

### 315 NICOLSON, THOMAS

Printer, Publisher, Librarian

Williamsburg, Richmond

Publisher of the *Virginia Gazette* (1779-81) at Williamsburg and then at Richmond with John Dixon Sr. (140); later publisher of the *Virginia Gazette or Weekly Advertiser* (1782-97) at Richmond, initially with William Prentis (340); uncle of J. B. Nicolson (314).

Nicolson was a son of Williamsburg who, along with several other young printers from that town, carried the printing trade to the new state capital at Richmond, building a foundation for tradesmen who followed. Yet in doing so, Nicolson failed to keep pace with the evolving technology and typography of the era making his later work appear anachronistic.

#### Williamsburg

Nicolson was born in Williamsburg about 1750, the second son of Robert Nicolson (1725-97). His father was an English émigré who apparently settled there in the 1740s, becoming a successful tailor and merchant in the two decades before the Revolution; that background led him to bind out all of his sons to various trades in the colonial capital as each of them reached adolescence, with each realizing success in their professions as adults as a result. Young Thomas landed in the office of John Dixon and Alexander Purdie (345) about the time that the partners initiated their joint concern in early 1766.

The partnership of Purdie & Dixon was designed as the means to separate Williamsburg's original printing office from the estates of William Hunter Sr. (230) and Joseph Royle (368) while providing for Hunter's minor son, William Hunter Jr. (231), and Royle's young widow, Roseanna Hunter. So Nicolson would have had little expectation of superseding his masters or their beneficiaries once his apprenticeship ended. But the introduction of a second press office in Williamsburg in 1766, one conducted by William Rind (358), altered the print-trade landscape in Virginia, helping to accelerate demand for printed materials there. Thus when Purdie & Dixon finally dissolved their affiliation at the end of 1774, each partner could keep a viable office of their own, even as Rind's – then in the hands of John Pinckney (325) after the recent death of Clementina Rind (356) – competed with their new businesses. As 1775 dawned, Purdie moved out of the old Williamsburg printing office and set up a new press nearer the capital; he was also named public printer for the colony, succeeding the Rinds in that function. Dixon retained the assets of their former concern, forming a new partnership with William Hunter Jr., who still had an interest in the office as his father's heir. Dixon also retained the services of three printers trained by Purdie in their old office: Nicolson, William Prentis (340), and Daniel Baxter (027) – craftsmen that the untrained Dixon now relied on for their trade skills. The Dixon & Hunter office was visibly larger than Purdie's was, but each thrived, a result of the growing customer base the two men had built together.

Dixon, however, would now be forced into the background as the Revolution opened. His association with Hunter would be his main hindrance. Hunter's adolescent years were spent in Philadelphia under the tutelage of Benjamin Franklin, so leading to a life-long friendship with Franklin's Loyalist son William, then royal governor of New Jersey. So their press and paper – a continuation of the original *Virginia Gazette* of William Parks (321) – were

suspect, and increasingly scorned by Virginians, as the war erupted and progressed. By 1778, Dixon & Hunter were also estranged politically, despite familial ties coming with Dixon's marriage to Roseanna Hunter Royle. At year end, the pair dissolved their alliance. Hunter apparently secured their firm's considerable book stocks and kept a bookstore in the original printing-office building, while Dixon kept the press, the *Gazette*, and the right to collect their firm's many debts in the dissolution. He also made Thomas Nicolson, now his shop's foreman, his tradesman-partner in the new concern. Hunter suffered most in this abrupt ending, finding scant patronage for his wares for the remainder of the war years. He left Virginia in 1781 with Lord Cornwallis, impoverished and bitter, seeking the patronage and assistance of the exiled William Franklin in London.

The new firm of Dixon & Nicolson also struggled through the remaining war years, but so too did Purdie. Supply shortages and financial disruptions plagued both offices, as they did all Virginia businesses. By early 1779, Purdie was under investigation by the Assembly for malfeasance in office as a result of growing delays in producing the public work created by those common problems; Purdie died before he could be cleared, leaving his office and the government work in the hands of his untried nephews John Clarkson (093) and Augustine Davis (119), who trained in his office after his parting from Dixon. The Assembly decided that splitting the public work between the two presses made the most practical sense in the short term, as they had also decided move the government's seat to Richmond before the May 1780 Assembly. The decision meant the two Williamsburg presses – the Rinds' office having closed in 1777 on John Pinckney's departure for North Carolina – now needed to relocate to Richmond as well. Clarkson & Davis claimed a financial inability move and so lost the prized government commission. But Dixon & Nicolson were granted only a short-term appointment in their place, despite having incurred the expense of moving their office to Richmond; then Governor Thomas Jefferson was seeking an alternative to both presses as public printers through the auspices of William Dunlap in Philadelphia; Dixon apparently understood the transitory nature of the situation and so did not move his household to Richmond, sending just the press office in Nicolson's care. This was still the situation in spring 1781 when Jefferson's chosen replacement, James Hayes (207) of Annapolis, finally arrived in Richmond, just in time for both offices to be ransacked by invading British troops under the command of Benedict Arnold.

## **Richmond**

After the Arnold raid, Dixon & Nicolson suspended publication of their venerable *Virginia Gazette*; it was never restarted as a result of the campaign waged in central Virginia by Lord Cornwallis that preceded his unforeseen surrender at Yorktown in October. When a paper was again issued from the old Dixon & Nicolson press on December 29, 1781, Dixon was no longer a part of the enterprise; he had ended their partnership in the interim, and the new the *Virginia Gazette or Weekly Advertiser* was a production of the concern that Nicolson formed with another former Dixon journeyman, William Prentis. While the firm of Nicolson & Prentis was deprived of the primary public-printing contract by the Hayes appointment, it turned out his press was not able to meet the quotas and deadlines set by the Assembly because of those same military disruptions. So the Senate of Virginia engaged Nicolson &

Prentis to publish its now-delayed journals; Nicolson would retain that contract until 1803. That engagement marked the start of a four-year-long conflict between Hayes and the Assembly that brought Nicolson & Prentis occasional contracts to fill gaps in the public work left unfilled by Hayes, so providing additional support for their business.

Still, conducting a printing office in the 1780s was a problematic venture, beset with supply deficiencies, credit realignments, and cash shortages – all of which ravaged Hayes. Nicolson helped to manage these uncertainties by maintaining his press office in his residence at Twenty-Second Street and Main at the foot of Church Hill. . Early in 1782, the thirty-two-year-old life-long bachelor lived there with the twenty-year-old Prentis, a sixteen year-old apprentice, William Alexander Rind (359), a son of the Williamsburg Rinds; and Peter (506), an African slave age twenty-three, whose presence shows that Nicolson & Prentis followed the practice of that period of using enslaved men to physically pull their printing press. But after just three years together, the partners would be pulled apart by forces beyond their control.

In late 1783, the General Assembly completed one of its infrequent revisals of the state's laws, a review of all recorded laws that resulted in the publication of a volume containing those laws still in force. They assigned publication to the new office of John Dixon and John Hunter Holt (223). They had been angling for Hayes's public contract since their arrival in town in mid-1783, and this assignment gave them a chance to prove their worth; so in the interest of speeding work on the revisal, Dixon divided its production between his office and Nicolson's, with Dixon & Holt setting type and Nicolson & Prentis printing its pages. The plan achieved its ends with a delivery of the first copies from the bindery of Thomas Brend (051) and Archibald Currie (113) in December 1784. But the project crashed on the evening of Thursday, January 6, 1785, when a fire destroyed the Nicolson & Prentis office, taking with it the printed though unbound pages of the revisal; the partners also lost a large bookstore. Compelled to replace the revisal at less than their costs, while trying to rebuild their press newspaper, and bookstore, the event effectively killed their business. The two old friends parted ways in May 1785 once their commitment to the revisal was fulfilled.

The dissolution of the firm of Nicolson & Prentis started a reorganization of Richmond's printing offices. Tired of the contention over the public work in Richmond, Prentis quickly removed to Petersburg; there he began a job-printing concern that issued the town's first newspaper, the *Petersburg Intelligencer*, a year later. That summer, Augustine Davis finally moved the remnants of the old Purdie office to Richmond, and picked up public work left undone by Hayes; in turn, Hayes was fired as public printer in early 1786; his staff fled to the city's other presses, principally that of Dixon & Hunter who now succeeded Hayes in office.

Meanwhile, Nicolson refocused his business on his ongoing enterprises, generally refusing new ones by overbidding on offered work. The exception was the subscription library that he brought to Richmond from Williamsburg in July 1785 to replace the one lost in the fire; that institution eventually became the Library Company of Richmond, incorporated in 1805 with Nicolson as its librarian. The only changes in his office would be occasional alterations in his supporting cast, as in early 1787 when young Rind left the shop and was replaced by Edward Charlton (089); it seems Charlton remained with him until the closing of Nicolson's

*Weekly Advertiser* in April 1797, when he was replaced by John O. Lynch (273). But the small scale of his office limited its usefulness and influence. The imprints that Nicolson produced show an apparent reluctance to replace his worn type and so present an almost amateurish appearance. Moreover, his work was prone to typographical errors which diminished their appeal. In 1798, such inattention engendered a sharp newspaper exchange between Nicolson and Tarleton W. Pleasants (333), cousin of his cross-town rival, Samuel Pleasants (331), over an almanac he had published that fall; Nicolson rejected the complaint out of hand, despite the evidence of the imprint itself, saying that the attack was designed solely to generate sales of his kinsman's competing almanac.

That exchange, however, demonstrates that Nicolson was becoming an ever-less important publisher in Richmond. He was someone engrossed in his work, but his focus shifted away from journalism over time. In April 1797, he closed his fifteen-year-old *Weekly Advertiser*, evidently realizing that its increasing unprofitability came from its intentional lack of a political perspective; no longer did the miscellany format that he had learned thirty-years earlier in Williamsburg fit the ongoing politicization of Richmond's newspapers; it was an approach now simply passé, even as it reflected a his being "persevering, conscientious, and a man of little passion." It may also be that he chose that non-partisan path so as to not overshadow the flourishing careers of his brothers George, a mayor of Richmond, and Robert, a respected physician.

### **Legacies**

Still, the withdrawal from journalism allowed Nicolson to fit ever more easily into the role of elder statesman in the city. From his earliest days there he was an active part of the various Masonic lodges there (three in total), and was a captain in Richmond's militia regiment in the 1790s. In response to the Chesapeake-Leopard affair in 1807, Nicolson was one of the organizers of the "Richmond Silver Greys," the city's home-guard unit comprised of old gray-haired men, many in the print and book trades. For many years he sat on the vestry of St. Paul's Church on the Capitol Square, and so became publisher for the Diocese of Virginia of the Protestant Episcopal Church. Nicolson was also a notable figure in the city's investment community, speculating in Richmond real estate, although renting his actual residences, and owning large numbers of shares in the Bank of Virginia (founded 1804) and the Manchester Turnpike Company (founded 1802).

But it seems that after 1797, Nicolson devoted most of his declining energies to his library, leaving the business of his press office to his journeymen – as was common practice among early Virginia printers at the end of their careers. In describing Nicolson, the Richmond chronicler Samuel Mordecai focused most heavily on that particular role, reporting that the aging printer's dedication to maintaining the library's holdings was well known: "Woe to the member who retained a book beyond the limited time!" Unfortunately, his successors were not so diligent, and the library faded into obscurity after Nicolson's death. Indeed an 1815 report on the library called it "select, but too small," overburdened with sentimental novels of transient popularity. It closed in the 1820s, its books distributed among the members.

Evidently, Nicolson's demise was a similarly prolonged event. He voluntarily relinquished his

contract as printer to the Virginia Senate in 1803 after nearly a quarter-century in the role. And while he had helped organize the Silver Greys, he was frequently absent from militia musters after 1800. State records in 1807 indicate that Nicolson then no longer directed the daily business affairs of his press, leaving that task to his journeyman Lynch, suggesting a confining illness. When he finally died in November 1808 in Richmond, Nicolson was widely mourned. Buried in a vault in the yard of St. Paul's, he was warmly memorialized:

"As a neighbor, friend and relation he was kind, benevolent, and attentive and strictly upright in his conduct to all. A lover of order, He was universally regular and correct in his manners. To crown all he was a real friend to religion and indefatigable in his endeavors to make its public service pleasing as well as useful."

But Mordecai presents the most memorable portrait of Nicolson, who was, he claimed, "the very beau ideal of an old bachelor, if beau and ideal can be thus applied." Hence, he died unmarried and childless. His multifaceted estate was settled by his brother-in-law, Charles Copeland, a prominent Richmond attorney, who eventually distributed its proceeds among a wide-range of his nephews and nieces. The press was sold to Lynch, who quickly formed a partnership with Charles Southgate (395), a Richmond-based musician and music teacher; the firm of Lynch & Southgate soon offered Virginia a biweekly literary journal, *The Visitor*, a paper that clearly emulated the style of Nicolson's erstwhile miscellany.

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

### ***Personal Data***

Born:           ca. 1750   Williamsburg, Virginia.

Died:   Nov. 10 1808   Richmond, Virginia.

Never married nor had children.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps 5 &6; *Annals of Henrico Parish*; Meagher, *Education in Richmond*; Tyler's *Quarterly* (1927); Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*.