

### **331 PLEASANTS, SAMUEL – [SAMUEL PLEASANTS, JR.]**

**Printer, Publisher, Public Printer**

**Richmond**

Publisher of the long-lived *Virginia Argus* (1793-1814) at Richmond, initially with Augustine Davis (119); husband of Deborah Whitehead Pleasants (328), father of Samuel Madison Pleasants (332), brother-in-law of William Lownes (271), and uncle of J. J. Pleasants (329).

Pleasants conducted the original Republican press in Richmond, becoming a key member of the party's leadership circle in the capital city. He was also an entrepreneurial figure in the Virginia print trade, establishing the first three-press office in the city and building the largest book store in Virginia through interactive connections with the national book trade. As a result, his imprimatur pervades the record of Virginia's early-Republic imprints.

#### **Quaker Roots**

Pleasants was part of a larger Quaker family who descended from a common ancestor who arrived in Virginia in 1665. The multiple occurrences of several given names in the Pleasants clan have created confusion among researchers over lines of descent. Here, the printer was the son of a third-generation John Pleasants (1730-90) and his wife Sarah Cox (sometimes spelled Cocke); in his early days in Richmond, he used the appellation "Jr." to differentiate himself from a like-named merchant there, a brother of the respected Quaker elder Robert Pleasants. Through his grandfather, he had connections to others in the Pleasants clan in the print trade: his cousin Tarleton W. Pleasants (333) worked alongside him in Richmond for a time; another cousin was Gov. James Pleasants (1769-1836), who later set up his son, John Hampden Pleasants (330), in the trade; and his brother Tarleton (1765-1835) sent his eldest son John Jay Pleasants (329) to train with Samuel in Richmond.

Although apparently born in York County, Pleasants was raised in the Quaker community of Henrico County dominated by the monthly meeting at Curles. There he became acquainted with the children of Richmond developer James Lownes (1740-1830), including his daughter Deborah and son William. That relationship became a vital part of his life, as he married Deborah in 1795 and employed William after 1804. Yet Pleasants would be "dismissed" from that meeting in 1793 for failing to end his office's dependence on enslaved pressmen, meaning that his wife would be cast out as well in 1796 for "marrying out of the faith." Still, his Quaker roots ran deep, as evinced by his simple dress, his avoidance of heated partisan rhetoric, and his ongoing reporting on antislavery activities of Quakers across the country.

Where Pleasants trained and with whom is still unclear, despite his later prominence. His first appearance in Virginia records – in a Richmond tax census – is as a journeyman printer in the office of Augustine Davis in late 1787. That placement suggests that he trained close to home, an opportunity resulting from the multiplication of printing offices in Richmond after 1781; but his strong Quaker roots may also have afforded him a training opportunity in Philadelphia with his appearance in 1787 marking a return to Virginia. In either case, however, Pleasants is essentially an enigmatic figure before 1793. Yet in that spring, the obscure printer became the city's newest journal owner.

## Republican Journalist

In the fall of 1792, James Carey (080), brother of the Philadelphia publishing entrepreneur Mathew Carey, arrived in Richmond to start publishing the city's first daily newspaper. He was persuaded to undertake the project by Augustine Davis, the one-time Williamsburg printer who then published the weekly *Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser* there. Davis had been named the state's public printer the year before and his paper was now often filled with official notices, rather than the commercial advertising that had been its forte previously; in backing Carey, Davis hoped to increase the space available for such notices and so enhance his revenues further than his original paper now allowed. But Carey was an unreliable partner and their new *Virginia Gazette and Richmond Daily Advertiser* was an expensive commodity; consequently, the newspaper lasted just three months – October 1st to December 31st – before Carey abandoned Richmond for greener pastures elsewhere.

Davis turned to Pleasants, his shop foreman, as an alternative to Carey. Pleasants agreed to attempt a twice-weekly journal in place of the closed daily. The pair formed a company to produce that replacement, one where Pleasants was the titular owner but in which Davis was the financial power – Samuel Pleasants and Company. Their new *Virginia Gazette and Richmond & Manchester Advertiser* first issued on April 15, 1793, "in consequence of Mr. Carey's removal from the city." It proved an auspicious time to start a new paper there; the divide between Jefferson and Hamilton had become one between two groups of political supporters, and American newspapers now began to evince distinctly partisan perspectives. Pleasants wanted their journal to support Jefferson, while Davis stayed loyal to Washington and Hamilton, a result, perhaps, of the president's earlier support of his once-struggling paper. So in mid-October 1794, the partners parted ways, with Pleasants then conducting the *Advertiser* alone. A year later, his *Advertiser* adopted a new name, the *Virginia Argus*, a title identifying the most widely-read paper in the state over the ensuing two decades.

The separation of Pleasants from Davis established a competition that shaped journalism in Richmond for years. The *Argus* was initially the only Republican paper issued in the capital, competing with three journals embracing various shades of Federalism. Within three years, Davis had settled in as the conservative journalist in Richmond, as opposed to the liberal Pleasants, forcing the older papers of John Dixon Jr. (141) and Thomas Nicolson (315) into permanent retirement. Thereafter, the former partners occupied the center-left (*Argus*) and center-right (*Gazette*) of the local partisan spectrum, with only an occasional appearance by short-lived papers embracing the extreme ends of that spectrum. Yet some contemporaries found the centrist balancing act unsatisfying, with one of them later reporting that

"Mr. Pleasants was, like his rival, more expert in wielding the scissors than the pen. The two editors did not draw their weapons on each other sanguinarily, though espousing opposite parties, and seldom came in collision in their editorials, unless when represented by champions under their masks..."

However, such an approach allowed each newspaper to weather the political and financial storms that raged in the years before the War of 1812.

With a stable readership in place, Pleasants could expand his business, although he did so

with caution. He began with a small one-press shop, but with the demise of his competitors' offices, he added capacity to draw in their customers, acquiring a second press in 1801, and a third in 1809 – compelling a relocation about every five years as his operation grew. When Pleasants added the second press, he was at last able to match the production scale of any printer in town, and so was granted a federal license in 1802 (by Secretary of State James Madison) to publish the laws enacted by Congress at each meeting of that body; it was a large job bringing a hefty subsidy for any paper holding such a license (three in each state) as the page-space used was paid for by the Federal government at the set advertising rate. He invested that revenue in his business, as he did with much of his profit, developing a job-printing concern, a bindery, and a book store alongside his *Virginia Argus*.

### **Publisher and Bookseller**

While the *Argus* was the keystone of his business, Pleasants understood that his long-term success required a more diverse set of goods and services. That approach had been central to the survival of the Williamsburg office of Alexander Purdie (245) and John Dixon Sr. (140) when Virginia's printing monopoly evaporated in 1766. As Davis had been trained by Purdie, his uncle, it should not be surprising that Pleasants followed suit when he began his office in 1793. From the start, his office sold books and contracted for printing while conducting his paper; what changed over time was the scale of those sidelines.

The main non-newspaper imprint that his office produced was an annual *Virginia Almanack*, a title that retained that archaic spelling until its end in 1815. Such works were divided between astronomical tables (ephemerides) – calculated by mathematical enthusiasts who often sold their work to more than one publisher – and editorial content – provided either by a writer employed by the publisher or the publisher himself, as seen in the example of the *Poor Richard's* almanacs published by Benjamin Franklin. With Pleasants, those who provided his calculations reflect the political and social evolution of his business as well.

At the outset (1795 & 1796), his ephemerides were drawn by Robert Andrews (1743-1804), then professor of natural philosophy and fine arts at the College of William & Mary; his calculations graced most Virginia-produced almanacs from 1781 until 1797. But Pleasants turned away from Andrews in his 1797 edition, using instead tables calculated by Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806), the mathematically-gifted freedman who aided Andrew Ellicott in his surveys of the American west. That change came in the midst of an antislavery debate unleashed in the state by Quaker elder Robert Pleasants and the printer evidently suffered commercially as a result of this alteration, even as he remained sympathetic to the cause. [In 1806, he filed an emancipation declaration in the city's court granting freedom to an adolescent slave named Ben, effective when he attained his majority in 1811.] So in 1798, he turned to another of Ellicott's associates, the Maryland-born engineer Isaac Briggs (1763-1825); by this time, both men travelled in the Jeffersonian circles of the Chesapeake, and so Pleasants kept his politically agreeable mathematician in this supporting role until 1803, when Jefferson sent Briggs to survey the Mississippi Territory. Requiring a new tabulator for his 1804 edition, Pleasants chose Benjamin Bates (1769-1812) of Hanover County; Bates was a well-known Quaker merchant there as well as an acquaintance from his youth; Bates provided tables for Pleasants alone until his 1812 death. Pleasants then turned to N. H.

[Nathaniel Henry] Turner (1787-1863) of Louisa County, another Quaker who had been computing ephemerides since at least 1808; he toiled solely for Pleasants as well, retiring from such work with the printer's death in 1814. In these successive choices, Pleasants cut a profitable path from conformity to individuality with his widely-distributed almanacs.

Still, it was clear that Pleasants could not compete with publishers in Philadelphia and New York in producing more substantial works. But he did recognize that distributing their many publications was a profitable opportunity and so became an important part of the national network of those retailing such wares. By 1796, Pleasants had forged a business alliance with Mathew Carey, brother of his journalistic predecessor, a connection initiated at the suggestion of Carey's famed itinerant bookseller, Mason Locke Weems (435). So for the rest of his life, Pleasants advertised extensive lists of books procured through Carey in his *Argus*. His success in this role allowed him to build similar associations with publishing concerns in Boston and New York as well. After the turn of the century, however, competition in the book trade in Richmond became more intense with the development of small, specialized stores and branch stores of those national suppliers; Pleasants was obligated to increase the range of his offerings as a result. So it has been often reported that "the *Argus* Office was the best-stocked book store" in Richmond between 1795 and 1812.

One aspect of the book trade that Pleasants could control through his inordinate production capacity was in publishing works with specific Virginia audiences – a niche market that the national producers shunned. The most notable examples of this aspect can be seen in two law-book projects executed in the decade before his death. The first was his publication of the *Revised Code of Virginia* in 1803, commissioned by James Monroe while governor and issued in conjunction with the Richmond press of Henry Pace (319); the second was a multi-volume collection of the laws of colonial Virginia compiled by William Waller Hening (213), *The Statutes at Large*, a project that was still unfinished when he died. But the most widely-read of all of his book productions was *The Letters of the British Spy* by William Wirt (1772-1834), then a Richmond attorney; the work had been serialized in his *Argus* in August and September of 1803, creating a demand for three editions from his press over the next two years, and then several Baltimore editions in the decade after he died. All of these unique projects found a willing publisher in Pleasants, as his well-known Republicanism was a sentiment consistent with each of their creators.

### **Printer to the Commonwealth**

In March 1804, Pleasants was named as the state's public printer as a consequence, in part, of those sentiments. Yet he had been involved in the production of government imprints for more than a decade by then, a hidden figure in the recent history of that office.

While still employed by Augustine Davis, Pleasants had been responsible for printing the public documents required of Davis in his role as the public printer. Davis was named to that position with the death of John Dixon Sr. (140) in 1791 and held that prized post until he was dismissed in 1798 as a result of the Governor's Council losing confidence in him to meet the government's needs. The issue then was timely distribution of the Assembly's session laws in quantities sufficient to allow the efficient operation of the state's county courts,

especially those in the strongly Republican areas of the west. The Council assigned one of their own, Meriwether Jones (242), to investigate his performance in late 1797; Jones discovered that Davis knew little about the actual production of his office and so he had to rely on Pleasants, who still printed items for Davis as a subcontractor, in his assessment of Davis. When Davis declined to increase his production without greater compensation, he was terminated and Jones, a non-printer, was appointed in his place. This abrupt change in the state's public printer, coming in the midst of the controversies attending the Alien & Sedition Acts, was seen by most as simple political patronage, a Republican Assembly rewarding one of their own out of the public treasury. But while an avowed Republican, Jones was an advocate for an informed electorate as well, meaning open communication between public officials and citizens, as were many of his Council peers, as were the Assembly members who elected him annually for the next five years, and as was Pleasants.

Jones built his own press office to conduct the public business, as well as his semi-official newspaper, *The Examiner*. That paper reflected the views of the most ardent Republicans in the state, and so led the journalistic campaign behind Jefferson's presidential campaign in 1800. Pleasants played a key supporting role in this arrangement, feeding trained workmen into the new press office, reprinting commentaries from the *Examiner* in his *Argus*, while subcontracting some of the public work as he had done with Davis. His press also printed parts of the most controversial imprint published by Jones, *The Prospect Before Us* by James T. Callender (075), which issued in early 1800. Meanwhile, Jones increased the scale of the public work, generating recurring scrutiny from both the General Assembly, who reluctantly paid its increasing cost, and the Federalist press, who believed Jones to be unqualified for the post. The result was a classic newspaper war between Jones's *Examiner* and the new Federalist-oriented *Recorder* of Henry Pace. That ongoing battle allowed both Pleasants and Davis to maintain the established centrist positions of their journals even while each man quietly supported one of the two combatants.

The conflict came to an end in 1804. Pace had closed his *Recorder* the preceding fall and left Richmond; now Jones closed his *Examiner*, just before relinquishing his public post in order to take on a federal position as director of the Land Office in Virginia. Pleasants and Davis were now the sole contenders for the public-printing concession in his stead, and with Davis having been dismissed from that position previously, Pleasants was the only truly viable candidate, even with a modicum of partisan baggage. Yet his election was more than a *fait accompli*; the legislature now required the public printer to post a sizable bond ensuring the appointee's future performance; Pleasants was probably the only Virginia printer then who could post the required amount, a mark of his financial success over the preceding decade. And in the end, his expert performance in the position meant that he was reelected to the position annually, without opposition, for the next ten years.

In consequence of the appointment, the bulk of the surviving imprints from the Pleasants press are government documents, durable, as seen in the Assembly's annual session laws, and ephemeral, as seen in the forms used in conducting government business. The shift in the productive focus of his press meant that after 1804, Pleasants issued fewer contracted imprints than before that. His business now settled into a routine of newspaper publishing, government printing, business form production, and bookselling, with only an occasional

contract for something more substantial than ephemera. Yet by taking on the public post, Pleasants now required the services of a bookbinder full-time; rather than hire the task out to the city's binderies, as he had before, he brought his bookbinding brother-in-law, William Lownes, into the mix. This was essentially the state of his *Argus* Office until October 1814.

### Succession

It also appears that Pleasants became more distracted from his publishing business after 1804 as a result of his new-found civic prominence. That same year he was elected as a director in both the Bank of Virginia and the Mutual Fire Insurance Company, serving in those roles until his death. Then in 1806, he was elected to a seat on the city's Common Council, the only popularly elective office he ever held. An active Mason, he assumed a larger leadership role in the city's lodges, as well as supporting several *ad hoc* charitable efforts in these years. Pleasants also invested heavily in Henrico County real estate, both within and without the city's boundaries. Such activities apparently allowed a competitor to slowly undermine the prominence of his aging *Virginia Argus*, as Pleasants distanced himself from his journal's daily operation. In January 1804, a young bookseller and teacher named Thomas Ritchie (360) acquired the remnants of the Jones press office and began publishing his *Richmond Enquirer* that May; by 1809, his newspaper had taken on the overtly-partisan mantle of Virginia Republicanism, while the older *Argus* evolved into a simple mercantile advertiser that carried official government notices.

One contemporary observer attributed the decline to the absence of entertaining articles in the *Argus* after Wirt's *Letters of the British Spy* were concluded:

"They furnished much to interest and amuse the public, and brought a great increase to the subscription list of the paper; but with the departure of the *Spy*, departed many of the subscribers, and after the war excitement was over, the '*Argus*' closed its eyes."

Yet whatever tale Richmonders came to believe later on, the demise of the *Argus* was very much a result of the death of its founder. Pleasants died on October 4, 1814, after only a few days' illness and just days after his forty-fourth birthday. The grief experienced in the capital city by his passing is best marked by the lengthy and unusually emotional obituary published by Augustine Davis, his long-time competitor and long-ago employer, in the pages of his *Virginia Patriot* the following day:

"Who shall paint the loss of this good man to his family, to his friends or to his country? Was there a pure man among us? It was Samuel Pleasants. Was there any man who loved his country? It was Samuel Pleasants. Was there one whose "hand was open as day to melting charity." It was Samuel Pleasants. Was there any one admirable for the purity of his sentiments or the integrity of his conduct? Here was the man."

Pleasants left a family of seven minor children in the care of his forty-year-old widow.

Deborah Pleasants moved quickly to take control of his affairs, having herself named as the administrator of the estate; she then hired John Maddox (275), a Richmond business agent of reliable Quaker origin, as her deputy. The *Argus* continued uninterrupted with its cadre

of experienced journeymen, but its masthead promptly recorded the transition, stating that the paper was now "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 Assembly allowed her to retain her husband's public position in her own right until January 1, 1815, after she reported that the work would be "done by persons in her employment" as it had been under her husband. 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 M. 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 of them 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 bookbinder 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 buy 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 that each firm had issued; unable to pay those notes, Burke fled Richmond in January 1817 after closing the *Argus*. Deborah Pleasants was left to pursue payment in the courts, a process that dragged on until at least 1826. It was an ignominious end to a noble life and a useful enterprise.

### ***Personal Data***

Born: Sept. 29 1770 Yorktown, Virginia.  
Married July 18 1795 Deborah W. Lownes @ Henrico County, Virginia.  
Died: Oct. 4 1814 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; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 5 & 6; Edward Pleasants Valentine Papers, Valentine Museum, Richmond; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; notices in Richmond papers (1793-1826); obituary in Richmond *Virginia Patriot*, Oct. 5, 1814; genealogical data from Miller, *Pleasants and Allied Families* (1980).