

301 MERCER, ROBERT

Publisher

Fredericksburg

Publisher of *Genius of Liberty* (1797-1800) at Fredericksburg in successive partnerships with George Carter (082), Henry Pittman (327), an unnamed Field (161), and James Walker (425).

Mercer was a scion of the Virginia elite who became a key figure in efforts by Republican leaders to produce newspapers in the state designed to counter the prevailing influence of its established Federalist journals, here the *Virginia Herald* of Fredericksburg, published by Connecticut-born Timothy Green (194).

Remarkably, this was a partisan divide that extended into Mercer's own family, embodied in two discrete sets of offspring sired by his father, John Mercer of Stafford County (1705-68), by successive spouses. His first was Catherine Mason, an older sister of George Mason, the author of the Declaration of Rights in the 1776 Virginia constitution; she gave birth to sons George, who exiled himself from Virginia consequent to his Loyalist sympathies during the Revolution, and James, father to the arch-Federalist Charles Fenton Mercer. Robert was the son of Mercer's second wife, Ann Roy, the last of Mercer's eleven sons and eighteenth of his nineteen children. His father was an prominent lawyer – representing George Washington, among others – who had come to Virginia from Dublin as an adolescent in 1720; in 1737, he published the first authoritative digest of the colony's laws (*An Exact Abridgment of all the Public Acts of Assembly, of Virginia, in force and use*), issued from the Williamsburg press of William Parks (321); thereafter, Mercer conducted a lucrative legal practice in the Northern Neck counties surrounding Fredericksburg, becoming a major Virginia landowner, as well as joining with other major planters to form the Ohio Company of Virginia, a land-speculation venture in the Ohio Country. That company's future was in doubt when Mercer died as a result of the prohibitions on settlement there contained in the Proclamation of 1763.

Robert Mercer was thus still a toddler at his father's death, and so was left to the care of his half-brother John Mercer Jr. who had inherited the family estate, Marlborough. Family lore reports that he studied law at Fredericksburg with John Marshall, the future chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court; if so, then he also studied with his full brother John Fenton Mercer and William Waller Hening (213), both Jeffersonian leaders later; if not, then he acquired much of his thorough legal education from his late father's library, which included over 500 legal titles. When Mercer began his journalistic career in 1797, he was the Commonwealth Attorney for the state courts meeting in Fredericksburg.

Mercer's social status dictated that he marry into an equally prominent Virginia family, which he did in 1792, taking eighteen-year-old Mildred Ann Byrd Carter as his wife; she was a granddaughter to two influential members of the colonial-era Council of State, Col. Charles Carter, son of Robert "King" Carter, and William Byrd II of Westover, perhaps the foremost of all councilors in the early 1700s; she was also a niece of Landon Carter, the noted Revolutionary era pamphleteer and political leader from Lancaster County, after whom her father had been named. Their marriage was remarkable given the enmity arising during the Stamp Act controversies of 1765-66 between Landon Carter and Mercer's older

half-brother George, the designated agent for the sale of stamps in Virginia.

In 1796, the thirty-two year-old Mercer was one of the Fredericksburg-area Jeffersonians who enticed printer Lancelot Aylett Mullin (307) to relocate there from Fayetteville, N.C. to challenge Green's Federalist journal. Mullin was then working for John Silbey publishing the *Fayetteville Gazette*, a paper with suitable Republican credentials. However, political fidelity did not necessarily equate to business acumen, especially in the early American print trade. Mullin's *Republican Citizen* depended heavily on financial subsidies from its original backers, so never realized a profit. After a year of struggle (June 1, 1796 to June 14 1797), the *Citizen* went into suspension; then in September 1797, Mullin absconded, with what little cash that he had accumulated and with a supply of books that had been consigned to him by Mathew Carey of Philadelphia, one step ahead of his creditors and the sheriff. The misadventure reached a seriocomic conclusion when Mullin died on September 29, 1797 while on board a ship that was taking him to Charleston from Norfolk.

Mercer moved quickly to pick up the pieces of the debacle in the midst of the campaigns that fall for political control of the coming General Assembly. He acquired Mullin's press office, either from Mullin or in a sheriff's sale, with monies borrowed from his father-in-law, Landon Carter. That backing was sensible given that Mercer's partner in this new publishing venture was George Carter, a cousin to his young wife and a nephew of her father; hence, Mercer's father-in-law was funding a family enterprise as much as he was a political one. That foundation also provided their new *Genius of Liberty* with a societal legitimacy that the antecedent *Republican Citizen* could never have matched. So less than a month after Mullin had fled town, on October 13th, the firm of Mercer & Carter issued the first number of the *Genius of Liberty*. From its start, the firm employed tradesmen from beyond Fredericksburg to produce the paper, while the family – in the person of Mercer – retained ownership of the office's tools, thus retaining local political control over its business affairs, in contrast to the preceding experience with Mullin. It seems to have been a successful approach, as the paper increased in frequency from a weekly to a twice-weekly pace in September 1798.

In the spring of 1799, however, Carter withdrew from the firm, possibly as a consequence of declining health (he died in 1809 at just thirty-two). Mercer then began a series of limited-term partnership arrangements with practical printers in publishing the *Genius*. The dearth of surviving copies of this paper leaves only conjecture as to when the changes in printers occurred. The first of those printers was apparently one Henry Pittman, a journeyman of dubious character who went on to publish newspapers in Alexandria; his association with Mercer seems to have lasted about six months, probably from January to July 1799. He was succeeded by a Mr. Field; Field's association with the *Genius of Liberty* was the longer of Mercer's two tradesman partners, but it terminated abruptly with Mercer's unexpected death in September 1800, about fifteen months into their arrangement.

Despite the disruption Mercer's demise created, his journal did not skip a beat; the *Genius of Liberty* operated without identifiable ownership for the next month – evidently for the benefit of his estate – before the office (two presses and their supplies) and the newspaper were sold to James Walker. Walker seems to have come from one of the several Walker families in the area, and had been trained as a printer before his acquired Mercer's effects;

it also seems that he was the next intended journeyman partner to Mercer, following Field's departure. Now he became the successor to Mercer that local Republicans chose to entrust with their troubled journal. Walker renamed the paper *The Courier*, and continued its publication as before for slightly more than a year (October 1800 to November 1801).

With Jefferson's election, though, Walker's financial support began to wane and he was forced again to suspend publication. Unlike Mullin, he remained a part of the community, conducting a job-printing office, waiting for a better time to restart his paper. That time came, he thought, in the fall of 1803, when his renamed *Apollo* appeared; but once again, its financial support was weak, forcing a closing after just six months existence. Walker may have continued job-printing in Fredericksburg, but evidently did not produce anything more substantial as he does not again appear in the bibliographic record. Walker's disappearance, however, suggests the end of an era. This avowedly-partisan paper, initiated by a respected Virginia family and its broad network of friends and associates, had lost its legitimacy, meaning that a truly viable newspaper that could effectively oppose the long-lived *Virginia Herald* did not emerge until the Jacksonian era, some twenty years later.

Personal Data

Born: in 1764 Marlborough, Stafford County, Virginia.
Married Mar. 22 1792 Mildred Ann Carter @ King George County, VA.
Died: Sept. 11 1800 Fredericksburg, Virginia.
Children: Three sons: Wilson Cary, James Byrd, and Landon Carter.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Will & Order Books, Fredericksburg Hustings Court; Weems Letters; Meade, *Old Churches*; Quinn, *Fredericksburg*; "Mercer Family Genealogy" (WMQ 1909).