

340 PRENTIS, WILLIAM

Printer, Publisher

Williamsburg, Richmond, Petersburg, Norfolk

Publisher of the original *Virginia Gazette* (1778-85) with Thomas Nicolson (315), first at Williamsburg, then at Richmond; publisher of the *Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle* (1789-92) with Daniel Baxter (027); and founding publisher of the *Petersburg Intelligencer* (1786-1804), partly in brief partnerships with Miles Hunter (229), William Yates Murray (310), and Tarleton Woodson Pleasants (333).

Prentis was a child of a large mercantile family which had interests in Williamsburg, Norfolk, Petersburg, and Richmond from the 1760s onward. In the course of a thirty-year career, he was an active print-trade practitioner in each of those locales, working on newspapers that advanced the commercial interests of those places, so aiding the family's business success.

At Work in the Capital

Born in Williamsburg in 1762, Prentis was evidently bound out in adolescence to apprentice in the printing trade; his later associations with John Dixon Sr. (140) and Thomas Nicolson suggest that he started that training in Dixon's office between the end of 1773 (eleven by then), when Dixon parted from Alexander Purdie (345), and late 1778 (then age sixteen), when Dixon split with William Hunter Jr. (231). Prentis would later partner with Hunter's cousin Miles in 1786, reflecting an earlier association with the Dixon & Hunter office, while local records show that he was working in the succeeding Dixon & Nicolson office in early 1779. Thus Prentis remained a dependent figure in the Williamsburg printing offices during the war years. But with the peace, he quickly became an independent one.

In the spring of 1780, the state government removed from the colonial capital to the small James River port of Richmond. The Dixon & Nicolson office was the only Virginia press office to follow the move there. However, Dixon himself did not relocate; with the government led by Thomas Jefferson about to bring a new printer to Richmond to serve them – one James Hayes (207) – Dixon chose to leave their office in Nicolson's hands alone and stay in Williamsburg tending to other familial interests. Nicolson needed help in Richmond and so brought Prentis with him as his principal assistant, marking the young printer's status as a fully-trained journeyman. The geographic split between Dixon and Nicolson became a legal one in late 1781. Raids by British forces that spring had forced Dixon & Nicolson to suspend publishing their venerable *Virginia Gazette*; it was never restarted, a victim of the campaign conducted in Virginia that summer by Lord Cornwallis preceding the Yorktown surrender in October. During this period of uncertainty, Dixon decided to dissolve their partnership, which left Nicolson an independent entity for the first time.

By December 1781, Nicolson reorganized his office and formed a new company with Prentis to publish the *Virginia Gazette or Weekly Advertiser*. While the firm of Nicolson & Prentis was deprived of the primary public-printing contract by the Hayes appointment, it turned out that his press was not capable of meeting the quotas and deadlines imposed by the Assembly because of those same military disruptions. So the Senate of Virginia engaged Nicolson & Prentis to publish its now-delayed journals. That contract also marked the start

of a four-year-long conflict between Hayes and the General Assembly that brought Nicolson & Prentis occasional orders to fill gaps in the public work left unfilled by Hayes, so providing additional support for their fledgling business.

Still, conducting a printing office in the 1780s was a problematic venture, beset with supply deficiencies, credit realignments, and cash shortages – all of which ravaged Hayes. The pair helped to manage the uncertainties by maintaining their press office in Nicolson's residence on Twenty-Second Street at Main, at the foot of Church Hill. In mid-1782, the thirty-two-year-old bachelor lived there with printer-partner Prentis, age twenty; a young apprentice, William Alexander Rind (359), age sixteen (a son of the Williamsburg Rinds); and an African slave named Peter, age twenty-three – indicating the office followed the contemporaneous practice of employing enslaved men to physically pull their presses. But after three years together, the partners would be pulled apart by forces beyond their control.

In late 1783, the General Assembly completed one of its infrequent revisals of the state's laws, a review of all recorded laws that resulted in the publication of a volume containing those laws still in force. They assigned publication to the new office of John Dixon and John Hunter Holt (223). They had been angling for Hayes's public contract since their arrival in town in mid-1783, and this assignment gave them a chance to prove their worth; so in the interest of speeding work on the revisal, Dixon divided its production between his office and theirs, with Dixon & Hunter setting type and Nicolson & Prentis printing its pages. The plan achieved its ends with a delivery of the first copies from the bindery of Thomas Brend (051) and Archibald Currie (113) in December 1784. But the project crashed on the evening of Thursday, January 6, 1785, when a fire destroyed the Nicolson & Prentis office, taking with it the unbound pages of the revisal; the partners also lost a large bookstore. Compelled to replace the revisal at less than their costs, while trying to rebuild their press and newspaper, the event effectively killed their partnership. The two old friends parted ways in May 1785 once their commitment to the revisal was fulfilled.

Independent Proprietor

Tired of the unending disputes over the public work in Richmond, Prentis quickly removed to Petersburg, establishing a job-printing concern there that served the needs of the town's merchants. In February 1786, Prentis wrote to the Common Council there expressing an interest in starting a weekly advertiser; the town fathers asked him carry out his plan.

At the same time, Miles Hunter found himself looking for new opportunities as a way to end his four-year connection with James Hayes. In April 1785, he purchased a 2000-acre tract in Jefferson County in the District of Kentucky and contemplated relocating there; in late 1785, a convention of enfranchised citizens meeting at Danville to consider Kentucky statehood offered him the chance to become their official printer, producing a newspaper that would support their statehood bid; but negotiations broke down over Hunter's desire for financial guarantees in making the move west, which the convention was unwilling to give him; as a result, he was still in Richmond when Hayes was finally removed from his public post in May 1786. Now unemployed, Hunter joined with Prentis in his new Petersburg printing office, which had now extricated both printers from Richmond's problems while establishing them

with the only press then operating there.

In July 1786, the new firm of Hunter & Prentis issued the *Virginia Gazette and Petersburg Intelligencer*, that town's first newspaper. It was a classic mercantile advertiser designed to support the port's commerce. The journal also represented a joint enterprise between two merchant families that had established interests in the Appomattox River entrepôt, bringing together younger members of those families to support its older ones. The venture was evidently successful as their weekly lacked for any competition for its first five years; that situation allowed them a chance to build a foundation that sustained the newspaper until the Civil War siege of Petersburg. But while Prentis and the *Intelligencer* went on to lengthy careers there, Hunter's time was limited. Following the deaths of two wives in eighteen months, Hunter passed on too in December 1788, probably succumbing to the disease that claimed his second wife – just as the controversies attending the ratification of the Federal Constitution reached their zenith and so demand for their paper. Hence the *Intelligencer* did not skip a beat, and Prentis did not find the need for another partner there until 1796.

Within months of Hunter's death, Prentis was given a second journalistic opportunity, this offered by another old Williamsburg compatriot, Daniel Baxter. Baxter was a former Dixon hand who had joined the Nicolson & Prentis firm in 1782. But when Dixon opened a new press office in Richmond with Holt in August 1783, Baxter returned to the employ of his old master, staying with that office after Holt's death a year later, so becoming Dixon's shop foreman. But by 1789, he was ready to strike out on his own, and Prentis was ready to assist him. The unexpected death of John McLean (297) in May 1789 put his Norfolk press office up for sale that summer, along with the subscriber list for his profitable, three-year-old *Norfolk and Portsmouth Journal*. Prentis and Baxter moved quickly to acquire both, with Baxter moving to Norfolk to be the resident proprietor of their new *Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle*. Their partnership continued for three rewarding years; by 1792, however, Prentis decided to refocus his efforts on his Petersburg newspaper and so sold his Norfolk interests to Baxter. Yet Baxter could not afford to continue alone and so formed a partnership with Philadelphian Thomas Wilson (452) to publish his now retitled *Virginia Chronicle*. However, Baxter's finances eventually forced him to return to the lesser position of shop foreman in 1794, taking up the management of the new *Norfolk Herald* office, and remaining in that subordinate role until his death in April 1836.

Political Challenges

In the 1790s, both the *Intelligencer* and its proprietor became ardent Federalist advocates, reflecting the mercantile purpose each had embraced in 1786. That choice also echoed the growth of the port's commerce in those years, which created such demand for advertising space that Prentis had to increase the pace of publication to twice-weekly in early 1793. Yet the dominance of the *Intelligencer* also engendered partisan competition in that decade. Three challengers were attempted in the 1790s; the first two – *The Independent Ledger* of Federalist William Davis (127) in 1793 and *The Virginia Star* of Republican Philip Rootes (362) in 1795 – lived for less than ninety days apiece. But the third proved to be a more formidable foe. Recognizing that the hinterlands around Petersburg favored Jefferson, while the port and its merchants favored Adams, the state's Republican leadership backed a new

journal designed to counter the *Intelligencer's* influence. They brought a native son, Thomas Field (162) back from Kentucky in late 1799 to print the *Petersburg Republican* for editor James Lyon (274), a Vermont-trained printer-publisher who was heading up similar efforts in Richmond, Staunton, and Georgetown as well. Field's local connections allowed him to find support for his alternative paper in neighboring Dinwiddie and Prince George Counties, while Prentis continued to dominate with in-town readers. It was a balancing act that continued between the two papers until the 1830s.

Prentis may have contributed inadvertently to his opponent's success. From his arrival in Petersburg, he had taken an active role in the town's government, serving on the Common Council from 1786 to 1811, being elected from that body as Petersburg's mayor four times (1793-94, 1797-98, 1801-02, and 1805-06). He also served as the City Recorder. As these commitments grew, he became ever more an absentee manager of the *Intelligencer*. So in 1796, as the hotly-contested presidential campaign of that year began, Prentis took on a younger partner, William Yates Murray. He intended to oppose the state's favorite son, Thomas Jefferson, that year, and Murray was likely as much a political-financial partner as he was a print-trade one for him. Moreover, his youth – then twenty-four years-old – would energize the paper as would his political orthodoxy. Murray was a known and reliable quantity here; he descended from the Bolling family that settled the area in the late 1600s, who were still a major commercial force in the port, and he was already a Prentis loyalist, having trained apparently in the *Intelligencer* office. But the new firm of Prentis & Murray lasted only about six months, as Murray died unexpectedly on October 1st, leaving Prentis to complete the campaign season alone. Prentis repeated this experiment in 1799, in advance of the 1800 election and the impending arrival of the *Republican* of Lyon & Field. This time Prentis took on the twenty-five year-old Richmond printer Tarleton W. Pleasants as his partner, so tapping into the wealth of the extensive mercantile family of the upper James River Valley bearing that surname as well. This new Prentis & Pleasants concern was as short-lived as had been his earlier one. In mid-1800, after it became clear that Jefferson would win this time, Lyon removed himself – and his outside sources of funding – from the *Republican*. So it became expedient for Pleasants to do likewise, so leaving the Petersburg newspaper market to a struggle between two resident publishers: Prentis and Field.

For 1804, however, Prentis chose a different course – retirement. After nearly twenty years at the helm of one of the most visible journals in the state, the forty-two year-old Prentis evidently now wanted to employ his accumulated wealth in the same mercantile pursuits that occupied his brothers and cousins, rather than to continue in the partisan newspaper wars. So he turned to the most-senior printers in his office – John Dickson (134) and Edward Pescud (324) – as his successors; for the twenty-two year-old Dickson and twenty-five year-old Pescud, the purchase of the *Petersburg Intelligencer* would be their first independent trade venture. Moreover, it seems that Prentis facilitated the sale by providing them the financing they needed. In introducing themselves to their readers in January 1804, Dickson & Pescud promised that the *Intelligencer* would be "conducted upon the same principles as when under the management of Mr. Prentis" – a consistently-voiced Federalist organ. While seemingly an acceptable course for Pescud at the outset, it was a partisan perspective he did not share; hence this new arrangement was short-lived as well, though longer than

those of the firms Prentis formed in 1796 and 1800. Thomas Field decided that the change in ownership of the *Intelligencer* made it a convenient moment for him to retire as well; so he sold his *Republican* to the disaffected Pescud in 1805, compelling his withdrawal from the *Intelligencer* to do so. Thus did these two old friends become fierce competitors.

Retirement

The sale of the *Intelligencer* did not entirely remove Prentis from the print trade, at least initially. He now became involved in a project instigated by the Rev. James Madison, then president of the College of William & Mary (a first cousin of the future President James Madison) to produce an accurate map of Virginia. Madison started work on the new map in 1802 after finding deficiencies in charts then available. Those were all based on a colonial era map of the state, completed in 1751 by Colonels Joshua Fry and Peter Jefferson (father of Thomas) for the Lords of Trade in London. That map's inaccuracies, as well as the growth of roads and population dictated that a new survey be undertaken and its results published in a new chart. He employed surveyor William Davis (not the like-named printer above) to conduct the detailed survey and to draft a manuscript version of the planned map; when completed in 1805, Madison presented the work to the General Assembly, seeking their endorsement and funding for its publication. However, the legislature declined to fund the project; so Madison turned to the now retired Prentis to supervise the subscription-based publication of the map for the benefit of all involved (i.e. Madison, Davis, and Prentis). Prentis, in turn, hired the Richmond copper-plate printer Frederick Bossler (042) to engrave plates for a six-sheet map and then print those sheets, while he collected subscriptions. The project was completed in 1807 with distribution of the finished map through Richmond's booksellers; it immediately came to be known as "Bishop Madison's Map" of Virginia.

Beyond occasional broadside proclamations that Prentis contracted for in the next decade, the map was the last imprint that the old Williamsburg hand produced. He turned to private business investments while continuing in his governmental roles. Those seem to have come to an end with the opening of the War of 1812, likely a result of his professed Federalism in the charged political conflicts that preceded the war. He returned briefly to public life in July 1815 when he was named to the *ad hoc* committee collecting and distributing funds for the relief of the victims of the Great Petersburg Fire, which consumed about two-thirds of the structures in the port town. More typical of his retirement-years activities, though, was his involvement with the Manchester and Petersburg Turnpike Company, a toll-road company chartered by the legislature in 1816; he was a manager for the sale of the company's stock, as well as a major investor in the venture; the road was completed shortly after his death.

Surviving Prentis family papers indicate that he was linked to the business interests of his wife's family as well as to those of his brothers and cousins. Indeed, his father-in-law, James Geddy II, removed his silver- and gold-smithing concern from Williamsburg to Petersburg shortly before Prentis married his daughter, Polly Geddy, someone Prentis had known from his earliest days; by 1796, their two business locations were close by each other in town. That year, after a ten-year-long residence in Petersburg, Prentis owned two large buildings in the town center with an assessed value of close to \$6000 (about \$1,000,000 today). He also invested in land and farms beyond the city's limits, partly as a way to provide for his

family's rising generation. In 1818, for example, he acquired a 2000-acre tract in Kentucky, fronting on the Ohio River, where other younger family members eventually settled.

Prentis died at such a location in early 1824 – the Prince George County farm that was then the residence of his son James. The *National Intelligencer* reported that he was then "one of the oldest inhabitants of Petersburg" having "nearly forty years since" established his paper there; it was a portrayal reprinted across the country, indicating that he had acquired some fame in that time, though not enough to generate longer memorializations. It seems that after twenty years in retirement, Prentis had simply become yesterday's news.

NB: Most sources report incorrect birth and death dates for Prentis, confusing him with his like-named father (b. ca. 1740), whose death date remains unknown, hidden in lost probate records. The dates reported here are based on census data for the city of Richmond in 1782, when Prentis was recorded as being age twenty, and references in the extensive files of the Colonial Williamsburg Research Department. This variance was noted and corrected by the late A. Paull Hubbard in 1987 in one of his unfinished reports on Richmond's early printing offices; Hubbard also observed that the well-known 1786 portrait of Prentis at the Virginia Historical Society is not one of a man nearing the age of fifty – which its certainly is not.

Personal Data

Born: in 1762 Williamsburg, Virginia.
Married March 1789 Mary "Polly" Geddy @ Petersburg, Virginia.
Died: Feb. 29 1824 Prince George County, Virginia.
Children: At least two sons: James (b. 1795) and John (b. 1800).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; files on Williamsburg People and at York County Records Project, CWF Research Dept.; Richmond City Census 1782; Seagrave, *Artisans & Mechanics*; Scott and Wyatt, *Petersburg's Story*, Lutz, *Chesterfield*; obituary in *Norfolk American Beacon*, March 9, 1824.