

277 MAJOR, SAMUEL

Printer

Williamsburg, Richmond

Journeyman printer working in the Williamsburg office of Alexander Purdie (345) in 1777.

Major has a fleeting presence in the historical record, limited to a report in the Journal of the House of Burgesses for 1777 and a notice of his death published in a Richmond paper in 1784. But that scant evidence provides adequate information to trace both his origins and his probable trade employments in the sources preserved by Colonial Williamsburg.

Born near Williamsburg in 1754, he was a son of a tavern-keeper and merchant in the town also named Samuel Major; his father died the year after he did, leading to confusion of the two Majors in nineteenth-century histories and genealogies; his grandfather was a Charles City merchant, Bernard Major (d. 1793), who is seen frequently in the surviving business records from the colonial capital. Given that background, it is clear that Major trained as a printer in Williamsburg in the late 1760s and early 1770s, so placing him in the office of Alexander Purdie and John Dixon Sr. (140) then. He remained with Purdie when the Purdie & Dixon partnership was dissolved at the end of 1774, as evinced by an investigation by the Burgesses into the inadvertent release of a "secret law" being printed in Purdie's office in November 1777; at that time, Major was called as a witness, along with fellow printers John Clarkson (093) and Joseph Matthews Davenport (115). His association both with Clarkson and that particular press office – one of two then operating in Williamsburg – suggests that Major continued working there after Purdie's death in 1779, when the office's new owners became the partnership of Clarkson and Augustine Davis (119), both nephews to Purdie.

After 1779, Major's employment is uncertain, though context suggests that he reconnected with John Dixon in Richmond. When the state's government removed to Richmond in early 1780, the Clarkson & Davis press remained in Williamsburg, claiming a financial inability to relocate; the office would continue to issue its *Virginia Gazette* through the end of 1780, but its printing work for the government was reassigned to the new Richmond press of John Dixon and Thomas Nicolson (315). As Major's 1784 death was announced only in Dixon's Richmond-based *Virginia Gazette*, it appears that Major left the employ of Clarkson & Davis in 1780 and joined Dixon & Nicolson in Richmond to help them produce the public work he had had a hand in printing since early 1775 in his former setting. That notice reported that Major had died "near Williamsburg," so also suggesting that he was visiting the family homestead when he died, unexpectedly, at the relatively young age of twenty-nine.

Personal Data

Born:	in	1754	York County, Virginia.
Married:	Mar. 8	1777	Anne Thornton Timson @ York County, Virginia.
Died:	Jan. 27	1784	York County, Virginia.
Children:	Samuel; Mary; Anne (no dates yet found).		

Sources: Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 4 (from Major files in CWF Research Dept.); *Journal House of Burgesses*; death notice in *Virginia Gazette and Independent Chronicle* (Dixon & Holt, Richmond), Feb. 5, 1784.