

342 PRICE, ELLIS

Publisher, Bookseller

Alexandria

Publisher of the *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette* (1792-1800), initially with John Smith (389), and later with Henry Gird Jr. (181).

Price was a founder of Alexandria's second newspaper in 1792 – a venture that grew out a life-long residence in Alexandria. Yet his trade and familial origins are unexplained despite such local permanence. The circumstances surrounding the start of his paper suggest that he trained as a printer in the press office of the preceding *Virginia Gazette and Alexandria Advertiser*, a weekly that began its life when Price was sixteen.

The *Advertiser* was initiated by George Richards (355), a journeyman from the trade network of the pervasive Goddard family, trained by William Goddard of Baltimore, who loaned Richards a press and some type for the project. He conducted this weekly mercantile journal from February 1786 to July 1789, when he died unexpectedly. His executors sold the paper to the firm of Hanson & Bond; Samuel Hanson (200) was a well-established merchant in this river-port town, while Thomas Bond (039) conducted a profitable land-sale office. The pair found trained hands – possibly Price, among others – to actually produce the paper for them. But each man was eventually drawn away from their journal. Just after taking control of the *Advertiser*, Hanson was named Surveyor of Customs for Alexandria by now-president George Washington in the new Federal government, someone he was also then engaged with in real estate transactions near Alexandria. At that same time, the widower Bond remarried, taking a young Morgantown resident as his new wife. So while their firm continued until 1793, Bond had only intermittent contact with their Alexandria office from the start, with Hanson becoming ever-more an absentee proprietor. These distractions meant stagnation; their weekly never increased in frequency, even as the port's commerce grew in those years.

In July 1792, the printer Price joined with John Smith, another local merchant, in proposing publication of a competing, twice-weekly mercantile advertiser. The partners noted that the planned paper's essential utility lay in its ability to transmit news in a more timely fashion, though they also observed that "the advantages from an early insertion of Advertisements are too obvious to require a single remark." The journal's financial foundation would be set in its advertising, as Smith & Price were determined to start the paper once 200 subscribers had been obtained, fewer than was then the norm. But they also required payment of one-third of the \$3.00 subscription price before the paper even issued, in order to acquire the materials they would need to produce their advertiser. As a result, the process of engaging subscribers and purchasing equipment took fully four months; their *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette* did not issue its first number until November 21, 1792.

The first year of the *Columbian Mirror* was evidently quite successful for Smith & Price. The sheet-size of their paper was approximately one-third larger than that of the *Advertiser*, and when issued twice each week, it represented an increase in page space of more than 250 per cent – space readily available to serve Alexandria's mercantile needs. The partners also had an unparalleled location in Alexandria, issuing their paper from an office "at the East

End of the Market-House," the heart of the city's merchant community. By August 1793, Price had accrued sufficient capital to purchase Smith's interest in their enterprise, and by December he had the wherewithal to increase the paper's frequency from twice-weekly to thrice-weekly, adding to his office staff to do so. This second change was aided by Hanson & Bond as well; in mid-November 1793, Bond sold his interest in the *Advertiser* to Hanson and moved to Morgantown permanently; Hanson, in turn, moved that paper across the river to Georgetown, where it reappeared as the twice-weekly *Columbian Chronicle* in December. So as 1794 opened, Ellis Price conducted the only paper in Alexandria and would continue in this fashion, with a raft of hired hands, until 1797.

Over those years, the partisan divide between Federalists and Republicans emerged and Price made the *Columbian Mirror* into a supporter of the administration, both out of loyalty to his subscriber, George Washington, and out of his ongoing mercantile interests. At the end of 1796, rumors began circulating about plans for a new Republican competitor to the *Mirror*, plans that came to fruition in April 1797 as *The Times and Alexandria Advertiser* of John V. Thomas (410) and James D. Westcott (437). So in November 1796, Price added Henry Gird Jr., the son of a local merchant-planter and land speculator as his new partner, as a way to solidify support for his paper and to reinvigorate its editorial perspective,

Gird was a Dublin-trained printer who had relocated to Baltimore when his father moved the family to Fairfax County, Virginia, in 1793. He had abandoned Baltimore in February 1796 after attempting to start a new daily paper there, taking on press-work in Price's office, apparently as his new shop foreman; on November 29th, Price announced that the new firm of Price & Gird would henceforth publish the *Columbian Mirror*. The change marked the start of a three-year-long period of uncertainty for the journal, primarily, it seems, as a result of the disruptions in Atlantic trade that attended the Adams presidency. Gird was a full partner for just a year; Price bought his interest in November 1797, probably to allow Gird to pay off the notes he had signed to purchase that share. Yet that transaction apparently also stretched Price's finances; just six weeks later he was soliciting offers for a new partner in the *Mirror*. Gird had remained in the office as Price's foreman and, with his affairs now settled, he could buy the *Mirror* outright, likely with help from his father; in late February 1798, Price sold out to Gird, who took complete control of the *Columbian Mirror* for the ensuing twenty months.

While the sale relieved Price's fiscal stress, it also seems to have been a move designed to distance him from the heated partisan war then raging over the Jay Treaty, the Quasi-War, and the resulting Alien & Sedition Acts. Almost immediately, Price opened a bookstore on Fairfax Street, and began advertising an extensive array of books in both of Alexandria's newspapers. But this was not a permanent arrangement. Gird was eventually pressured to sell the *Mirror* as a result of the antislavery views he brought to the paper's pages, even as they echoed Price's editorial perspective. So in December 1799, Gird persuaded Price to reacquire the journal, though retaining the right to collect its outstanding debts. Gird then left Alexandria for New York City and journeyman work there, never to return.

Price now came under similar pressure, particularly in light of concurrent efforts by local Quakers to press "freedom suits" for enslaved Africans in the area's courts. Likewise, he

soon found that the paper's indebtedness restricted its operation. In January 1800, he even forged an agreement with his competitors at *The Times* for a mutual increase in their advertising rates as a way to offset "the enhanced expense of labour and materials." But as before, Price eventually went in search of a partner and found a buyer, one William Fowler (173). He was yet another Alexandria merchant, not a trained printer, reportedly running a dry-goods store there. Fowler took on the *Columbian Mirror* under the same conditions that Price had taken it from Gird: he acquired the office and subscriber list in September 1800, leaving collection of outstanding debts to the former owner. Yet Fowler too found the fiscal burden excessive and was seeking a way out of the mess within two months. His solution to the dilemma was to sell the business piecemeal. He sold the press and type to other shops in Alexandria, primarily it seems, to job-press offices, once he had sold the newspaper's subscriber list to two print-tradesmen then seeking to set up shop in Washington: New Jersey journeyman Samuel Snowden (393) and Matthew Brown (057), a Federalist editor from Baltimore. On December 3rd, Snowden & Brown published the first number of their new *Alexandria Advertiser and Commercial Intelligencer* under Snowden's supervision.

Still, the sale of the *Mirror* to Fowler did not end Price's career in the Virginia print trade. He continued to operate his bookstore, though with declining success in the face of the larger competitors there. So in spring 1802 he made an investment in a new journalistic endeavor across the Potomac in Georgetown – *The Olio* of the former Bostonian Benjamin Parks; it was intended to be a Federalist paper both devoid of defamatory essays and full of non-political articles; out of step with its potential audience, the *Olio* lasted but a year. Within months of its closing. Price was forced to declare bankruptcy.

His impoverishment pushed Price into obscurity for the remainder of his life, likely taking on roles as a clerk or agent in Alexandria, though not a business owner or publisher again. He died in his hometown in August 1817, memorialized only in the successor to the *Columbian Mirror*, the *Alexandria Advertiser*. In the brief notice that he published, Samuel Snowden was generous, noting that Price was

"an amiable man naturally. His disposition was peculiarly mild and friendly, and such was his modesty that he felt no pride but in his consciousness of sterling integrity."

Such a commentary suggests that Price was well-suited for his editorial ventures, so long as they provided a vital community service; but he was not, nor could he have ever been, a partisan ideologue, and that was why he failed financially in the end.

Personal Data

Born: ca. 1770 Alexandria, Virginia

Died: Aug. 30 1817 Alexandria, Virginia

Apparently died unmarried and without offspring.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; *Artisans & Merchants*; notices in *Columbian Mirror* (1792-1800), *Alexandria Advertiser* (1800-17) *Alexandria Times* (1799-1802).