samuel Morse, a Republican journalist from Connecticut who had relocated to Savannah, Georgia; there the two men replicated the arrangement Lyon had had with his Virginia partners, with Morse producing their new *Georgia Republican & State Intelligencer* there while Lyon contributed content and funding from afar; that arrangement continued until late 1805, when Morse died and his estate negotiated a sale of the paper in January 1806. (In 1811, James Lewis Edwards [156], attempted to coerce Jefferson into paying him \$1000 that he claimed was owed to the paper's successors as a result of promises made to Lyon; Jefferson rejected his claim out of hand, saying he had never paid such a sum to any printer or publisher.)

By the time of Morse's death, Lyon had started another weekly in New Orleans: *The Union, Orleans Advertiser, and Price Current*, issued within days of the transfer of the Louisiana Territory to the United States by France in December 1803, a result of his having been asked by Jefferson to carry orders to Gen. James Wilkinson in Baton Rouge to take possession of the port city in the transfer; Lyon's involvement in that paper – the first English-language one published there – lasted just a year, when he sold the business to James M. Bradford, son of David Bradford, the first Kentucky printer (Lyon had to sue Bradford in 1806 to

receive payment of the note given to purchase the paper). In both ventures, Lyon did not reside in that place, travelling instead on a circuit from Washington to Kentucky to New Orleans to Savannah and then home again on a regular basis, leaving the daily business of each office to his resident partner.

Eventually, Lyon did move away from Washington, just as he had from Richmond. In August 1804, he terminated his alliance with Dinmore – who had closed their *Literary Advertiser* a year before to focus solely on their *Alexandria Expositor* during Lyon's extended absences – and moved to his father's Kentucky residence; by 1806, Lyon had moved on to Tennessee, downstream from Eddyville; there he was an unsuccessful Congressional candidate in 1808, failing to join his father and step-brother Chittenden, also a representative from Kentucky, in that legislative body. Thus he returned to journalism in January 1809, joining with William Moore as editor of his *Carthage Gazette*. That affiliation ended with the start of the War of 1812 when Lyon accompanied Gen. Wilkinson on his military expeditions through Spanish Florida. Thus Lyon was once again first on the scene with an English-language newspaper in Mobile (the *Mobile Gazette*) when Wilkinson's forces occupied West Florida in March 1813. As with his New Orleans *Union* before, Lyon's involvement with the *Mobile Gazette* was relatively brief, probably just a year, as he was back in west Tennessee at war's end.

Sometime between 1817 and 1820, Lyon moved his family again, this time to Chesterfield County in South Carolina, and the newly incorporated town of Cheraw. Situated on the Pee Dee River, Cheraw was then poised to serve as the main steamboat-trade entrepôt with the Carolina piedmonts, both North and South. In September 1820, Lyon established another newspaper there, the *Pee Dee Gazette and Cheraw Advertiser*, clearly expecting to reap the financial benefits of its prime location; but less than three years later, he had sold out once again, this time to one William Poole, who issued his succeeding *Cheraw Intelligencer and Southern Register* in June 1823.

The *Pee Dee Gazette* proved to be Lyon's last journalistic venture. Ten months after its sale, he died at Cheraw "in his forty-ninth year," and less than two years after his father's death. That short interval suggests that he was already ill when he sold the paper, as does family lore in reporting that he "died poor." In any event, he left behind a large family which now scattered across the Old Southwest, seeking the kind of economic security that Lyon never achieved in using his successive newspapers to advance his political principles.

Personal Data

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| Born: | Apr. 15 | 1776 | Wallingford, Rutland County, Vermont. |
| Married: | Dec. 25 | 1794 | Phila Risley @ Saratoga, New York. |
| Died: | Apr. 13 | 1824 | Cheraw, Chesterfield County, South Carolina. |
| Children: | Laura Matilda (1796-1843); Mason Risley (1798-1882); Eliza Jane (1801-96); Phila Ann (1806-07); James Lawrence (1808-20); Matthew Bradley (1810); Nancy Pomeroy (1810-41); Matthew III (1812-92); Adolphus Grant (1815-29); Eudocia Ellen (1815-22); Mary (1817-20). | | |

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; US Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 5 & 6; Lyon correspondence in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*; Austin, *Matthew Lyon: Blumberg, Repressive Jurisprudence*; Ames, *National Intelligencer*; McLaughlin, *Hampden of Congress* (1900). WPA, *Guide to Louisiana* (1941); Shackelford, *Muscle Shoals Baptist Association* (1891); newspaper notices in Richmond (1799-1804) and Washington (1800-06).