

296 McLEAN, ARCHIBALD

297 McLEAN, JOHN

Publishers

Norfolk

Publishers of the *Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal* (1786-89), the first newspaper issued in Norfolk after the Revolutionary War.

The McLean brothers were Scottish-born and -trained printers who sought their fortunes in early Republic America; while successful, both came to premature ends in that pursuit.

John was the elder brother and so was the first to traverse the Atlantic, landing in New York City in mid-1783, evidently anticipating the evacuation of the city by British forces. When that withdrawal was imminent in November 1783, McLean joined another printer there, one Charles R. Webster (1762-1834), to publish a semi-weekly newspaper, the *Independent Journal or The General Advertiser*. But the journal's early days were fraught with difficulty; its first number actually issued five days before the British departed, not after as intended, and so evinced the shortage of supplies resulting from the occupation – limited to a weekly publication for its first month with a smaller page size than planned and well-worn type. Then in February 1784, Webster withdrew from their new-born firm to relocate to Albany where he soon established the long-lived *Albany Gazette*.

Still, McLean survived the problems and thrived as the seaport's commerce recovered and expanded. Part of that growth came from building trade links with other American ports, and McLean recognized this reality. In early 1786, he left his New York office in the hands of trusted tradesmen and moved south to Norfolk to start a new paper there that constituted the southern end of an advertising-based mercantile connection between these important American ports. Thus when the new *Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal* began publication on June 21, 1786, the firm of John McLean & Company became the first American publishing house to issue papers concurrently in two places – an indication of McLean's larger goals.

By mid-1788, the demand for advertising in his New York paper prompted an increase in its frequency from semi-weekly to daily. So McLean sent for his younger brother Archibald in Glasgow to join him in America in this journalistic scheme; on Archibald's arrival, he took command of the New York office as partner in the firm of J. & A. McLean, and began issuing the retitled *New York Daily Gazette* on December 29, 1788. This cozy working relationship, however, lasted just a few months. On May 18, 1789, John died unexpectedly, "after a short indisposition," in Norfolk. *The Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal* died with its founder.

Archibald moved quickly to settle John's Virginia estate, evidently selling both the office and the paper's subscriber list to William Prentis (340) and Daniel Baxter (027) – two former Williamsburg journeymen. Baxter possibly worked for the McLean brothers in Norfolk, and so would have had a working knowledge of the business there, while Prentis had opened Petersburg's first newspaper after being a part of the contentious Richmond printing-trade between 1780 and 1786. By August 1789, just three months after John's death, the firm of Prentis & Baxter was publishing another mercantile advertiser in the port: *The Norfolk and*

Portsmouth Chronicle.

Archibald McLean returned to their old New York office in the early fall of 1789, where he continued profitably publishing their year-old daily. In 1795 he re-launched it as the *New York Gazette and General Advertiser*, harkening back to the original title bestowed on it by his late brother. But as maritime commerce was disrupted by the continual wars between France and England, McLean was compelled in August 1797 to take on an investor-partner, John Lang, to keep his advertising-centered business afloat. After that sale, he was evidently the primary tradesman in the office, to the detriment of his health. McLean fell ill in mid-September 1798 and died on Saturday the 22nd. The *Gazette* was forced into an immediate suspension for want of journeymen as Lang awkwardly announced in a half-sheet issue published a week later. He eventually reorganized the office sufficiently to operate the daily for another dozen years; but the founding McLean brothers were long forgotten by then.

Personal Data on John

Born: in 1757 Glasgow, Scotland.

Died: May 18 1789 Norfolk, Virginia.

No record of wife or offspring yet discovered.

Personal Data on Archibald

Born: ca. 1760 Glasgow, Scotland.

Died: Sept. 22 1798 New York City, New York.

No record of wife or offspring yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; U.S. Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Wertenbaker, *Norfolk: Historic Southern Port*; Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*; *Papers of the Common Hall of Norfolk*; obituary for John from *Virginia Independent Chronicle* [Richmond], May 29, 1789; obituary for Archibald from *New York Gazette*, Sept. 28, 1798.