## 345 PURDIE, ALEXANDER – [ALEXANDER PURDIE, SR.]

**Printer, Publisher** **Williamsburg**

Revolutionary-era printer in Williamsburg, first as an employee (1759-66) of William Hunter Sr. (230) and Joseph Royle (368), then as partner to John Dixon, Sr. (140) in firm of Purdie & Dixon (1766-74), and finally as an independent proprietor (1775-79); Virginia's public printer (1775-79); father of Alexander Purdie. Jr. (346); and uncle of John Clarkson (093), Augustine Davis (119), and Joseph Mathews Davenport (115).

Purdie was the first public printer of the Commonwealth of Virginia, after having served as the last for His Majesty's Most Ancient Colony and Dominion of Virginia. The post was the culmination of a career in Virginia that began in the summer of 1759.

Purdie had been brought to the colony by then public printer William Hunter to aid his new shop foreman, Joseph Royle, who was also a fellow traveler. Both men were Scottish-born printers, though of differing personalities; a contemporaneous account describes Purdie as being a gregarious and cheerful presence in Hunter's office while Royle appeared therein as a dour and serious individual. Their employment had been part of Hunter's plan to replace the existing office staff on his return to Virginia from a three-year-long sojourn in England. As a result, Purdie's earliest days in the colonial capital were ones where he was considered a tool of the governor, and not a servant of the colonists.

### From Journeyman to Master

During Hunter's absence, John Stretch (407), his long-time bookbinder, opened the pages of the *Virginia Gazette* to writers opposed to the policies of Governor Robert Dinwiddie; on his return, with Royle and Purdie in place, the paper returned to its former stance, supporting the governor and his administration, that now of Francis Fauquier. That reversion became problematic for Purdie during the Stamp Act controversy of 1765-66. Hunter died in August 1761, leading to Royle's succession to ownership of the printing office, and to the linked post of public printer, as well as Purdie's elevation to shop foreman. In mid-1765, when the General Assembly requested that Royle publish their resolutions against the Stamp Act in the official *Virginia Gazette*, he refused, probably at Fauquier's order; Royle then promptly decamped for the New York home of his brother-in-law, John Holt (222), to seek treatment for an undefined illness, leaving Purdie to face the wrath of the colonial public. Royle died shortly after his return to Williamsburg that winter, making Purdie the *de facto* public printer, and so the new tool of the imperial administration.

Purdie was, in reality, anything but a compliant servant to Fauquier. Rather, he clearly saw his role in broader terms as a result of his experience as the office's proprietor in Royle's absence. He understood the political dynamic then developing in the colony and cast his lot with what was the majority faction in the General Assembly – the tidewater elite. But he also recognized that his support there could be tenuous, so he also seems to have kept the *Gazette* for governor and his press for the legislature. This enabled the more dissident voices in the Assembly – largely a group of western expansionists from the part of northern Virginia formerly the Fairfax Grant – to publish pamphlets presenting their perspective on

the ongoing Parsons' Cause. Virginia's Anglican clergy were then suing for compensation they thought was due them for a reduction in their salaries created by the Two-Penny Acts of 1755 and 1759, with Fauquier's support; during Royle's absence between 1764 and 1766, Purdie published several anti-clerical pamphlets by Richard Bland and Landon Carter, as well as one of the ministerial replies drafted by the Rev. John Camm, the target of Bland's and Carter's commentaries. Still, Purdie's help was not sufficient for these radicals, and they began scheming for a way to bring Stretch back to Virginia and make him the public printer in place of the absent Royle; however, in the midst of those machinations both Stretch and Royle died, compelling them to find a new alternative to block Purdie's promotion.

Yet Purdie was actually empowered by Royle's death in ways no one had yet considered. When Hunter died in 1761, he made Royle a legatee of his estate, largely because the printer was married to his sister Roseanna; but he also placed conditions on the inheritance by requiring Royle to conduct the business for the equal benefit of himself and Hunter's illegitimate son, William Hunter Jr. (231). Now Royle tried to impose similar conditions on Purdie as a way to continue young Billy Hunter's support. Purdie declined the bequest and moved in an entirely different direction. Between January and March 1766, Purdie formed a partnership with Williamsburg merchant John Dixon to buy the printing office and its assets outright from Hunter's estate. This initiated a process that brought Hunter's and Royle's estates to a final, long-delayed settlement, with Dixon named the administrator of both. So in very short order, Dixon became an owner of the printing office, the collector of the foregoing firms' outstanding debts (many from customers still patronizing the office), and the legal guardian of Billy Hunter. His alliance with Purdie continued until his ward attained his majority at the end of 1774, with a final settlement of both the Hunter and Royle estates following in early 1775. In return, Purdie could establish himself independently, free of the entails of his predecessors, finally becoming a master in his own right.

**Competing Presses**

Purdie's troubles were not over though; he still faced the challenge posed by Burgesses who thought him too compliant to Fauquier. Landon Carter had employed the Annapolis office of Jonas Green to publish pamphlets for him during the Stamp Act dispute; he now led an effort to bring Green's shop foreman, one William Rind (358), to Williamsburg to succeed Royle. But with the Assembly in adjournment until November 1766, Purdie remained the only person in Virginia with a press, and with the public-printing contract, at least until that next session. Rind did not have a competing office in place there until May 1766, two months after Purdie & Dixon began their company. In the interim, Purdie waged a campaign in the pages of the *Gazette* to temper, if not to refute, perceptions of his subservience to Fauquier, a shift that the governor complained bitterly about to his superiors.

First, news of the Stamp Act's repeal reached Virginia, an event that was loudly trumpeted in Purdie's paper. Then John Robinson – the long-serving Speaker of the House of Burgesses and Treasurer of the colony – died. It quickly became apparent that Robinson was bankrupt and that by commingling his finances with those of the colony, as was a common practice of the time, he had left the colony responsible for his enormous debts. Purdie would prove an open outlet for news about this controversy, frequently publishing correspondence from

the principal arbiters of the ensuing settlement – especially that from the new treasurer, Robert Carter Nicholas, as well as from other commentators on the affair. And when Col. John Chiswell, a marriage relation of Robinson's, was released on an illegal bond following his killing of a Prince Edward County merchant a month later, Purdie's *Gazette* benefitted by its ability to obtain and print the story before the new Rind *Gazette* could. So when Rind was finally elected public printer by the Assembly that fall, Purdie & Dixon had forged an identity that clearly separated them from the earlier prejudices.

Rind's business was dependent on the largess of the Assembly, and limited to producing his "official" newspaper; meanwhile the Purdie & Dixon office offered more than their *Gazette*; they sold books, blank forms, binding services, and contract publishing, as well as serving as the main post office for the colony – Dixon having been appointed to Royle's role by John Foxcroft, deputy postmaster for the southern colonies, previously Fauquier's secretary. And as Purdie & Dixon thrived, the Rind office became mired in litigation with unpaid creditors. Such circumstances kept Rind from doing more than the minimum required of him, as can be seen in other government projects. In 1767, for example, a committee appointed by the Assembly completed a rare "revisal" of the colony's laws, a compilation of the laws then still in force; for the first time the Assembly had a choice of local printers in publishing the work. On the face of things, the sizable task was divided equally between the two competing presses, but in reality the only one capable of printing the text was that of Purdie & Dixon; nonetheless, the project was hampered by supply problems, delaying publication. It would not be the last Purdie imprint so impeded as trade restrictions imposed by the continental associations that soon followed made paper and type more difficult to acquire.

The faction that elected Rind in 1766 remained supportive of their chosen printer, despite his continuing problems, until he died in August 1773; they then convinced the rest of the Assembly to appoint Rind's widow Clementina (356) as his successor, in order to sustain his heavily-indebted family. But when she died just thirteen months later, practicality trumped sentimentality. The Rind's foreman, John Pinkney (325), became the *de facto* public printer, as Purdie had in 1766, and remained such until May 1775, largely a result of the disruptions attending the Continental Congress. When Pinkney finally sought appointment the next spring, the Assembly chose the better capitalized and more experienced Purdie over him.

By the spring of 1775, Purdie was operating without encumbrances or partners. His eight-year-long partnership with Dixon had come to an end on the last day of 1774, and on the first of 1775, he established the new concern of Alexander Purdie & Company. The change ended any remaining doubts about his loyalties with his final separation from the Hunter family – hence his victory over Pinkney. In the first eighteen months of his new business, Purdie published the journals of the three Virginia conventions (March, July, and December) of 1775 and was so involved when the fifth Virginia convention in 1776 (May-June) swept aside the institutions of the colonial government; Purdie thus became the last printer to the old order while serving as printer to the new order.

**Revolutionary Printer**

In this new role, Purdie would be pressed by unprecedented problems, while also striving to

expand the production of the public-printing office in response to the new need to keep an informed electorate informed. His *Virginia Gazette* was at the center of those efforts, but paper shortages threatened its publication. The other Williamsburg newspapers – those of Dixon & Hunter and of Pinkney – simply reduced page size or skipped issues to deal with the problem, but Purdie continued to publish his paper uninterrupted, out of an obligation to the public as publisher of its official *Gazette*, occasionally just curtailing the number issued. He was also faced with labor shortages, the result of limited migration from Britain of new hands and the call-up of local militia units comprised of old hands, which forced him to depend on familial resources, eventually employing three of his nephews – John Clarkson, Augustine Davis, and Joseph Mathews Davenport – that he had to train as well. But the largest problem was the hyper-inflation experienced during the war years; the value and availability of supplies fluctuated rapidly, disrupting any arrangements Purdie made with his suppliers and the financial assumptions on which such agreements were based.

Still, the variety of new imprints that Purdie produced in these years was impressive. He issued a published journal for the Senate of Virginia, a task unknown in the colonial era. He printed enormous numbers of proclamations and blank forms (warrants, commissions, and bonds) that were the lubricants of the new governmental apparatus. He also printed vast numbers of military documents, both for the state and the continental line. And throughout this all, he continued to produce the traditional public imprints: the journals of the House of Delegates (née Burgesses), the laws of each Assembly session, the speeches and sermons ordered published by those sessions, and special-order items commanded by the Governor or the Speaker of the House – all in larger numbers than his predecessors produced.

By 1778, however, Purdie found that he was increasingly unable to meet these contractual obligations to the state government through a combination of factors. Production of the Assembly's laws and journals was delayed by recurring paper shortages; but that production was not hastened by supplies of paper from the public stores; unsuitable as "law paper," Purdie used the "writing paper" to publish his *Gazette* instead, so drawing criticism from the Assembly. At the same time, his printing press was deteriorating from its heavy use, while an inability to find spare parts to maintain it slowed Purdie's production further; eventually he asked for aid from the public blacksmith in making needed parts; some in the legislature thought that the government had gained ownership of the press in this repair process and attempted to dictate what Purdie could produce and when. The result was ever increasing dissatisfaction with Purdie's performance in office. A thorough investigation of the public printer was thus planned for the spring Assembly of 1779.

However, it was also known in the winter of 1778-79 that Purdie was not a well man, and some part of his illness may have been self-inflicted. Earlier in 1778, Edmund Pendleton, the Speaker of the House of Delegates, had tried to have a patriotic song published by the Scotsman "but Mr. Purdie has had the battles of the Keggs since I came to Town and it don't yet appear." How much effect his drinking had on his death is unclear, given the spare description of his demise: dropsy, a condition marked by fluid retention. Still, whatever the cause, Purdie was dead before the Assembly met again in May 1779. Indeed, his will had been entered for probate in the York County Court, an inventory of his estate had been

taken, and a sale of his property had been scheduled. Only a settlement remained undone.

**Denouement**

Purdie's successor was not immediately named. Rather, the Assembly chose to continue Purdie's office in its former role – now the familial firm of Clarkson & Davis – and to use the town's other surviving press – that of John Dixon and Thomas Nicolson (315) – as an alternate source when Clarkson & Davis failed to meet deadlines. Meanwhile, Governor Thomas Jefferson convinced the Assembly that moving the state government to Richmond was an important military-security concern, and with such a relocation, he would solicit the services of "a well-provided patriot" from Philadelphia to take over the public work there. The Assembly agreed, and the supremacy of Williamsburg tradesmen in Virginia's print trade came to an abrupt end in early 1780. Clarkson & Davis claimed a financial inability to move to Richmond and so stayed in Williamsburg, closing Purdie's five-year-old *Gazette*, and turning the office into a bookstore and job-press. Dixon & Nicolson moved their office to Richmond, though Dixon stayed behind, recognizing that their claim to the public printing contract would cease when Jefferson's new printer finally arrived.

As for Purdie's immediate family, they were left nearly destitute by his death. His son Hugh would later say that his father had "too great faith in the paper currency of the state," which had failed to retain its face value. But his father clearly understood the tenuous nature of his estate, despite its remarkable valuation of ₤11,705 – he owned far too little real estate to offset the promissory notes he held. Beyond directing the purchase of five mourning rings and assigning five particular slaves – of thirteen total – to his wife, Peachey, Purdie could only order a simple division of his estate. All of his property was to be sold "for ready money or on credit" and his outstanding debts collected; then his executors would pay off his creditors from the proceeds before dividing the residue equally between his widow and his three surviving sons: James, Hugh, and Alexander.

Remarkably, the economic collapse that marked at the end of Purdie's life has been largely overshadowed by his role as publisher of record for the Revolutionary leadership in Virginia, both in government documents and his *Virginia Gazette*. And by fulfilling that role Purdie has gained sufficient recognition to be, perhaps, the best-known printer in Virginia history.

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Purdie has one noteworthy posthumous tie to the history of the early Republic. Son Hugh was one of "his family who survived the fatigues of the war [only to be reduced] to service employments for their subsistence" afterwards. Hugh became a licensed able seaman, and was impressed into the Royal Navy on the Thames River in 1790 as a result; Jefferson, then the secretary of state, interceded on his behalf – through the offices of consul John Browne Cutting – and the Admiralty promptly ordered his release; yet Purdie was flogged for voicing loyalty to the newly-independent United States once that order had been received by a ship captain who said he found it “impossible … to avoid whipping a free American” in order to maintain discipline among the other impressed sailors in his command.

***Personal Data***

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| Born: | before | 1743 | Scotland. |
| Married [1]: | ca. | 1763 | "Mary" @ Williamsburg, Virginia (1745-72). |
| Married [2]: | Dec. 28 | 1772 | Peachey Davenport @ York County, Virginia. |
| Died: | April | 1779 | Williamsburg, Virginia. |
| Children: | All by Mary: Jennet (b. 1764); James (1765-80); Hugh (b. 1767); Alexander Jr. (1768-96); Jane (1770-72); William (1772). | | |

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Rawson, "Guardians," chaps. 2-5; Williamsburg People files and York County Project files, CW Research Dept.; Goodwin, *Bruton Church*; impressment detailed in editorial note in *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* accompanying relevant documents (summer 1790).