

281 MARTIN, G. A. – [GEORGE A. MARTIN]

Printer & Publisher

Petersburg

Journeyman printer in Petersburg who was briefly publisher of the *Petersburg Daily Courier* (1814-15) and the *Mercantile Advertiser* (1816-17) there.

Martin represents a fleeting figure in the Petersburg printing trade, although he was a key part of the reorganization of the trade there that came about with the end of the War of 1812 in early 1815 and the Great Petersburg Fire of that July.

Martin's first appearance in the imprint record came when he became the titular proprietor of the *Petersburg Daily Courier* in December 1814. The *Courier* was founded the preceding September by editor John Wood (456) and printer Francis G. Yancey (463). Wood was a Scottish-born political writer and mathematician who came to Petersburg from Richmond after falling out in the summer of 1811 with teacher and journalist Louis Hue Girardin (180) over Wood's behavior while teaching at Girardin's Hallerian Academy; he was offered a similar position at the Petersburg Academy and began teaching there in early 1812. Having previously edited papers in Frankfort, Kentucky, and in Washington City, Wood sought out prospective printer-partners for publishing another one almost from his start in Petersburg. In the summer of 1814, he convinced Yancey, a journeyman in the *Petersburg Intelligencer* office of John Dickson (134) to join him in producing the town's first daily newspaper.

But Yancey soon found himself torn between the two journals; just as he made known his plans to join Wood, Dickson died and his estate pursued buyers for his profitable thrice-weekly paper; local merchant entrepreneur Thomas Whitworth (443) moved quickly to purchase the *Intelligencer*, but he faced the same need for a practical-printer partner that did Wood with the *Courier*; Yancey was evidently more confident in the prospects for the proven *Intelligencer* than for the unproven *Courier*, but had already committed to joining Wood; thus, Yancey became the tradesman-partner in both papers until Wood could find a new partner. In November 1814, John Netherland (312) took on Yancey's interest in the *Courier*, allowing Yancey to return to the *Intelligencer*, where he remained until his 1828 retirement. But Wood's new alliance lasted just a month before Netherland withdrew from the *Courier* as well. And just as he sought another printer-partner, Wood was elected president of the Petersburg Academy; that would saddle with conflicting responsibilities as of January 1, 1815. So Wood chose to leave his problematic journal to others, and Martin was his choice as owner. In the sale notice published in the *Courier*, Wood's description of Martin suggests that he was well-known in Petersburg's press offices – then at least four in number – and that he hoped the city's many literary talents would assist this accomplished tradesman with its editorial content. As Martin then continued the daily through at least June 1815, it seems he found such assistance.

Still, Martin's tenure also appears to have been problematic. Three months later, he moved the newspaper's office to a new location on Sycamore Street; remarkably, the number of surviving copies of the *Daily Courier* dwindles immediately after the move, following near complete runs of the paper previously; that decline suggests a concurrent reduction in the paper's production numbers. The last known issue of the paper is from June 22, 1815; that

number carried a notice dated June 17th, that Martin intended to increase the size of the *Courier's* sheet at the start of the paper's second volume that September "should adequate encouragement be offered." That comment is curious, as it indicates that he had secured sufficient advertising to fill that larger sheet, but that the expense of producing it was not covered by the revenue those advertisements generated. Martin also thought it necessary to reassert the doctrine on which he had conducted the daily since acquiring it from Wood:

"the Editor...takes leave to promise, that the PETERSBURG COURIER will be conducted on principles congruent with those, for the establishment of which, a WASHINGTON unsheathed his sword,—combated,—and conquered."

However, it seems that Martin never got the chance to pursue his planned enlargement that fall. Three weeks after that June issue, the Great Petersburg Fire of July 16th destroyed all of the structures along Sycamore Street; among the more than 400 buildings lost that summer day were all four of the town's printing offices, so forcing its three papers – the *Courier*, the *Intelligencer*, and the *Republican* – to suspend publication. It appears that Martin was unable to recover from the disaster, unlike his competitors, and so the *Daily Courier* passed from the scene.

This experience, however, clearly did not sour Martin on journalism. He eventually rebuilt his office and planned for another paper – the *Mercantile Advertiser and Daily Vehicle* – one that would focus on commerce rather than on politics and literature, as Wood had. Yet his new journal did not issue its first number until mid-October 1816, suggesting that he had struggled in the interim, and so may have been employed in other Petersburg shops in that period, as the first to be rebuilt after the fire were the most fiscally stable ones.

Another victim of the fire was the job-printing business of Marvel W. Dunnivant (154), also a Petersburg trained printer; his press had survived the War of 1812, despite the prolonged absence of his partner, Samuel Dillworth (138), who served in the "Petersburg Volunteers" at Norfolk; shortly after his office reopened, about October 1815, Dilworth left Petersburg to start a new job-printing firm in Norfolk with Charles Keemle (246). It seems likely that Dunnivant brought Martin into his office, while Martin struggled, to compensate for the loss of Dilworth's labor; such a development is also suggested by the fact that Martin's new daily appeared exactly one year after Dilworth left Dunnivant, a standard length for many trade employment contracts then. Moreover, Dunnivant needed reliable help during that year as he was contracted to print the long-delayed final volume of *The History of Virginia* by John Daly Burk (063) – completed in 1815 by L. H. Girardin but destroyed by the fire – so succeeding John Dickson and his former partner, Edward Pescud (324), in that role.

Despite the lengthy planning and careful launch of his *Mercantile Advertiser*, Martin did not publish his daily for much more than six months; the scattering of surviving copies comes to an end at the close of February 1817, indicating a termination at about that time. His next appearance in print comes in July 1817, working in the office of a different newspaper, *The American Star* – a thrice-weekly journal started in June 1817 by Dunnivant in partnership with another Petersburg-native printer, Thomas W. Lorrain (270), reinforcing the suggestion that Dunnivant had an ongoing relationship with Martin that antedated the firm of Lorrain & Dunnivant. Yet that relationship seems to have come to an end by October 1817, when

Lorrain left Petersburg for new prospects in New Orleans. Dunnavant's ensuing struggles in keeping his *Star* alive resulted from a lack of competent help, something Martin had once provided him, indicating his absence as well; so *The American Star* ended its run the next April, though Dunnavant continued his job-printing business in Petersburg until 1824.

Martin's life after *The American Star* is unknown. He may have been the "Mr. Martin" (280) who served as manager (and later proprietor) of the Steam Boat Hotel Reading Room in Norfolk after 1817; he may also have simply returned to work as an anonymous journeyman in the American print trade, as had other tradesmen broken financially by their journalistic ventures. Still, the last notice we have of this Martin is an advertisement he published in July 1817 offering for sale the few remaining copies of his reprint edition of William Cobbett's "Farewell Address to the People of England" (more properly, *An Address, to the People of England*) originally published in 1812. His fate thereafter remains a mystery.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Wyatt, *Checklist for Petersburg*; Scott & Wyatt. *Petersburg's Story*; Meagher, *Education in Richmond*; notices in *Petersburg Daily Courier* (1814-15) and *American Star* (1817).