

## 325 PINKNEY, JOHN

### Printer & Publisher

### Williamsburg

Publisher of the second *Virginia Gazette* (1774-76) at Williamsburg as the successor to its founders William (358) and Clementina Rind (356); employed by them previously.

Pinkney is an ill-fated figure in the American printing trade; having acquired the remnants of the Williamsburg printing office of William and Clementina Rind, his former employers, he then failed in competition with the other two presses in town, moved to North Carolina to start over, but died before he could act there.

Where Pinkney originated and where he was trained remains a mystery, though his alliance with the Rinds suggests that he had been a part of the Green family network of printers that launched William Rind on his career as a journeyman printer. Upon the death of Clementina Rind he reported that he was "a relation" to her, but a more specific account is unknown. The printer is essentially invisible until William Rind's death in August 1773; then he appears as the foreman in Rind's office and as an appraiser of Rind's estate. That initial appearance indicates that he was born before 1752, as he would have to have been at least twenty-one to be assigned such a legal obligation. From that date until September 1774, Pinkney was the conductor of the Rind press, even as Clementina Rind retained her husband's post as printer to the colonial government; whether she had the training needed to run the press is still debated, though she likely did have a say over content in the family's *Virginia Gazette*, established in May 1766 when they relocated to Virginia from Annapolis. Thus, it was not until Clementina Rind's death in September 1774 that Pinkney came into his own.

Pinkney was quickly named administrator for the estates of both husband and wife, as well as a guardian of their minor children. It was probably a pre-arranged plan as their *Gazette* continued without missing a beat despite its proprietor's death. Until the end of March 1775, Pinkney professed that he conducted the paper "for the benefit of Clementina Rind's children," but a letter he published in February 1775 suggests that many in Virginia believed the claim was a ruse designed to keep public funds flowing into the family's coffers. Indeed, Alexander Purdie (345) was not named as the new public printer until May of that year, resulting in such monies flowing into the Rind office, and so to Pinkney's hands, for another eight months; and even then, an argument was made for Pinkney keeping the position for the Rind orphans' benefit. So from the start of his tenure in command of the Rind press, Pinkney's reputation was under scrutiny, and so often tarnished by the scrutinizers.

The reality of the era was that the political atmosphere undermined existing commercial relationships, as a way to force concessions from London – the so-called Continental Association of October 1774 – disrupting the supply networks of American printers. Pinkney faced the further complication that the Rind press had been a marginal operation from its inception in 1766; it was heavily dependent on partisan subsidies and the public work, and remained so after its owners' deaths. With the transfer of the concession for public work to Purdie in 1775, Pinkney's revenues were substantially reduced. By the end of that year, all three of the Williamsburg press offices faced paper shortages triggered by the boycotts of British goods. In December, Pinkney reduced the size of his paper to a half-sheet, as did the

competing press of John Dixon Sr. (140) and William Hunter Jr. (231) shortly thereafter. By February 1776, the situation evidently forced Pinkney to suspend publication, as no issues are known after February 3rd. Now lacking the revenue produced by the weekly paper, the fate of the business was essentially sealed. Several historians, Douglas McMurtrie among them, have seen this failure as the "result of its publisher's poor management." Yet there is no real evidence to support such a decisive statement. As he eventually left Williamsburg, he was required to post a debtor-bond before leaving; but such bonds do not prove mismanagement in and of themselves; indeed, they were quite common then, given the increasing indebtedness of all Virginians – an unintended consequence of the Continental Association. And in this case, the problem was not Pinkney's departure as much as it was the removal of his assets from the state, the collateral that secured his debts; that act is what obliged Pinkney to post a bond.

Pinkney's destination was North Carolina. There, the incumbent public printer, James Davis (123), a former Williamsburg journeyman trained by William Parks (321), was experiencing problems similar to Pinkney's. He too faced supply disruptions that delayed his production of the public work; but he also operated at some distance from the government; he resided in the coastal town of New Bern, while the government was seated in the piedmont village of Halifax. Pinkney made it known that he was willing to move the old Rind office – which he had purchased a year before – to Halifax. So in late April 1777, the General Assembly there decided to replace Davis with Pinkney. Still, he had to wrap up his affairs in Williamsburg, including settling the Rinds' estates. But after two months delay, his new employers began demanding that he move. Pinkney was forced to leave his problems in the hands of Jacob Bruce, a Williamsburg merchant, before all was settled. He moved south in about mid-July, but his situation went from bad to worse. He came down ill shortly after his arrival in Halifax and died in mid-August, before he could produce any imprints. The Assembly reluctantly rehired Davis; the former printer's supporters immediately launched a campaign to vilify Pinkney for "conduct [that] was so scandalous that we only regret that he did not die before he had the opportunity of abusing this state in the gross manner he has done." Such remarks are the basis for assessments in North Carolina histories that not only misrepresent Pinkney, but all Virginians, as seen in the comment of Stephen P. Weeks in a 1913 article that "those were the days when any outgrown garment or outwork creed was good enough for circulation in North Carolina if it but had the Virginia brand." Pinkney was not as mean as such reports suggest, but clearly he was unable to conceive of a way to conduct a press office in the context of the fiscal disorder of the early Revolutionary era.

**NB:** Surname spelled occasionally as Pinckney, as used by the noted South Carolina family.

### ***Personal Data***

Born:           by 1752    Unknown

Died:        August 1777    Halifax, North Carolina.

No record of wife or children discovered; likely never married.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Williamsburg People files and York County Records Project files, CWF Research Dept.; Weeks, *Press of North Carolina*, Weeks, "Pre-Revolutionary Printers," (1913).