

### 330 PLEASANTS, JOHN HAMPDEN

**Publisher & Editor**

**Lynchburg, Richmond**

Publisher of the *Lynchburg Press* (1820-22) in successive partnerships with William Duffy (150) and Joseph Butler (069); then publisher of *The Virginian* (1822-24) in Lynchburg with Butler; and finally publisher of the *Richmond Whig* (1824-41).

Pleasants is perhaps the best known of Virginia's "dueling editors," principally a result of his death in such an affair; yet his career as a journalist marked the evolution of a Democratic alternative to the dominant party journal in Virginia of that day into a voice for opponents of that party's control of state government and political discourse; it was that oppositional view that generated a personal animosity that was the real cause of his fatal encounter, even though the argument leading up to that event was about slavery.

The publisher was part of an extended Quaker family descended from a common ancestor who arrived in Virginia in 1665. His branch of the family settled in the counties of the upper James River Valley in the early 1700s; his immediate family had set deep roots in Goochland County by the time of his birth in 1797. He was the eldest son of James Pleasants (1769-1836) and Susannah L. Rose (1771-1854). Then a member of the House of Delegates, James named his son after John Hampden, the English Whig who helped forge the parliamentary resistance to Charles I that led to the English Civil War, so placing him in a political context from birth. The son received a classical education near the family estate of "Contention" and was sent to Williamsburg to attend the College of William & Mary in 1815; graduating in 1817, Pleasants returned to the James River valley to study law in Lynchburg, evidently qualifying to practice there within a year. In that time, his father had progressed from his initial service in the Assembly (1797-1802), to the clerk of the House of Delegates (1802-11), then as a representative in the U.S. House of Representatives (1811-19), and finally a U.S. Senator from Virginia (1819-22).

#### **Lynchburg**

In 1820, the elder Pleasants launched his son on a journalism career in Lynchburg as well. While anticipating an eventual run for governor, he was not guaranteed the support of the Democratic party's principal organ, the *Richmond Enquirer* of Thomas Ritchie (360), which was drifting away from his supporters in the state party. So he moved to build a journalistic base for himself through John Hampden Pleasants by acquiring the *Lynchburg Press*.

The *Press* was the long-established Republican journal in the market town, founded in 1809 by Fleming Grantland (185) in support of the Madison administration. By 1811, the paper had become the purview of Jacob Haas (196); in late 1817, he brought Samuel G. Dawson (131), a nephew of his wife, into the venture, making the journal a family business with Republican inclinations. But in 1819, each partner determined to retire from journalism and so convinced William Duffy to sell his Georgetown, D.C., bookstore and press in order to come to Lynchburg to take over their aging *Press*; Duffy first bought Dawson's interest that April, and then that of Haas in late May, taking control of the newspaper as William Duffy &

Company.

Just who Duffy's unnamed partner-backers were is unclear, but within a year he was openly associated with James Pleasants. In April 1820, he arranged the purchase from Duffy of a half-interest in the *Press* by his son, John Hampden. Then in September, Duffy sold his share to the younger Pleasants as well, placing the paper firmly in the Pleasants family's hands. The following April, the younger Pleasants brought in Marcellus Smith, his brother-in-law, to assist in the project. As none of the new proprietors were trained printers, Duffy may have stayed with them as press manager, as he did remain in Lynchburg operating a successful brewery for several more years.

The elder Pleasants now determined to seek election as governor in 1822, and his publisher son and son-in-law moved to support the campaign with their paper. First, Smith withdrew from the venture at the end of 1821, selling his interest to Joseph Butler, an experienced newspaper proprietor and a marriage relation of Smith's from Dinwiddie County to the east. The resulting infusion of capital allowed the firm of Pleasants & Butler to acquire their new cross-town rival *Lynchburg Gazette* in August 1822, and merge two papers into a weekly with broader appeal in the state: *The Virginian*. That journal openly supported the campaign agenda of father James – principally advocating greater representation in the Assembly for the state's fast-growing western population. That December, James Pleasants was elected to the first of three consecutive terms as Virginia's governor.

By the end of 1823, however, the governor found himself increasingly at odds with Ritchie and his *Enquirer*, even as he was re-elected in December. Hence John Hampden Pleasants decided to move his operation to the capital to actively engage with Ritchie and the party leadership there, the Richmond Junto. In early December 1823, the firm of Pleasants & Butler advertised proposals for a new journal they called the *Constitutional Whig*. Finding enough support to convince them that more would follow, the pair sold the *Virginian* at year end to Richard H. Toler, a marriage relation of Butler's, and moved to Richmond. The new paper issued there for the first time on January 27, 1824.

### **Richmond**

The 1824 presidential campaign was the key factor in dividing the Virginia Democratic party. At the outset, both the *Whig* of Pleasants and the *Enquirer* of Ritchie supported William H. Crawford, the former *Virginian* then Secretary of Treasury, as James Monroe's successor. However, when Crawford suffered a stroke in 1823, both broke from the choice made by the congressional caucus, Speaker Henry Clay of Kentucky, though in separate directions. Ritchie and the rest of the Richmond Junto moved to support the populist war-hero Andrew Jackson, while the Pleasants faction backed the Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. The divergence meant that Ritchie's *Enquirer* would no longer present the governor's opinions unfiltered to the voters of the state, forcing his son's new *Constitutional Whig* into that role. While the governor was reelected in December 1824, the deepening schism impelled him to retire from political life at the end of his third term in December 1825; he was succeeded by another anti-Jackson politician, John Tyler of Charles City County, with the support of his son's *Constitutional Whig*.

John Hampden Pleasants now found himself the primary voice of the anti-Jackson element in Virginia, and so the *Whig* quickly found itself in heated battle with his father's former supporters. Contemporaries reported that he did not realize a profit from the paper until after 1834, when the state became disaffected with Jackson over his reversal of position for states' rights during the nullification controversy. In these years, Pleasants ran through a series of partners who helped sustain the journal with their resources, turning to the old Richmond hand Philip DuVal (155) in the winter of 1824-25, then to Alexander W. Jones from spring 1825 to early 1826, and then to brother-in-law Marcellus Smith again until early 1829. When Smith died in February 1829, Pleasants found a partner who stayed with the venture for ten years, one Josiah B. Abbott. It was under the firm of Pleasants & Abbott that the *Whig* became a profitable venture, suggesting a reason for his long tie with Pleasants.

Still, his Whig outlook proved a difficult position to sustain, especially as the national party began to take on a Northern perspective. Pleasants had supported Adams in 1824 as the better of "a choice of evils;" yet Virginians did not begin to turn away from Jackson until after 1832, leaving him a voice in the wilderness in the interim. After that date, though, the additional problem of the "radical" antislavery views of northern Whigs arose for him. After the War of 1812, the American Colonization Society was created by national political and religious leaders in Washington, including rising figures like Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. Supported by Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe as a states' rights solution to the slavery issue, Virginians followed their old heroes' lead and began raising money to assist the process. Pleasants supported colonization, as had his father, each serving as officers in the state organization as they believed that colonization was the only viable alternative to the "disruptive" abolitionist movement. It was a position that would haunt Pleasants.

The Whig victory in the 1840 presidential election put Pleasants and his paper in a position of unprecedented influence. He had brought in the former editor of the *Virginia Free Press* at Charlestown, John S. Gallaher (177), as a partner and editorial writer in January 1840, and aided Gallaher in conducting a Whig campaign paper, *The Yeoman*, there as well. But events in early 1841 changed the dynamic; William Henry Harrison, of course, died unexpectedly, making John Tyler president; long a supporter and friend of Pleasants, Tyler insisted that he come to Washington to establish a pro-administration paper to counter the unfriendly Whig and Democratic journals there. Pleasants agreed, selling his interest in the *Richmond Whig* to Alexander Moseley in September, before commencing publication of *The Independent* in Washington in December; that journal lasted barely six months, finding as little support locally as did Tyler nationally, and so closed at the end of June 1842. Pleasants returned to Richmond as editor of the *Whig* for Moseley and his successor, Robert H. Gallaher, the son of Pleasants's former partner.

### **The Fatal Duel**

Eventually, Pleasants proposed publishing a new journal in Richmond, separate from his old *Whig*, in an attempt to distance himself from the emerging antislavery views of northern Whig journals. The catalyst for his planning was the annexation of Texas.

By 1844, the *Richmond Whig* was under financial pressure as its patronage declined once

again. Its overt support of Tyler, who was rejected by Southern Democrats and Northern Whigs alike that year, was part of the problem. But so too were popular perceptions that the *Whig* had become too antislavery, a problem associated with the editor's association with the colonization society in the 1820s and 1830s.

Meanwhile, Thomas Ritchie rebounded, backing the winning candidate that year, James K. Polk, the new Democratic hero from Tennessee. Polk then brought Ritchie to Washington to conduct the incoming administration's new journal, leaving the venerable *Enquirer* in the care of his two sons, Thomas Jr. and William Foushee Ritchie. Neither son had any love for Pleasants, despite their father's long association with both James and John Hampden. Thus the rhetoric in the *Enquirer* began to heat up, targeting Pleasants personally, linking him to northern abolitionists. In late 1845, Pleasants severed his ties to his own paper and became a correspondent for Whig papers throughout the state. The Ritchie brothers immediately speculated that the "aging" Pleasants was about to open a new abolitionist newspaper in the Virginia capital, playing off rumors of his planned new Southern Whig journal.

In January 1846, the conflict between Pleasants and the Ritchie brothers heated up in the midst of Polk's push for a war with Mexico over Texas. The Richmond daily *News and Star* of Charles M. Smith offered Pleasants a platform from which to respond to the Ritchies every time that they published derogatory opinions of him; he was increasingly annoyed by the fact that they knew (or should have known) that he was not an abolitionist; rather, he noted repeatedly that he held the same ideas about slavery that their father had from the early days of the colonization effort. But the Ritchie brothers continued their assault; so over the course of just five weeks, the dispute went from sarcastic jibes to a deadly duel.

In the end, Thomas Ritchie Jr. decided to not continue the exchange and shifted to insult, simply calling Pleasants a coward. This was the final straw; honor needed satisfaction. Four days later, on February 25th, the two met on an island separating the James from the James River Canal, each armed with pistols and swords. Pleasants charged the younger Ritchie intending to skewer him; Ritchie fired his weapon, dropping his adversary as he slashed at him. Two days later, Pleasants was dead at age forty-nine. Within a month, Ritchie was on trial for murder in the Chesterfield County Court; yet despite the fact that duels had long been outlawed in the state, Ritchie was acquitted without the jury leaving the courtroom.

Whig journals around the country, especially the *American Whig Review* in New York, loudly mourned his death and criticized Ritchie's acquittal. Still, his death marked a turn in the antislavery debate in the country. Pleasants could discuss the issue in his *Whig* before 1840; but after that doing so made him a target and a martyr – presaging the war yet to come.

***Personal Data***

Born: Jan. 4 1797 Goochland County, Virginia.  
Married [1]: in 1818 Ann Eliza Irving @ Lynchburg, VA (d. 1819).  
Married [2]: Dec. 15 1829 Mary Massie @ Allegheny County, VA (d. 1837).  
Died: Feb. 27 1846 Henrico County, Virginia.  
Children: By Mary: James (b. 1831); Anna Elizabeth (b. 1834).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Hubbard on Richmond; US Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Cabell, *Recollections of Lynchburg*; Peyton, *Augusta County*; Mordecai. *By-Gone Days*; Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*; *A Full Report, Embracing all the Evidence and Arguments in the Case of the Commonwealth of Virginia vs. Thomas Ritchie, Jr. Tried at the Spring Term of the Chesterfield Superior Court, 1846.* (1846); genealogical data from Miller, *Pleasants and Allied Families* (1980).