

321 PARKS, WILLIAM

Printer, Publisher, Bookseller

Williamsburg

First authorized printer in Virginia; first "public printer" for the colonial government (1730-50), publisher of the first authoritative collection of Virginia's laws (1733), and proprietor of its first newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette* (1736-50), all at Williamsburg.

Parks is an iconic figure in colonial Virginia history, as well as the celebrated progenitor of the print trade in the Old Dominion. Yet his appearance also demonstrates the ambivalence that the colony's governors and their imperial masters held for this technology. Deemed a disruptive influence for the effect imprints had in launching the Reformation and resultant English Civil War, the trade was actively suppressed in Virginia for more than a century. The end of that suppression was a concession to print's innate capacity to convey consistent and authoritative information across space and time, a necessary element of government and defense as Virginia grew in its acreage and population in that century. By letting a solitary printer into the colony, the government expected to control the trade's proliferation while benefitting from its conveniences. But Parks' residence created a market for print materials that ultimately outgrew the government's ability to control their distribution and influence.

Early Years

Despite the clear path that Parks carved in Virginia, his origins are conjectural. The account that has been accepted as his history is one based on probability rather than hard fact. The first supposition is that a William Parks seen in England before 1727 is the same William Parks seen in America thereafter. That Parks makes his first appearance in any historical record as the publisher of the *Ludlow Post-Man* in October 1719. That introduction suggests a tradesman starting his first independent office in his early twenties. Thus this Parks was probably born between 1695 and 1700, possibly in Shropshire County where the town of Ludlow is situated. That Parks moved to Hereford in 1721, and then to Reading in 1723.

The Parks who came to Virginia appears initially in America in March 1726, answering a call for a printer from the Maryland Assembly. Most historians presume that the three-year gap between the records of these two printers indicates the time Parks was in transit between the two shores, and that he landed in Philadelphia, as that is where the Maryland Assembly advertised its need. While the connection is likely, it has never been proven.

The Maryland Assembly accepted Parks' application and by the fall of 1726, he had opened a press office in Annapolis and had begun printing the laws promulgated in each legislative session there. His press was the fourth so employed in Maryland, his predecessors having either died or relocated. The first was William Nuthead (316), also the first to bring a press into Virginia only to be prohibited from printing by the Governor's Council in 1683; he relocated to Maryland and began printing there with that government's approbation. The immediate predecessor to Parks was John Peter Zenger, who had removed to New York City in 1722 where he would become famous for the celebrated 1735 trial that established truth as a defense when accused of libeling a public figure. In the four-year interval, the printing required by the Maryland government had been produced in Philadelphia with increasing

difficulty, leading to the call posted by the Maryland Assembly in 1726. Parks expanded his business in September 1727 when he published the first number of the *Maryland Gazette*, the colony's first newspaper, providing a weekly vehicle for official information alongside the advertising that would aid the growth of that colony's commerce. A month later, Parks published the first compilation of Maryland's laws, a collection that became essential to the conduct of its county courts thereafter. Having now demonstrated his capabilities Parks was confirmed by the Assembly as their official printer, so making him responsible for producing whatever imprints the government required. As that work increased, Parks took on Edmund Hall as his partner in late in 1732 to handle the demands of the *Gazette* while he focused on the public work. He remained the colony's printer until 1737.

Virginia's Public Printer

Now securely established in Maryland, Parks turned to Virginia. He had proposed publishing a collection of Virginia's laws then in force in December 1726, shortly after he received the commission to do the same in Maryland. That proposal had been tabled by the Governor's Council, who was awaiting the arrival of a new governor who would either approve or disapprove the proposal. Sir William Gooch arrived in Williamsburg in September 1727 with instructions in hand that gave him the authority to admit a press into the colony for the first time. At the next Assembly in February 1728 he made it known to the Assembly that he would look favorably on their hiring of Parks to publish such a collection. This was a project that the colony's many county courts had been pushing for since the 1690s, and that the Assembly had suggested since 1710. In short order, Parks was granted an "authority to print" in the colony, and was asked to also publish the laws of each Assembly, its session laws, as in Maryland. The entrepreneurial printer agreed, and promptly employed his Annapolis office to complete the tasks.

It was soon obvious, however, that a second office would be needed in Virginia to execute the work there. So in the winter of 1729-30, Parks traveled to England to acquire the tools to outfit a new office in Williamsburg. On his return to the Chesapeake, he moved his family to Virginia, though maintaining his Annapolis office and his position as Maryland's public printer. But the burden wore on him; it became obvious that as his Virginia work increased, his Maryland commitments suffered. At the end of 1734, he began reducing his Maryland presence by closing his *Maryland Gazette*, which would leave the colony without a paper until 1745. In May 1737, an angry Maryland Assembly terminated his contract.

In Maryland, Parks had been accused of neglecting his work, but the reality was that he had bitten off more than he could chew. To prevent a recurrence in Virginia, he took more care to flatter the colony's authorities. First, he published John Markland's *Typographia: An Ode to Printing* (1730), a paean to Sir William Gooch, the governor who had approved his appointment. Then he issued the Assembly's desired compilation of the laws then in force (1733), followed by a manual for county-court justices – *The Office and Authority of a Justice of the Peace* (1736) – both produced with the aid of George Webb, a respected New Kent County justice. In August of 1736, he returned to the newspaper trade, issuing the first *Virginia Gazette*, a publication that would continue until the capital moved to Richmond in 1780. Like its Maryland predecessor, the *Gazette* was a weekly paper that was the source of

official news and information. Yet it also featured advertising notices for the land, slaves, goods, and services that facilitated the colony's economic growth, much to the authorities' avowed satisfaction.

By 1750, only about one-third of Parks' substantial income came from government work, evincing how much his business had evolved in the intervening years. The *Virginia Gazette* turned a handsome profit for him, as did his *Virginia Almanack*, published from 1731 onward, so becoming a staple among the region's planters. Yet his smaller activities yielded wealth as well. His office produced vast numbers of blank forms and account books that helped lubricate colonial commerce. He also sold books imported in sheets from England, binding them according to his customers' specifications. He published three to four books per year written by Virginia authors, including the first cook book (Eliza Smith, *The Compleat Housewife or Accomplish'd Gentlewoman's Companion*) and the first medical manual (John Tennent, *Every Man His Own Doctor*) printed in British North America). Parks even served as Williamsburg's postmaster, embracing a role that readily connected him with other printers in North America. The only activity that failed him was the paper mill that he constructed in 1744 on Archer's Hope Creek south of Williamsburg. The first of its kind in the southern colonies, the mill produced inferior-quality paper and did not survive Parks, despite the patronage of Benjamin Franklin.

Unlike his Maryland days, Parks' twenty-year tenure in Virginia provoked little controversy among the gentry, with the only tensions coming in the 1740s. In 1742, he published an unflattering story in his *Gazette* about a sitting Burgess who had moved to another county in an attempt to hide a conviction for stealing sheep as a young man. The Burgess accused Parks of libel, but the printed story was proved to be true. Drawing on the precedent of the Zenger trial of 1735, the Assembly dismissed the charges. Then in 1749, Parks was caught in a dispute between the Governor's Council and the House of Burgesses when he published in his *Gazette* a hostile opinion of the Burgesses from the journals of the Governor's Council by order of its president, Thomas Lee; again, once the truth was revealed, and his complicity in the matter disproved, Parks went free.

Legacies

After the General Assembly ordered a new compilation of Virginia laws in 1749, Parks embarked for England in search of new tools to complete the task. He did not see Virginia again, dying of pleurisy on April 1, 1750, just eight days after leaving Hampton; his body was carried on to England and buried at Gosport. Although Parks' estate was substantial – he owned the town lot that has been rebuilt as the Williamsburg Printing Office; property in Maryland; a house in New Castle, Virginia; a Hanover County farm that included the building where the county court then met; a score each of cattle and hogs; and twenty slaves – it was devoured by debt and litigation fees. Parks' outstanding publishing commitments were completed by his shop foreman, William Hunter (230), with the assistance of the estate and Hunter's relatives. That prompt performance made Hunter his master's successor as the colony's public printer – an office that would now continue for more than a century.

A less-evident contribution that Parks made to Virginia came through his daughter and sole surviving heir, Eleanor. She married John Shelton of Hanover; their daughter, Sarah Shelton, was the first wife of Patrick Henry.

Personal Data

Born: about 1697 in England.
Married ca. 1720 Eleanor in England.
Died: April 1 1750 Onboard the *Nelson*, enroute to England.
Wife and a son predeceased him; daughter Eleanor survived him.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 2; York County Records Project files and Williamsburg People files for Parks and Hunter; Wroth, *Maryland Printing and William Parks*; Rutherford, *The William Parks Paper Mill*.

This note is a modified version of the Parks entry written for the online *Encyclopedia Virginia* in 2010.