

316 NUTHEAD, WILLIAM

Printer

Gloucester Point

First printer to conduct a press in Virginia (1683), financed by John Buckner (475).

Nuthead is an emblematic figure in the history of the Virginia print trade; while he was the first printer to conduct a press in the colony, he also breached contemporaneous English law by printing official documents without government sanction; thus Nuthead's residence in Virginia can be measured in weeks not years.

The first printing press established in Virginia was conducted by Nuthead at the Gloucester Point business of John Buckner; as the colonial government was then seated at Jamestown, most historians have assumed that Nuthead's press was conducted there, but the journals of the Governor's Council record that it was hosted by Buckner, so not in the capital. That location reflects the imperatives that prompted Nuthead's emigration from England.

John Buckner was then a member of the House of Burgesses and the Clerk of the Gloucester County Court. In those roles, he became aware of the tardy distribution of the laws enacted by the General Assembly, then "published" only in widely-varying manuscript form carried home by the individual Burgesses. The sitting governor, Sir William Berkeley, opposed and actively suppressed any efforts to bring printing to Virginia, seeing the technology as a destabilizing influence – as evinced by the printing press's role in fomenting the English Civil War, which took the life of his patron, Charles I, as well as the social order of his youth. But his departure in 1677, recalled over his handling of Bacon's Rebellion, brought changes to Virginia, with the county courts and their clerks pressing for a more timely promulgation of those laws by their publication in print. Berkeley's successor, Thomas Culpeper, Lord Thoresway, was essentially an absentee governor, residing in the colony just ten months in the seven years he held the post, an absence that left open the question of whether printing was allowed in Virginia.

The uncertainty led Buckner to take matters into his own hands. It appears that between the two sessions of the 1682 General Assembly (April and November), he invited Nuthead to bring his press to Virginia to produce printed copies of that Assembly's laws. At the end of the November session, Nuthead printed proof copies of the laws enacted by that Assembly for Buckner at his Gloucester Point store. However, neither Buckner nor Nuthead had asked permission to do so from the Council or the Assembly, nor had they sought a license under the Printing Act promulgated with the Stuart Restoration (The Licensing of the Press Act 1662). While their actions were consistent with the practices followed by colonial American printers to the north, this oversight in Virginia resulted in a call to appear before the Governor (who had returned, reluctantly, in December 1682) and his Council to explain their presumptive behavior. In February 1683, they were ordered to immediately cease and desist in their endeavor until the King's pleasure on the matter could be ascertained, and to post a £100 bond guaranteeing their compliance with the order.

Culpeper and the Council expected that the issue would be resolved when the governor returned to England that May. But what no one could know then was that Culpeper's return

would infuriate Charles II and so instigate proceedings that voided his commission from his negligence. Nicholas Spencer, president of the Council, would be the acting governor until Culpeper's successor arrived, so leaving the issue unresolved. But when Francis Howard, Baron Howard of Effingham, arrived in February 1684 – more than a year after the Council's cease-and-desist order – he carried explicit instructions on the matter:

And whereas, We have taken notice of the Inconvenience that may arise by the Liberty of Printing in that Our Colony, you are to provide by all necessary orders and Directions that no person be permitted to use any press for printing upon any occasion whatsoever.

Effingham was expected to guarantee that Virginia's printing void would not be filled by some entrepreneur like Nuthead. Buckner and Nuthead were now out of business.

By November 1685, Nuthead had moved on to the neighboring Maryland colony, where he set up his press at the capital in St. Mary's City, thereby gaining the distinction of being the first printer in both the Virginia and Maryland colonies. His life in Maryland is easier to trace than that in Virginia, but the "Protestant Revolution" of July 1689, in which the proprietary government of the Catholic Lord Baltimore was overturned, has left gaps in the record. Still, Nuthead appears to have learned from his Virginia disappointment as he tied his fortunes to the leaders of that revolt, all supporters of the newly-seated monarchs William & Mary, and so benefitted by those ties afterward. He printed for the governments of both the rebellious John Coode and the succeeding royal governor, Nehemiah Blakiston, and so maintained a monopoly over the colony's printing until his death in early 1695, "in his forty-first year."

Yet Nuthead's last days were marked by self-interested controversy. The arrival in 1694 of Governor Francis Nicolson, the man who had succeeded Lord Effingham in Virginia, brought a change in the site of the colonial capital; he laid out a new city at the mouth of the Severn River that became Annapolis (named for Queen Anne) just as he had done in Virginia with Williamsburg (named for King William). The merchants of St. Mary's City, including Nuthead, presented a protest to the Assembly that fall in an attempt to block the move, but to no avail; the capital relocated in the fall of 1695. After Nuthead's death the following January, his office fell to the hands of his wife, Dinah Nuthead, who continued operating the press with the aid of journeymen, even though she could not then read or write. Thus, when the government moved north, so too did the Nuthead press, with Dinah Nuthead being licensed to print for the colonial government in her own right in May 1696, apparently continuing in that role until at least 1702.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1654 in England.

Died: ca. Jan. 1695 St, Mary's City, Maryland.

Left a wife, Dinah, and two children, William and Susan.

Sources: Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 2; Wroth, *Printing in Colonial Maryland*.