

### 314 NICOLSON, J. B. – [COMMODORE JOHN B. NICOLSON]

#### Apprentice Printer

#### Richmond

Apprentice printer (ca. 1802) in the Richmond *Recorder* office of Henry Pace (319) and James T. Callender (075); nephew of Thomas Nicolson (315).

Nicolson had but an adolescent association with the Virginia print trade, turning instead to a naval career, gaining sufficient fame through his exploits at sea that his days as a "printer's devil" were mostly forgotten. Indeed, the one reference placing him in that time and place still extant is a story told long after Nicolson's death by the Richmond chronicler Samuel Mordecai, a companion from those days.

In 1802 and 1803, the incendiary political writer James T. Callender edited the *Recorder* for the printer Henry Pace. After his break with Jefferson and the city's Republican leadership, he began writing circular letters "chock full of democracy, manufactured by a Scotchman, for" delegates to the General Assembly "who clubbed their money instead of their wits" by issuing nearly identical missives. The young workers in Pace's office were expected to sort and distribute the letters when they had been completed. But that process was subject to the whims of his "devils," for one time,

"...the boys in the printing office, who folded and directed the circulars, were so mischievous as to direct them indiscriminately. Thus some of the letters signed by an eastern member would be sent to a western constituent, and vice-versa, tending to show a remarkable coincidence in the sentiments and language of different individuals. One of these boys was afterwards Capt. J. B. Nicolson, of the navy..."

Mordecai ended his tale by noting he was "the instigator ... [who] aided and abetted them."

Nicolson came to be in Pace's employ apparently through the influence of his uncle, Thomas Nicolson, the Williamsburg journeyman turned Richmond publisher. He was the son of the printer's older brother William; both were sons of one Robert Nicolson (1725-97), an English immigrant who settled in Williamsburg in the mid-1700s and became a successful merchant there. He bound out all of his sons to various trades in the colonial capital as each reached adolescence, with Thomas landing in the office of John Dixon (140) and Alexander Purdie (345); when the government moved to Richmond in 1780, he became Dixon's partner there and so published the city's first weekly; but after seventeen years of that grind, while facing stiff partisan competition, Nicolson closed his *Virginia Gazette* in April 1797 to focus on job-printing and his circulating library. Yet his young nephew, then fourteen, probably got his start in his office then, and moved to Pace's when he set up shop in Richmond in late 1800.

However, the print trade was clearly not exciting enough for young Nicolson. In July 1805, he was appointed a midshipman in the U.S. Navy and never looked back. With the start of the War of 1812, he was promoted to lieutenant and saw action on the frigate *United States* and the heavy-sloop *Peacock*; he rose to commander in March 1814 when entrusted with the prize ship HMS *Epervier*, captured by the *Peacock*; he then took command of the brig *Flambeau* in the fleet led by Stephen Decatur against Algiers in the Second Barbary War. Following the peace with Great Britain, Nicolson remained in the navy, rising to master

commander in 1817 and then to captain in 1828. His last command was as yard master of the Boston Navy Yard in 1838, before he was brought back to Washington by Martin Van Buren to serve on the board of naval commissioners. On his retirement in 1841, Nicolson was granted the use of the honorific title of commodore, as he was then the most senior officer in the U.S. Navy.

Nineteenth-century historians noted that Nicolson was a close friend of Washington Irving, likely dating to the writer's European travels in the late 1820s and early 1830s. Thus he is a common figure in Irving's letters, commonly referred to as "Jovial Jack Nicholson." It is a description consistent with that of Nicolson seen in the obituary published after his death in November 1846:

...he goes down to the grave followed by the unaffected sorrow of his brother officers and mourned by numerous friends, whom fifty years of amiable sociability and unwearied kindness gathered around him.

Nicolson was buried with considerable pomp and ceremony in the Congressional Cemetery, then the place of highest national honor.

**NB:** Contemporaries often misspelled his surname as Nicholson; he used the Nicolson form his entire life, the style adopted by his immigrant grandfather, Robert, in Williamsburg.

### ***Personal Data***

Born:            in 1783    Richmond, Virginia.

Died:        Nov. 9    1846    Washington, District of Columbia.

Never married or had children, as none are noted in family history.

Sources: Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; Williamsburg People Files, CWF; Service List of Officers, U.S. Navy; Nicolson entries in *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (1900) and *Tyler's Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography* (1915), obituary in *National Intelligencer*, Nov. 11, 1846.