

328 PLEASANTS, DEBORAH – [DEBORAH WHITEHEAD LOWNES PLEASANTS]

Publisher, Public Printer

Richmond

Publisher of the *Virginia Argus* (1814) at Richmond with her son Samuel M. Pleasants (332) as successors to her husband, Samuel Pleasants (331); sister of William Lownes (271).

Deborah Pleasants inherited control over the most extensive print-trade business operating in Richmond in 1814, one carefully built by her late husband, Samuel Pleasants. That legacy made her the second (and last) woman to hold the position of public printer in Virginia. Yet her tenure in business was consciously a transitory one, as she planned from the first to sell the concern to provide adequate support for raising a family of seven minor children.

Pleasants was born Deborah Whitehead Lownes in 1774, the fourth of ten children in a well-to-do Quaker family in Philadelphia. Her father, James Lownes (1740-1830), moved his family to Richmond in about 1790, becoming a real-estate speculator and developer there; his most notable creation was the Falling Gardens property along the west bank of Shockoe Creek above Franklin Street. Those activities and the family's faith brought her an early acquaintance with journeyman printer Samuel Pleasants through attendance at the Curles meeting; that introduction led to their marriage in 1795. Yet that union separated her from her family's faith; her husband has been "dismissed" from that meeting in 1793 for failing to end his new printing office's dependence on enslaved pressmen, meaning that she would be cast out as well in 1796 for "marrying out of the faith."

Over the next two decades, Pleasants was a peripheral figure in her husband's business. In those years, Samuel built a simple one-press shop that issued a twice-weekly mercantile advertiser into a trade complex that operated a three-press printing plant, a well-stocked bookstore, and the influential Republican journal, the *Virginia Argus*. Apparently Deborah was tied to their home until 1806, giving birth to seven children in ten years. But after the birth of her youngest daughter, she opened a millinery shop adjacent to her husband's well-known Argus Office, establishing an independent business identity of her own. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that she was a factor in the conduct of her husband's business before his death in October 1814. Hence, that unhappy event brought her abruptly into the trade.

Still, it seems that Pleasants was sufficiently conversant with her husband's affairs that she could move quickly to take control of them herself. The now forty-year-old widow faced the prospect of supporting a large family without a husband's aid. Moreover, the Argus Office had obligations that needed to be addressed, particularly those to the state government in its function as the Printer to the Commonwealth. So Pleasants first petitioned the Hustings Court seeking to be named as the administrator of Samuel's estate; once appointed, she hired John Maddox (275), a Richmond business agent of reliable Quaker origin, as her deputy, and set him loose to collect her husband's outstanding debts. The *Argus* continued uninterrupted with its cadre of experienced journeymen, but its masthead promptly recorded the transition, stating that it was "published by Samuel M. Pleasants, for the benefit of himself and the other Representatives of Samuel Pleasants, deceased." It was a remarkable pronouncement as the printer's eldest son was just fourteen-years-old while his self-assured mother stayed in the shadows as its actual manager. The General Assembly

allowed her to retain the post of public printer until January 1, 1815, after she reported that the work would be "done by persons in her employment" as it had been under Samuel.

These rapid moves gave the widow Pleasants some time to plan the dissolution of the *Argus* Office, with its many parts. She offered the entire office for sale in a public auction held on its doorstep on December 18, 1814 – two months after her husband died and two weeks before her public contract expired. Though it might have been sold piecemeal, the office was sold as a whole to the partnership of John McDonald Burke (065), foreman of the *Argus* press, and Philip DuVal (155), son of a wealthy Henrico County planter. The promissory note that Philip DuVal & Co. gave the estate was to be paid off by an ensuing sale of the printing plant and the bookstore to partnerships that each man formed with others; Burke's second alliance was with Arthur G. Booker (031), a practical printer who had also been employed by Pleasants; they bought the press in late March 1815 as the firm of Arthur G. Booker & Co.; meanwhile, DuVal joined with book-binder Frederick A. Mayo (284) to buy the bookstore as the concern of DuVal & Mayo. Thus by mid-1815, Burke and Duval owned the *Argus* itself, with Burke controlling the printing plant and Duval the bookstore.

The transaction did not settle the estate, however; Deborah Pleasants was now essentially the primary creditor to all three businesses through the note issued to acquire the complex in December 1814. Burke proved to be a man "with major schemes and minor capital." His plan began to unravel in December 1815, with Booker, DuVal, and Mayo all withdrawing from the scheme by March 1816, leaving him responsible for the notes they had issued; in turn, Burke fled Richmond in January 1817 after closing the *Argus*. Pleasants was thus left to pursue payment in the courts, a process that dragged on until at least 1826. But despite this ongoing problem, she found sufficient long-term support in the properties Samuel had invested in, including ones developed initially by her father.

Deborah Pleasants remained in Richmond for the remainder of her life, ensconced in the large house that Samuel had rebuilt on Twenty-Second Street near Leigh. Her two sons lived with her there, with younger son Edwin raising his family there as well; meanwhile Samuel, the eldest, seems to have taken responsibility for the care of his aging mother, so never marrying. She died at her residence in May 1837 at the age of sixty-three.

Personal Data

Born:	Feb. 20	1774	Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Married	July 18	1795	Samuel Pleasants @ Henrico County, Virginia.
Died:	May 26	1837	Henrico County, Virginia.
Children:	Lucinda (b. 1796); Sally Ann (b. 1798); Samuel Madison (b. 1800); Ellen (b. ca. 1802); Edwin Chapman (b. 1804); Charlotte (b. 1805); Mary Gallego (b. 1806).		

Sources: Imprints; Hubbard on Richmond; Edward Pleasants Valentine Papers, Valentine Museum, Richmond; notices in Richmond papers (1806-37); genealogical data from Miller, *Pleasants and Allied Families* (1980). Brigham incorrectly reports Pleasants as partner to DuVal in 1815; Burke was actual partner in DuVal & Co. at that time, even though she had advertised her anticipated investment in the firm (per Hubbard).