

278 MANSON, THOMAS P. – [THOMAS PESCOD MANSON]

Printer & Publisher

Richmond

Printer and publisher in Richmond of the *Impartial Observer* (1806-07) with Samuel Brooks (054) and *The Virginian* (1808) for Gerard Banks (019); nephew of Edward Pescud (324).

Manson was a peripheral figure in the growing Republican press establishment in Richmond during the first decade of the nineteenth century, though he briefly rose to ownership of a weekly paper there, so garnering a brief national notoriety.

Born at the end of the Revolutionary War, near the Yorktown battlefield, he was the second son of York County planter Robert Manson (1748-96) and his wife Mary Pescud, half-sister of Edward Pescud, later printer and publisher of the *Petersburg Republican*. That familial connection suggests that Manson trained in the *Petersburg Intelligencer* office of William Prentis (340) where Pescud – who was just four years older than him – had been trained; if so, Manson would also have seen that his opportunities were limited there; Pescud and fellow Prentis journeyman John Dickson (134) were the heirs-apparent to the *Intelligencer* (which passed to them in 1804), and Thomas Field (162) was then in his prime conducting the cross-town rival *Republican*, making a move to Richmond prudent. By 1803, Manson was working as a journeyman in Richmond, marrying there on his twenty-first birthday; as public notice of the marriage appeared only in the *Virginia Argus* of Samuel Pleasants (331), Manson was likely a part of the press complex that had been built there by Pleasants and Meriwether Jones (242) in support of the state's Republican leadership.

Manson's next appearance as part of the city's print trade came in June 1806, when Samuel Brooks engaged him as his printer-partner in his month-old *Impartial Observer*. Described, at different times as a jeweler, goldsmith, silversmith, seal cutter, and engraver, Brooks had gained a journalistic reputation from a national debate he engendered over the prevention of counterfeits as a result of his involvement in the arrest and prosecution of a Brunswick County counterfeiter; recognizing the visibility he had gained in the affair, Brooks wanted to publish a weekly paper that carried politically-neutral and socially-necessary debates – such as that generated by his counterfeiting essays – without becoming involved in the ongoing partisan newspaper war of that day. To do so, he needed the assistance of a job-printer not associated with either of the partisan presses operating in Richmond, and Manson was his choice. He conducted "all the mechanical part of" journal paper through January 1807, ten months in all, but withdrew from the project then, embarrassed financially by the "sacrifices" he had made

"of his time and talents, to sustain the publication of a paper, which he well knows was intended only for PUBLIC UTILITY – Sacrifices which many professing republicans would not, perhaps *dare not* make."

Brooks suspended publication of the *Observer* for ten weeks after Manson's withdrawal, before embarking that April on a three-month-long attempt to find sustainability for his journal; his trade partner in the effort was evidently John Courtney Jr. (109), who went uncredited, but the result was still unsatisfactory; Brooks closed his *Observer* in mid-July.

Despite his financial problems, Manson remained a desirable trade-partner for Richmond's Republican political leaders. As the 1808 presidential election dawned, a new campaign newspaper appeared in the city, edited by the well-known Jeffersonian writer Gerard Banks; he was a part of a faction within the state that favored the election of James Monroe as Jefferson's successor, over that of James Madison. In January 1808, Banks began issuing *The Virginian* from the press of Seaton Grantland (186), who was associated with Meriwether Jones before he formed his own job-press in 1804; but Grantland only committed to the project for three months, either from caution, or from a time-limited contract, or both. Thus at the end of March, Banks needed a new printer and engaged Manson to print his *Virginian* for the ensuing three months; from July on, it is unclear who produced the paper for Banks, but it is clear that once Madison was elected that fall, Banks's journal ended its run.

After his engagement with Banks, Manson did not publish a newspaper again. Rather, he focused on job printing alone, producing a few small books over the following two years. It seems that his office was still problematic financially, as he took on a non-printing business partner sometime in late; the unnamed Minor who joined the firm of Manson & Minor was obviously from the innumerable, wealthy, and influential Virginia family of that surname, but his specific identity has never been established. The pair acquired the press and tools of the recently departed Seaton Grantland (186), who left Richmond to become printer to the state of Georgia, and focused on the production of religious tracts, with their largest work being the millennialist treatise *A Solemn Warning to All the Dwellers upon Earth* by Nimrod Hughes, which predicted that the world would end on June 4, 1812. While such imprints had a popular following, they were apparently unprofitable. In July 1810, just two months after issuing *A Solemn Warning*, one of Manson's two household slaves – "a *Negro Girl* named *JUDITH*" – was seized and sold at auction to settle a promissory note that Manson had failed to pay. Subsequently, the Richmond papers show no evidence of his advertising, though he continued printing there. Eventually, however, the burden of debt led him to sell his business to satisfy his creditors. In July 1811, Samuel Shepherd (379), a journeyman then working for Samuel Pleasants, announced that he had bought Manson's office and "that the business will still be carried on in the same house, near the market." After this, Manson is not seen in the trade again.

It seems that Manson left Richmond at that time, probably returning to the family's York County seat, the Pescud Mill Plantation, at a site that is today just northeast of the Newport News/Williamsburg Airport. His family life also deteriorated in the two years after the sale of his press; in February 1813, Manson became involved in an exchange of warning notices placed in Norfolk's papers with his now-estranged wife; he reported that she had attempted "frequently" to abscond with their children and his property, "once with success," and that she was seeking a ship to take her and the children away from Virginia. Those notices are the last glimpse we have of Manson. Thereafter, he is not seen in the print-trade record, or the public record, or in newspaper advertisements, or in the federal census, or in any family records. His fate, as well as that of his family, remains an intriguing mystery.

Personal Data

Born: Apr. 9 1782 Charles Parish, York County, Virginia.
Married: Apr. 9 1803 Martha "Patsy" Bass @ Richmond, Virginia
Died: after 1813 Unknown
Children: Sarah and Martha (no dates yet found).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; notices in *Virginia Argus* (1803-11), *Richmond Enquirer* (1810-11), and Norfolk *Publick Ledger* (1813); Federal Decennial Census, 1810; genealogical data from articles on Manson, Pescud, Francisco, and Chisman families in *William & Mary Quarterly* (1905-06).