

282 MASON, VALENTINE – [REV. VALENTINE M. MASON]

Printer & Publisher

Alexandria, Leesburg, Lexington

Journeyman printer at Alexandria, then publisher of *Impartial Journal* (1803-04) at Leesburg and later of the *Lexington Intelligencer* (1823-31).

Mason was a well-trained printer who became a Baptist minister in middle life and pursued both professions until his health began to fail. Born near Fredericksburg in 1783, it has been reported that he learned the printing trade in Alexandria before he relocated to Lexington in 1804. The imprint record, however, discloses that Mason was involved with a short-lived weekly in Leesburg – the *Impartial Journal* – from 1803 to early 1805; while no copies of that journal are now known extant, it was often quoted by other newspapers in Maryland (Frederick, Baltimore, and Hagerstown) and in Virginia (Fredericksburg and Alexandria) from February 1803 to July 1804, indicating that those dates embody the span of its existence. It was often mocked by the Frederick-issued papers of Matthias Bartgis (024), who termed the *Impartial Journal* a "little country paper." He reported that its masthead carried:

"the following motto – '*This paper is open to all parties*' – But in the last number we have received, the printer says he will publish for *no party*, unless —*they pay him!* ... This is what we call a printer's *selling his press* to the highest bidder."

As the Republican Bartgis made these repeated efforts to denigrate this "little" competitor, the *Impartial Journal* was clearly a Federalist organ, suggesting that Mason's training came in the Alexandria offices of the like-minded Ellis Price (342) and/or Samuel Snowden (393). That he was associated with this Leesburg newspaper is made clear by the marriage notice from December 1804 in Fredericksburg's *Virginia Herald* of the Federalist publisher Timothy Green (194) – his home-town paper – noting his occupation as editor of that paper.

The closing of the *Impartial Journal*, Mason's relocation to Lexington, and his marriage there in 1804 seem part of a sequence resulting from Leesburg's inability to then sustain a weekly paper, regardless of political orientation, in the face of larger, well-established competitors nearby. The relocation may have been prompted by the impending dissolution of the firm of Samuel Walkup (426) and William G. Lyford (272), publishers of the *Virginia Telegraphe or Rockbridge Courier*, ahead of Lyford's purchase of the Staunton press office of Ira Woodruff (458) – Federalists, one and all. But Walkup closed the *Telegraphe* in October 1804 to focus on publishing a new bimonthly *Virginia Religious Magazine* for the Lexington Synod of the Presbyterian Church. Hence, Mason was forced to take on work as a clerk in a mercantile business there until a new trade opportunity presented itself. As Walkup finally restarted the *Telegraphe* in August 1806, while still publishing the Synod's magazine, it seems that he brought Mason into that operation earlier that year. That press appears to have continued operating after Walkup discontinued both the magazine (in December 1807) and the paper (in 1810), suggesting that it fell to Mason's care after Walkup's retirement from the trade.

Over the next twenty years, Mason became a fixture in Rockingham County. He had married into the Presbyterian elite in the county, and served in the War of 1812 in the regiment of Col. James McDowell, the Rockbridge County sheriff and staunch supporter of the Lexington

Presbytery. (Mason was called to active duty as an Orderly Sergeant in Capt. Archibald Lyle's Cavalry Company of McDowell's 5th Regiment of Virginia Militia with the British invasion of August 1814.) After the war, Mason became involved with an assemblage of Federalist-oriented Presbyterians wanting to check the influence of a group of Republican-centered Methodists behind the well-entrenched *Lynchburg Press*. In June 1815, Mason advertised a prospectus for *The Farmer's Register and Lynchburg Weekly Advertiser* in Virginia's larger Federalist papers, arguing that the Republicans required constant monitoring to prevent a dismantling of "the benefits resulting from good government;" to abandon the explicitly partisan journalism of the pre-war era,

"when just relieved from what we consider an impolitic and ruinous war—the public still agitated by passions which have been heightened by that event—an attempt to reconcile the two great contending parties, and a profession of impartial feeling toward them both, would be a prostration of principle..."

However, Mason and his backers found that they had insufficient support for such a divisive paper in the Lynchburg area, finding unity was now more valued than partisanship. So he remained in Lexington conducting his job-printing office.

Mason eventually returned to journalism there, however, with a paper more suited to the post-war political environment. His *Lexington Intelligencer* made its first appearance in May 1823, nearly two decades after his prior effort ended. The time spent in Rockbridge County in the interim brought him an understanding of his neighbors and their perspectives. From the start, the *Intelligencer* was an advocate for internal improvements that would aid trade and commerce in the Lexington area. That first year, it supported an effort by local leaders trying to convince Congress to build a new National Road from Washington to New Orleans, hoping such would bring the same kind of development to the Old Southwest as the first had brought to the Old Northwest; hence, the *Intelligencer* supported Georgia-resident and Virginia-born William H. Crawford in the 1824 presidential election, and then backed the economic policies of the administration of John Quincy Adams in the 1826 congressional elections. But Mason found himself increasingly out of step with his neighbors as the Age of Jackson emerged and advanced. His *Intelligencer* became a Whig voice in 1828, a voice requiring younger and more energetic proprietors after Jackson's election. So Mason sold his paper to a pair of such directors in 1831 and retired from journalism permanently.

Though partisanship was a factor in the sale, Mason had also become increasingly detached from political affairs in his years at the head of the *Lexington Intelligencer*. As a result of his living among strict Scots-Irish Presbyterians, like Walkup, he felt an increasing unease with aspects of Presbyterian theology, particularly the idea of infant baptism. On his return from military service, Mason began to seek answers for his nagging questions, finding them in the preaching of the Baptist minister William Duncan. He was baptized into the evangelical faith by Duncan in 1817 and began preparing for a ministerial career of his own. In July 1819, he was ordained as a Baptist minister and became the pastor of Rockbridge's Neriah Church, near Buena Vista Furnace, where he had worshipped since his conversion. That assignment made him part of the Albemarle Association, becoming its clerk in 1823, just when he began publishing his *Intelligencer*. In the ensuing years, his press became the producer of imprints

for that Association, as well as for other Valley evangelicals, such as the Presbyterian leader Andrew B. Davidson (116), alongside his commercially-focused paper. Mason was able to maintain a balance between his secular and sectarian responsibilities until 1829. That year he joined a committee formed by the state's General Association charged with finding ways to fill vacant Baptist pulpits, leading to a proposal drafted by him to raise money to pay such "supply misters" from the Association's coffers, rather than expecting largess from the small congregations they served. This work took Mason away from his Lexington press for large parts of the following two years; but more importantly, it brought a call in 1831 to become a "general agent" for the General Association – its first such appointment – tasked to fill vacant pulpits, recruit ministerial candidates, and raise funds for the Association to pursue its missionary works. Now presented with a clear choice between religious and political affairs, Mason abandoned journalism and embraced evangelicism.

Mason removed his family from Lexington to Amelia County, a location more central to his new responsibilities, a seat he called Clifton Plantation, "30 miles west of Richmond, about 36 from Petersburg, and 16 from Amelia Springs." From that base, Mason travelled widely throughout Virginia for the next ten years, serving as an itinerant supply minister as well as an administrator for the General Association. Yet even as he had distanced himself from political affairs, he could not avoid them entirely. In April 1835, following widespread complaints in Virginia's newspapers about the ministerial foundations of abolitionism – and the possible influence of Northern clergy on their Southern brethren – Mason was a visible participant in a meeting of Virginia clergymen that publically disavowed both abolition and the activities of their Northern counterparts, noting, in part, that the Bible "fully and clearly recognizes the relation of master and servant; and that our Saviour and his Apostles taught servants their various duties to their masters and submission to the Powers that be."

Eventually, Mason's exertions took a toll on his health, especially (as his peers reported) during the exceedingly brutal winters of 1838-39 and 1839-40, "journeying during severe snow storms, [when] he contracted colds, which fixed themselves on his system." Thus in 1841, Mason was forced into retirement from his ministry, shedding his agency role, being frequently confined to bed. After three years of incessant, poorly diagnosed "suffering," Mason breathed his last among a circle of his clerical friends late in the evening of July 15, 1843. Yet his death revealed the fiscal poverty of his calling: his beloved Clifton was sold at auction two months later and his three minor children were consigned to court-appointed guardians that November having lost their mother some years earlier.

Personal Data

Born: in 1783 Stafford County, Virginia.
Married: Dec. 4, 1804 Betsey Margrave @ Lexington, Virginia.
Died: July 15 1843 Clifton Plantation, Amelia County, Virginia.
Children: John (b. 1810); Mary (b. 1813); William (1816-36); Martha (by 1835);
 Sarah Ann (b. 1831); Edward (after 1835); James (after 1835).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, Boley, *Lexington*; Albemarle County Orphan's Court records, 1843; obituary in *Religious Herald* (Richmond), July 27, 1843.