

341 PRENTISS, CHARLES

Publisher

Richmond

Twice an editorial partner to the printer-publisher Augustine Davis (119) in his Federalist journals in Richmond (1805 and 1816-17).

Prentiss was a peripatetic journalist who owned and/or edited a series of Federalist papers in Massachusetts, Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Virginia between 1795 and 1817. He was a classical scholar who employed the "literary federalism" style exemplified by John Dennie (1768-1812) and his *Portfolio* (Philadelphia, 1801-12); his commentaries on political affairs typified a contemporaneous divergence between the "classical republicanism" found in the past – as practiced by the Federalists – and the "popular republicanism" seen in his time – as practiced by Jeffersonian Democrats.

Beginnings

Born in Reading, Massachusetts in 1774, he was the second of the thirteen children of Rev. Caleb Prentiss and Pamela Mellen. He entered Harvard College in 1792, earning a bachelor's degree in 1795 and a master's degree in 1798. While still enrolled, he drew attention in Boston's literary circles for his essays, particularly from writer Robert Treat Paine, Jr., whose collected poems Prentiss would later publish in a posthumous edition. This exposure drew him into Boston's printing offices, then the second-largest publishing center in the country, where writers like Paine were fast becoming the major figures in the national Federalist press. Prentiss joined their ranks in October 1795, editing a new Federalist journal in the north-central Massachusetts town of Leominster, entitled *The Rural Repository*, employing his younger brother John as printer. This first venture lasted until April 1797 when its sagging finances finally compelled its closing. Prentiss tried again there in July 1798, issuing the *Political Focus*, now in partnership with his tradesman brother. In the interim, Prentiss had written for Federalist papers elsewhere, most frequently, it seems, for the *Boston Federal Gazette* of C. P. Wayne. That epistolary work gave Prentiss a growing national reputation and led to the closing of his second Leominster paper in late 1799, when Prentiss moved to the District of Columbia to assume a more visible role there in concert with Virginia-born Federalist printer William Alexander Rind (359).

In May 1799, Rind had commenced publication of the *Virginia Federalist* in Richmond; the son of the Williamsburg Rinds, William (358) and Clementina (356), had been raised in the Richmond office of Thomas Nicolson (315) and William Prentis (340), and may have joined Prentis in Petersburg when he first set up a press there in 1786. Yet Rind left the country in 1788 to join loyalist printer James Robertson (1747-1816) – formerly of Albany, Charleston, and Philadelphia – at his press office in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island; Rind remained until 1798, having become "printer to the crown" there by default following Robertson's unexpected removal to England in 1789. When he returned to Virginia, he was recruited by John Stewart (401), then the clerk of the House of Delegates, to launch an energetic Federalist alternative to the staid and aging *Virginia Gazette* of Augustine Davis with the backing of several influential merchant-planters; the *Virginia Federalist* was the result.

However, Rind faced stiff competition from new Republican journals started in Virginia in 1799 and 1800, especially the Richmond newspaper of the new public printer, Meriwether Jones (242), the *Examiner*. Rind & Stewart soon realized the futility of their position among Jefferson's stalwarts in the capital, but chose relocation over closing. In August 1800, they suspended publication of their paper and moved their operation to the District of Columbia. On September 25th, just six weeks later, Rind's new *Washington Federalist* issued from his Georgetown office with Prentiss prominently reported as its editor. Prentiss may have been a part of the project while it was still housed in Richmond, given the closing of his *Political Focus* the preceding winter, though an overt connection was not recorded until the move.

First Southern Residence

The *Washington Federalist* proved to be a springboard for Prentiss. It also set a pattern for his involvement in newspapers from there on out. He was regularly employed as a journal's editor, but irregularly made a partner in those ventures. With Rind, Prentiss was at first an employee; he became a partner in September 1801 and remained so until his official parting from Rind in March 1802. In his first year there, he also engaged in a separate publishing venture, one designed to promote the literary foundations of his political views. For eight weeks that winter (November 1800 to January 1801), Prentiss issued the *Child of Pallas* from the Baltimore press of booksellers Warner & Hanna; the work reflected a common idea among college-educated Federalists that the country's body politic needed to be inculcated with an understanding of the proper forms of republicanism, ones recorded in classical literature, and ones that limited democratic excess, deemed the principal vice of Jefferson and his supporters. The literary effort was abandoned when it began to interfere with his commitment to Rind, and likely initiated discussions to make him a partner; but it also introduced Prentiss to like-minded supporters in Baltimore.

Prentiss welcomed the pressure exerted by those supporters to start a new, more strident Federalist paper there. So on January 1, 1802, Prentiss issued his new *Republican, or Anti-Democrat* in partnership with John Cole, a paper whose title embodied his understanding of the political problem facing the country. Prentiss withdrew from the *Federalist* two months later so as to focus on the new weekly alone, and remained its driving force until June 1803, when he sold it to George L. Gray (188), another ardent Federalist editor; Gray continued the paper until the end of 1803, when he abandoned Baltimore and his heavily-indebted journal for the chance to edit the *Norfolk Gazette & Publick Ledger* for John Cowper (110).

Prentiss retired temporarily from partisan journalism with the sale of his *Republican*. He travelled to England in 1804; but by the end of that year, he was ready to resume the grind of editing such a paper. He found that Rind was receptive to the idea of selling him the *Washington Federalist* as Prentiss solicited subscribers for such a purchase that December; yet that sale never came to fruition; Rind continued on his own until 1809, when he handed the journal over to his son. Still, Prentiss soon found other suitors for his services.

In March 1805, Prentiss came to Richmond to join with Augustine Davis as the editor of his *Virginia Gazette, and General Advertiser*. The paper was then fully twenty years old, and owner Davis, like his long-time competitor Samuel Pleasants (331), was

"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..."

Clearly, Prentiss was intended to be one of those champions, so reinvigorating the flagging *Gazette*. But his association with Davis did not live out the year. One contemporary laid the failure at the editor's feet, reporting that "his paragraphs were too highly seasoned for the taste of his readers."

By January 1806, Prentiss had returned to Massachusetts. Over the next four years, he continued to write, but distanced himself from any overt role the partisan newspaper fray, likely out of a need to provide for a young, growing family. One project undertaken to that end was a "short-lived comic periodical" called *The Thistle*, issued briefly in the fall of 1807 from the Boston press of Etheridge & Bliss; using the pseudonym Roderick Rover, Prentiss set out to skewer personality traits and attitudes among the fictitious Rover family. Yet it seems that his primary occupation was a school teacher, an avocation that now became an increasingly important part of his political life and activism.

Second Southern Residence

Prentiss returned to Washington in 1810, this time as a reporter (recorder) of Congressional debates for New England newspapers. He used the office of the *Independent American* in Georgetown as his base, editing that paper for owners John Thomas and Thomas Leakin until they sold the unprofitable weekly in March 1811. In this new role, Prentiss observed the deliberations there anticipating the war with Great Britain, and so wrote pseudonymous commentaries on the deliberations for a variety of anti-Madisonian papers. His tenure in the capital came to an end in May 1812 when he became embroiled in a controversy over published reports on the "secret" proceedings of the special House committee on Foreign Relations then considering whether such an anticipated war was advisable.

In April 1812, the Washington newspaper *Spirit of Seventy-Six*, an anti-Madison paper that had relocated there from Richmond – just as Rind had done in 1800 – published a detailed account of those "secret" proceedings. The subsequent investigation into the revelations discovered just how porous the veil of secrecy was in reality; it was just a simple prohibition placed on the attendant reporters not to discuss or publish what they heard in Congress when such activity was deemed secret. Prentiss was found to be the source of the story and so was called before the committee to explain himself; he reported that he had given the publishers of the *Spirit of Seventy-Six*, the brothers James B. and John M. Carter (084), an account based on a conversation that he had had with Nathaniel Rounsavell (367), then both a Congressional reporter and publisher of the *Alexandria Herald*.

The committee summoned Rounsavell to discover from where he had acquired the account; the editor testified that he had been told of the committee's proceedings from a member of Congress, but when pressed to identify that member, he refused to answer; the committee ordered him detained by the House sergeant-at-arms for his defiance of their authority. A lengthy debate ensued in the House in the following days, resulting in Rounsavell's eventual

release, but only after the editor apologized to Congress and revealed the source of the story, the Virginia representative John Randolph of Roanoke. In Randolph's absence from town, his colleagues presumed that his disclosure had been an inadvertent one, and that Rounsavell had no way of knowing of the secrecy injunction as a result. But Prentiss should have known (and probably did) that the discussion was privileged. Within days, he had departed once again for New England, discretion being the better part of valor.

His destination this time was the south-central Massachusetts town of Brimfield, where he now owned a substantial farm. Alongside this agricultural business, Prentiss turned to two longer literary projects. The first was the collection of his original mentor's writings: *The Works, in Verse and Prose, of the late Robert Treat Paine, Jun.*, issued in late 1812 from the Boston press of Joshua Belcher. It was followed in 1813 by his *Life of the Late Gen. William Eaton*, a biography the hero of the First Tripolitan War (1801-05) issued from the nearby Brookfield press of Ebenezer Merriam. Prentis also utilized Merriam's press to publish several shorter works, orations delivered in the vicinity of his farm during the War of 1812.

Third Southern Residence

Prentiss would likely have remained in Brimfield for the rest of his life was it not for a summons from Richmond in 1816. Following his 1805 alliance with Augustine Davis, the old Virginia Federalist had engaged a series of Northern editors for his paper. In the winter of 1808-09, that journalist had been Samuel Livermore (267) of Newburyport, Massachusetts; his appearance brought about a change in title for the Davis paper, now called the *Virginia Patriot*; in March 1809, Livermore sold his interest in the paper to Samuel B. Beach, Esq. (468), apparently a Northern Federalist lawyer like himself, bringing a biting commentary on the change from Thomas Ritchie (360) in his Republican competitor, the *Enquirer*:

"A Virginia Patriot, is one who has been in Virginia but once, perhaps, in his life— whose very air is that of a foreigner; who is ignorant of our laws and manners; and, who comes as the missionary of truth, to convince us how much we have been mistaken, all this time, in our politics and rights."

So as the 1816 election approached, and with it, the end of James Madison's presidency, Davis and his Federalist supporters in Richmond turned to Prentiss again, not the least because of his previous Virginia residences, but because he was then the most reputable Federalist editor in the country, having not been tarnished by open opposition to the recent war – after all, he had been essentially in retirement.

This time the Virginia Federalists made Prentiss a more substantial offer than he received before: a commitment to a year-long contract with an equal interest in the *Virginia Patriot* to that of Davis. Prentis took up the editorial chair again in May 1816, and became a full partner in July. Moreover, Prentiss was provided facilities to conduct a school "on Church Hill for young ladies and gentlemen" that employed his exacting pedagogical approach:

"The characteristic feature of this school is the use of 'Conversation as a means of educating. The pupils are trained to converse on science, ethics, and belles-lettres."

In the view of a contemporary, the system made his institute "a *rara avis* among schools;"

hence, it survived only as long as Prentiss remained in Richmond.

This second partnership with Davis continued only until the end of the original contract in July 1817; the election cycle had effectively ended the national influence of the Federal party, while Virginia was evincing a growing alliance between disaffected Republicans and the remaining Federalists; thus the circulation of the *Virginia Patriot* saw little improvement under Prentiss, and so the editor returned to his Brimfield farm once his commitment was fulfilled. Davis was left with his son, George (122), as partner and editor, his other sons having met premature, accidental deaths; he sold the paper and retired four years later.

Endings

Once back in Massachusetts, Prentiss devoted his non-agricultural energies to teaching. His final publishing project was a textbook, a venture that he shared with his print-tradesman brother John, who had left Leominster in 1799 as well to start up his own press in Keene, New Hampshire. Together they produced a stereotype-plate school book entitled *History of the United States of America: With a Brief Account of Some of the Principal Empires and States of Ancient and Modern Times*. The work stressed the classical foundations of the country's system of government, just as Prentiss had always argued; moreover it was targeted "for the use of schools and families," continuing his efforts to inculcate a better understanding of classicism among the uneducated masses. John Prentiss published annual stereotype editions of the work from 1820 to 1824, apparently timing their appearance to the seasonal cycle of New England's schools.

Yet Prentiss saw just the first of those editions. He died at his Brimfield farm in October 1820, at age forty-six, shortly after that initial version of his textbook was issued. His passing was noted in only a handful of Federalist journals, and not at all in Virginia papers outside of the *Virginia Patriot*. His death also seems to have had a limited effect on his family, as his three children had all reached their majorities, with his only daughter already married to a prominent Boston lawyer. His eldest son, Charles Gardner Prentiss (1798-1864), apparently never left Worcester County, even as his father moved from place to place; he was a lawyer who became the county Registrar of Deeds and clerk of the courts there; he was also the corresponding secretary of the American Antiquarian Society, the library of early American history and culture that has provided many of the materials from which this Index is drawn.

Personal Data

Born:	Oct. 8	1774	Reading, Massachusetts.
Married	Nov. 19	1795	Sophia Gardner @ Leominster, Massachusetts.
Died:	Oct. 19	1820	Brimfield, Massachusetts.
Children:	Sophia (1796-1864); Charles G. (1798-1863); Caleb M. (1802-28).		

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; Meagher, *Education in Richmond*; Buckingham, *Specimens of Newspaper Literature* (1850); Downing, *Literary Federalism in the Age of Jefferson* (1999); Binney, *Prentiss Family*.(1883); Printer File, AAS.