

299 McRAE, ALEXANDER

Publisher

Richmond

Publisher of *The Press* (1800) at Richmond with John H. Foushee (170), Meriwether Jones (242), and James Lyon (274).

McRae was part of the Virginia printing trade only briefly through an association with a plan to develop a series of partisan newspapers in Virginia in support of the candidacy of Thomas Jefferson for president in 1800. That opportunity came with his ongoing leadership role in the state party organization in the decades before and after 1800. The eldest of twelve children born to Christopher McRae (1749-1808) and Virginia Harris (1749-1810) of Surry County, he was trained as a lawyer and practiced initially in Petersburg. In 1794, McRae was elected to the House of Delegates from Dinwiddie County for the 1794-95 session and was reelected for the 1795-96 and 1796-97 sessions. In December 1796, the House elevated him to the Council of State, where he would serve until 1809, occasionally as the council's president – then essentially the state's Lieutenant Governor. All through this period, he also maintained a legal practice in Richmond, which became his home base.

Joining the council along with McRae during that 1796-97 Assembly was Meriwether Jones, a delegate from Hanover County selected to replace the newly-elected governor, James Wood of Frederick County, on that body. The two quickly became part of extensive audits of the public treasury that led, in turn, to a reassessment of the office of public printer. Jones conducted a study of that post in advance of the 1798-99 Assembly and his report to the council led to the dismissal of the incumbent printer, Augustine Davis (119), in November 1798. The understanding of the office that Jones acquired in conducting his detailed study made him the perfect candidate to replace Davis, having a better grasp on the demands and limits the position faced; thus he was appointed to the vacant office by the council in December, with McRae supporting the like-minded Jones.

The appointment of Jones proved to be the beginning of a Republican publishing concern in Richmond that was sustained financially by Virginia Republicans including McRae. Yet those leaders also needed to expand the number of newspapers in the state that would champion Jefferson's election in 1800 in the face of the dominance of well-established, Federalist-oriented mercantile advertisers in Virginia's principal commercial centers. Jones's press office became the hub for a concerted effort to start and sustain such papers throughout the Commonwealth. In early 1799, James Lyon, a Vermont-trained printer-publisher, the son of the recently-persecuted Republican congressman Matthew Lyon, arrived in Virginia to execute the multi-part publication plan behind that effort.

The first part was launching a monthly magazine that would provide common matter for all of the country's Republican journals, as well as the Virginia ones Lyon would start the next winter. In late April, he circulated proposals for publishing the *National Magazine, or A Political, Historical, Biographical, and Literary Repository* – the first monthly magazine to be published in Virginia; the first number of that serial was issued from Jones's press on June 1st. The next piece was starting a book-printing concern, which created an independent press for the *National Magazine* and Lyon's later journals as well. But the third and final

part was the most important of all – to commence publishing new Republican newspapers throughout the state. In each of these ventures, Lyon was the editorial partner to a print-tradesman in each locale, so dispensing a consistent partisan message. The first of these papers was *The Republican* at Petersburg, issued in December 1799 with Thomas Field (162) as its resident printer; it was followed in January 1800 by *The Friend of the People*, published in Richmond, and by *The Scourge of Aristocracy*, published in Staunton by John McArthur (285), Lyon's cousin. The *Baltimore American* noted Lyon's feat by remarking that "this gentleman, in the term of one year, has established no less than four Republican presses, from any of which more truths are issued in one day than the whole federal faction can digest in a month."

Yet behind this all was Jones and the capital's Republican leadership, including McRae. They now set out to publish a "national paper" to be called *The Press*, utilizing a stock-based company managed by three trustees: Jones; MacRae, and Dr. John H. Foushee (170), son of the city's foremost Republican leader, Dr. William Foushee. *The Press* was to be produced in three editions – thrice-weekly, weekly, and biweekly – with content being drawn from the *Friend of the People*, the *National Magazine*, and Jones's twice-weekly *Examiner*, then the state's journal-of-record, as well as from any other publication that was deemed suitable by the trustees. How long this campaign newspaper survived is unclear, as only two issues of the weekly edition and one of the biweekly edition are known extant, both published before the third number of Lyon's *Friend of the People* appeared in early February. Moreover, once Jefferson's election became a certainty, Lyon abandoned most of the papers he had started, leaving Richmond by mid-summer. His departure ended McRae's print-trade career.

After 1800, McRae became both a major legal figure in Richmond and a minor functionary in the Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe administrations, assigned tasks that each president believed fit his capabilities, aware that he was seen as "a lawyer of courage and tenacity but lacking in tact." His political prominence brought him election as the Grand Master of the Masonic Lodge in Virginia in 1802-03 and a seat on the board of trustees of the Richmond Academy in 1804. Meanwhile, his skills as a real-estate attorney led to his being named as president of the Virginia Mutual Assurance Society in 1804, the state's first fire-insurance company, transforming the business from a small local firm to a regional concern. But it was not until 1807 that McRae was given a significant national assignment, while still president of the Council of State; he joined two close associates – George Hay (then the U.S. Attorney for eastern Virginia) and William Wirt (then a fledgling lawyer) – to assist the U.S. Attorney-General, Cesar A. Rodney, in prosecuting Aaron Burr for treason. And when the proceedings were interrupted by the Chesapeake-Leopard affair near Norfolk, McRae became the chair of the corresponding committee formed in Richmond to coordinate state-wide political and military responses. Afterward, he became the state's intermediary for weapons loaned to Virginia's militia from federal armories.

In 1808, McRae was a part of the state's Republican faction that favored James Monroe over James Madison as Jefferson's successor, engendering enmity with several of Madison's supporters in the Virginia print trade, such as Thomas Ritchie (360), editor of the *Richmond Enquirer*. But such brought him closer to the governor that he had served on the Council of State. As a result, when Monroe became Madison's secretary of state, McRae was asked to

undertake a diplomatic mission to Europe to assess the standing of American diplomats there; thus he resigned from both the Council and the Assurance Society and departed for England in late 1809. Monroe was pleased with his service there, and so asked his Virginia collaborator to remain in Europe, and had Madison name him the American Consul in Paris; after two years in France (1810-11), McRae returned to Virginia just before war broke out between Britain and the United States in 1812. As president, Monroe sought out him once again, appointing McRae Consul to Amsterdam, but he declined the post, pleading a need to attend to his legal practice for financial reasons. Such fiscal distress seems the primary theme of his life thereafter. Monroe again asked him to travel to Europe in 1823, under the cloak of a private business trip, as his personal, secret agent to report on European affairs. McRae chose to stay in England once his appointment ended in late 1824, pursuing business opportunities there, as well as avoiding probable debt-litigation back home. Hence, McRae never returned to the United States, dying at his London residence in December 1840. His body was returned to Virginia and interred in the burial ground that later became Hollywood Cemetery.

McRae had one other indirect connection to Virginia's printing trade. In 1807, following the death of his wife Harriet, he married Anne Dent Hayes, the widow of the former Virginia public printer (1780-86) James Hayes (207). Yet she was not with her husband when he died in England; she had already passed on at her brother's North Carolina home in 1838, suggesting an estrangement resulting from his self-imposed exile.

Personal Data

Born:	May 4	1768	Surry County, Virginia.
Married [1]:	Sept. 9	1795	Harriet Voss @ Culpeper Cty, Virginia (d. 1802).
Married [2]:	Sept. 21	1807	Anne Dent Hayes @ Richmond, Virginia.
Died:	Dec. 14	1840	London, England.
Children:	At least two daughters by Harriet: Amanda and Harriet.		

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 5 & 6; *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*; papers of Jefferson & Madison at Library of Congress; Christian, *Richmond*; Fisher, *Monumental Church*; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; WPA Guide to Virginia; *Virginia Text-Book*; authority record on McRae at Library of Virginia; notices in Richmond newspapers (1796-1841).