

348 RAMSAY, WILLIAM

Printer, Publisher

Richmond

Printer and publisher of the *Virginia Patriot* (1819-22), succeeding founder Augustine Davis (119); of the *Virginia Daily Times* (1823); and of the *Daily Richmond Whig* (1828) with John Hampden Pleasants (330).

Ramsay was a practical printer who rose briefly to newspaper ownership in Richmond in the 1820s. His first appearance in the imprint record is from 1819, conducting a job-printing business in Richmond; that year he published a history of the War of 1812, featuring the exploits of W.C.C. (William Charles Cole) Claiborne (1775-1817), late governor of Louisiana, penned by his brother, Nathaniel Herbert Claiborne (1777-1859) of Franklin County. That work remains the only evidence of his work in the pre-1820 Virginia print trade.

Ramsay next appears as proprietor of a Richmond newspaper in early 1821. That February, he acquired the venerable *Virginia Patriot and Richmond Daily Mercantile Advertiser* of Augustine Davis, established in 1786 as *The Virginia Independent Chronicle*. At that time, Ramsay was reportedly the foreman of the Davis shop, and so not a financier or a polemicist as most of Davis's partners had been. The new firm of William Ramsay & Co. then "engaged a gentleman of talents to assist them in the editorial department," an apparent necessity given Ramsay's non-journalistic background. The entire project was quite labor intensive, as alongside the daily paper, he issued a thrice-weekly country edition, known successively as simply the *Virginia Patriot*, the *Virginia Patriot and Political Expositor*, and the *Political Expositor*; this country edition evidently ceased publication in July 1821, allowing Ramsay and his editor to focus on the Richmond daily exclusively in the face of competition from the increasingly hostile Republican paper of Thomas Ritchie (360), the *Richmond Enquirer*.

It appears the Ramsay went through a reorganization of his office in late 1822. He brought the *Virginia Patriot* to an end in December, before issuing a new journal, *The Virginia Daily Times*, in February 1823 – this in conjunction with one Samuel Crawford as his editor. The change seems to have been an effort to distance Ramsay from the archaic Federalism of Davis and his *Patriot*, while forging an identity of his own. But the experiment last only until the end of July when the *Times* was closed. The Richmond chronicler Samuel Mordecai later said that Ramsay's paper was one of the "sundry 'Times' [issued there, which] whether dull, or brisk, or hard, they did not become old."

Ramsay evidently remained in Richmond, though, either as an independent contractor, or as a press-office foreman, or both. This last alternative seems the more likely one, given his subsequent affiliation with the *Richmond Whig* of John Hampden Pleasants. That journal came to life in the capital in January 1824, six months after the *Virginia Times* closed; so it is possible that he performed job-printing and then shifted back to journalism when the *Whig* arrived. And when Pleasants turned his thrice-weekly into a daily paper in November 1828, the well-experienced printer Ramsay became a partner in the venture. That supposition is supported by a broadside Ramsay had published in January 1828, endorsed by Pleasants; Ritchie had published some of his private correspondence in the *Enquirer*, letters that were unflattering to William Radford, the president of the Farmers' Bank branch in Lynchburg,

after he had attempted to "extort" Ramsay into paying for suppressing those letters; it was an event that came nearly a year before he became a partner in the *Whig*. How long Ramsay remained with Pleasants is uncertain, as his name vanished from the paper's masthead by year's end, just six weeks into its daily form. Subsequently, Ramsay is not seen as part of the Virginia print trade again.

Beyond this spare bibliographic record, Ramsay is an even more enigmatic figure. A clear identification is hampered by the several individuals then living in Virginia who shared his name, particularly a like-named father-and-son pair in Alexandria who were key figures in the port's commerce and government; his surname is also an old colonial-era one around Norfolk. But the most intriguing possibility for Ramsay's origin can be found in Baltimore in December 1810; proprietors George Dobbin and Thomas Murphy of the *American* placed a notices in the city's papers warning against

"harboring or employing WILLIAM RAMSAY, a runaway apprentice, who absconded from the subscribers ... He is a native of Scotland and has considerable of the Scotch accent ... between 18 and 19 years of age, and has a bad temper, speaks the French language, a printer by profession, at which he is expert."

While no definitive link has been found between the Richmond and Baltimore Ramsays, the Richmonder's lengthy association with Federalist/Whig journals suggests that he was the apprentice who fled the Republican office of Dobbin & Murphy in 1810. If so, he was in his late twenties when he bought the *Virginia Patriot* and in his late thirties when he published the daily *Whig*. He may also be the William Ramsay who issued the short-lived *Democratic Spark* weekly in Xenia, Ohio in 1838, but the Jacksonian tone of that paper argues against such a link to the Richmonder by the same logic. Hence no conclusive portrait of Ramsay's origin or fate can be drawn without further evidence.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; notices in *National Intelligencer*, Feb. 19, 1821, [Baltimore] *Commercial Advertiser*, Dec. 15, 1810, and [Columbus] *Ohio Statesman*. Aug. 10, 1838.