

## 360 RITCHIE, THOMAS

**Publisher, Public Printer**

**Richmond**

Printer to the Virginia Senate (1804-15), then to the Commonwealth (1815-34 & 1835-39); publisher of the *Richmond Enquirer* (1804-45), in part with William W. Worsley (462), Daniel Trueheart (420), Philip DuVal (155), Claiborne W. Gooch (182), and John L. Cook (105); employer of Thomas Burling (066); publisher of the *Richmond Commercial Compiler* (1816-45), in part with Trueheart, Samuel Cary (085), William Pollard (336), among others; also brother-in-law of John H. Foushee (170).

Ritchie remains the best known practitioner in the early Virginia print trade, the result of his conducting the most widely-circulated newspaper in the state for more than forty years, as well as publishing the majority of the Commonwealth's public record for nearly as long. That primacy made Ritchie into a nationally-known advocate for the political agenda of the party of Jefferson and Jackson. It also made his Richmond business the largest single trainer and employer of print tradesmen in Virginia in the first half of the nineteenth century.

### Origins

Ritchie was born into a family that combined immigrant ambition and gentry assurance. His father, Archibald Ritchie, was a Scottish merchant who came to Tappahannock in 1749; in the early days of the Revolutionary era, he ran afoul of the non-intercourse decrees, which engendered continuing doubts about his loyalties despite his later participation in Virginia's committees of safety, doubts that were employed against his son long after his 1784 death. Such claims were offset by the deep Virginia roots of his mother's family; Mary Roane was the daughter of Capt. William Roane and Sarah Upshaw of Essex County; she was a cousin to Spencer Roane, the celebrated Virginia jurist, and her sisters would marry influential men who became life-long associates of her son Thomas.

The first of those associations was with John Brockenbrough (1744-1801), an Essex County physician and county-court justice married to his aunt Sarah Roane; in the doctor's home, Ritchie received his initial education from the Presbyterian minister Alexander Syme, one steeped in Scottish Enlightenment classics; he also began there a life-long friendship with John Brockenbrough, Jr. (1773-1852), later president of the Bank of Virginia and part of the leadership circle of the Virginia Republican party, the Richmond Junto, with Ritchie. He was then sent on to the home of Spencer Roane to study for the law, but found those studies tedious; so he travelled on to Philadelphia to study medicine, but also found that field uninspiring. In 1799, he returned to Virginia and established a school in Fredericksburg; in 1800, he began a long relationship with "Professor" James Ogilvie by opening a school with him at Tappahannock, one he continued from 1801 to 1803 alone, following Ogilvie's relocation first to Stevensburg in Culpeper County in 1801 and then to Richmond in 1803; Ritchie's locally-recognized talents brought an invitation to deliver the Fourth of July oration in Fredericksburg in 1802, the publication of which provided his first national acclaim.

Ritchie's principal biographer, Charles Ambler, suggests that ill health compelled the young schoolmaster to abandon teaching in 1803 and move to Richmond to become a bookseller.

But Ritchie's restlessness seems to have been triggered instead by an unrequited need to become a more visible and influential figure in early-Republic Virginia, one more likely to be fulfilled in Richmond than elsewhere. That same year he travelled to Baltimore to build up his book-trade connections; there he met Thomas Burling, a New-York-trained printer then managing the office of the *American*, a Republican paper owned by William Pechin. Finding that they were kindred spirits politically, as well as being of a similar age, Ritchie broached a plan to Burling for a new Jeffersonian journal for Richmond.

Ambler reports that Jefferson himself had a hand in initiating Ritchie's project, but being two years into his presidency, and having shifted his journalistic focus to the new *National Intelligencer*, such involvement is more likely mythical than real. Ritchie was certainly aware of the journalistic climate in Richmond and capable of acting independently through his own contacts, such as Roane and Brockenbrough. The two primary papers were *The Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser* of Federalist Augustine Davis (119), and the *Virginia Argus* of Jeffersonian Samuel Pleasants (331), but neither journal was virulently political in nature, as the implement they "chiefly used was the scissors" and not the pen, as a contemporary succinctly noted. There were also two minor players in town: *The Examiner* of Meriwether Jones (242) and *The Recorder* of Henry Pace (319); however, both of those were about to disappear. Pace's journal had been devastated legally by his choice to employ the late and disgraced James Thomson Callender (075) as his editorial partner; it would close in August 1803. Moreover, Ritchie knew that Jones was then planning a change of his employment; he had served as the Commonwealth's public printer since 1798, with his paper acting as the state's journal of record; Jones was now seeking a federal appointment that would allow him to withdraw from both his state post and his paper; that also meant that the *Examiner's* office and subscriber list would soon be up for sale.

### **The Jeffersonian Republican**

Meriwether Jones retired from his *Examiner* in August 1803 – about the time that Ritchie travelled to Baltimore – splitting his interest between his brother, Skelton Jones (243), and his shop foreman, William W. Worsley. In January 1804, Ritchie bought Skelton Jones' share; he and Worsley immediately closed the *Examiner* and planned for a new, more partisan version once the press itself became available; Meriwether Jones retained ownership of that key element until March 1804 when he retired from his public-printing post to take up management of Virginia's federal Land Office. With press and subscriber list in hands of the new firm of Ritchie & Worsley, Ritchie sent for Burling to manage the new office, as he had for Pechin. Their *Enquirer* made its debut on May 9th, issued twice-weekly, except when the legislature met, when it was issued thrice-weekly. Burling managed the production of the *Enquirer* until 1817, and Ritchie edited its content until 1845; Worsley remained with the project only until July 1805, when he sold his interest to Ritchie and relocated to Kentucky.

The *Enquirer* office was more than a newspaper alone, a circumstance often overlooked. From its start, job printing was a significant part of the work done there; and from that start, the office provided such to one segment of the state government. Meriwether Jones' retirement as public printer led to the selection of Samuel Pleasants as his replacement; as Pleasants was then printer to the Virginia Senate, he now had to resign that post; Ritchie

was elected to succeed him, holding that post until the end of the 1814-15 Assembly. In that session, the Assembly had to rearrange those appointments once again as a result of the death of Pleasants; Ritchie was designated as the new printer to the Commonwealth and Burling followed him as printer to the Senate. And it was these public roles that brought Ritchie the most criticisms in the longer term: many thought that he could not serve two masters – the state and the party – at the same time without injuring one or the other.

Still, Ritchie is best known for his partisan newspaper, one which – despite contemporary comments to the contrary – evinced an enduring attachment to its founding principles: that the country's future depended on a balance between the rights of the individual states and those of the union itself. And to achieve that survival, political leaders and parties needed to forge compromises with their opponents. This meant that Ritchie's journalistic adversaries saw inconsistencies and hypocrisy in his essays whenever he tried to advance compromise solutions in those writings. His one blind spot was that in asserting and protecting Virginia's rights, Ritchie could fail to see that he was undermining those of the union.

As a result, the *Enquirer* was a paper frequently quoted beyond Virginia but not supported at such distances. Hence, it required subsidies from Republican coffers within the state, as patronage, as subscriptions, and as advertisements. The public-printing contract is the most obvious patronage source, but not the only one. For the duration of his career, Ritchie was dependent on loans – from both banks and individuals – to cover short falls in subscription and advertising payments, as well as to finance regular refits of his office equipment. While such loans came from friendly sources, they required repayment from his more problematic revenues. It did not help that Ritchie favored political content over advertising, declaring from the start that he hoped to limit such to one-fourth of his content; nor did it help that he was "ignorant in matters of domestic and business economy," leaving many accounts uncollected for years. Thus his journal was always on the edge of financial disaster despite its notoriety and influence. But the approach also gave him entrée into the leadership circle of the state Republican party, the so-called Richmond Junto, alongside Spencer Roane, Wilson Cary Nicholas, Alexander McRae (299), Samuel Pleasants, William Wirt, Dr. John Brockenbrough, Jr., and Dr. William Foushee (his father-in-law), among others.

In the first decade of the *Enquirer*, Ritchie slowly developed a reputation for promoting Virginia's commerce while making repeated efforts to heal the new rift between dissident Republicans, led by John Randolph, and the party's Madisonian leadership. But the events of spring 1807 – the Burr trial and the Chesapeake/Leopard affair – brought an end to those efforts; thereafter Ritchie saw the dissidents being as self-interested rather than Virginia-interested; he became an ever-more strident voice for war with Britain in the face of their multiplying affronts to both the state and the union. He served briefly in the local militia during the War of 1812, while his elder brothers John and Archibald served in the regular army, with John dying in battle in 1814. By war's end, he had become a vocal advocate for western expansion, though still in a context of preserving Virginia's dominance of national political and economic affairs. This approach made Ritchie a supporter of state banks over national ones, of state incentives for improving transportation and industry over national programs, and of expanding the domestic slave trade as a way to utilize the state's growing

number of enslaved laborers for the greater national good.

To aid his advocacy for these initiatives, Ritchie acquired editorial control of Richmond's first successful daily, *The Compiler*, in May 1816. Over the next seventeen years, he was the anonymous "& Company" in a series of partnerships with the trained printers producing the paper: Philip DuVal & Daniel Trueheart (May 1819 to Oct. 1819); Trueheart & Samuel Cary (Oct. 1819 to Mar. 1823); Cary & William Pollard (March-July 1823); Pollard alone (July 1823 to May 1826); Pollard & Robert Mosby (May 1826 to Mar. 1827); Mosby alone (Mar. 1827 to Mar. 1831); John A. Lacy (Mar. 1831 to Sept. 1832); and Thomas Keeran Jr. (Sept. 1832 to June 1833). Throughout this period, Ritchie's *Compiler* focused on developing consensus among Virginians on the state's economic development, while his *Enquirer* addressed more openly political themes. Hence, contemporaries like Samuel Mordecai, the chronicler of antebellum Richmond, could easily mistake Ritchie's purpose:

"Such was the success of the 'Enquirer,' that Mr. Ritchie found it expedient to attach to it a sort of tender, as a vehicle for city advertisements, and so he purchased 'The Compiler,' which had been commenced by Leroy Anderson."

While *The Compiler* was an advertising sheet that provided sustenance for the more famous *Enquirer*, it was also a key part of Ritchie's promotion of his home state and its assets.

By dividing the functions of his papers, Ritchie found an active role in the national political arena, particularly from 1824 onward. In 1820, Ritchie took on a partner for the first time since Worsley left in 1805; his choice was the state's adjutant general, Claiborne W. Gooch, a hero of the War of 1812 who also happened to be married to his aunt Lucy Roane. The move helped solidify both his finances and his standing among conservatives in eastern Virginia who were angered by his support of efforts to democratize the state's political process. Together, they led a national campaign to bring another Virginian, William Harris Crawford (now of Georgia), to the presidency in 1824, as James Monroe's successor. Still, the change was startling to some. The notorious travel writer and social critic Anne Royall reported that Ritchie's addition of Gooch had subverted the free-thinking, democratic quality of his *Enquirer* to the service of her reviled "blue-backs," men who would force open public discourse into a set of prescribed religious restraints.

However, their 1824 efforts came to naught as that divisive election split the state as much as it did the country at large; Ritchie supported Crawford to the bitter end in the House of Representatives in early 1825, arguing that Andrew Jackson, the leading vote-getter, would be a disastrous choice for the country; he was willing to accept Henry Clay as an alternative, but was angered by the horse-trading Clay orchestrated that brought John Quincy Adams into the White House that March; as a result, Ritchie broke off relations with Clay, by then a friend of two decades, for nearly thirty years. More importantly though, the editor was now clearly out of step with the overwhelming majority of Virginians who had voted for either Adams or Jackson. It was a turn that opened the door for a determined foe who would dog his heels for the next twenty years: John Hampden Pleasants (330), editor of the *Virginian* in Lynchburg and then of the *Constitutional Whig* in Richmond, and a leader of the pro-Adams faction that became the Whig party in Virginia.

Despite Ritchie's antipathy for Jackson, the *Enquirer* became ever more a supporter of the

Tennessean over the following four years, largely from his friendship with Martin Van Buren and the New Yorker's editorial alter ego, Edwin Croswell of the *Albany Argus*. It was a shift that brought recurring critiques from Pleasants and the Whigs. In 1826, they attempted to remove Ritchie from his public-printing post, noting that he had to hire printers to complete the work and so exploited them.

"They say that I employ a printer to do the work at most inadequate wages, and skim the cream myself; when it is a fact that [Samuel] Shepherd, the best printer in the Commonwealth, and equal to any in the Union, receives a salary of \$850, besides being as much interested in the profits as I am, that is just one third. When I proposed three years ago to resign Shepherd would not let me. He was pleased to say such had been my liberality he could not consent to lose me."

While unsuccessful then, the ploy was repeated by the Whigs over the ensuing decade, before finally succeeding briefly for the 1834-35 Assembly session. Yet for all the bluster, Pleasants and his friends could not prove what they so frequently charged.

### **The Jacksonian Democrat**

With the introduction of the rival *Constitutional Whig*, Ritchie was compelled to refortify his office. In the midst of the 1824 campaign, he called John L. Cook, one of his first craftsmen, back to Richmond from Washington to take charge of the *Enquirer* office. Ritchie had been pressed to find a reliable foreman since the departure (and death) of Thomas Burling in 1817; Cook was a part of the *Examiner* office when he bought it in 1804, and so had been a part of the *Enquirer's* earliest issues. Cook came willingly to Richmond, having to support, as Ritchie reported, "a numerous family dependent upon his efforts." By 1830, his household had grown from five to twenty, with fourteen dependents under age twenty, a considerable financial burden. His new situation was a relief for editor and printer alike.

Ritchie's opposition to Clay's American System and Adams's tariff policy pushed him into the Jackson camp in 1828, despite Van Buren's displacement from the ticket by John C. Calhoun. Calhoun's presence evidently convinced Gooch to allow Ritchie to promote Jackson in their *Enquirer* that election year; but with the presidency won for the democratic champion, both men saw problems on the horizon: a major disagreement between them over a possible state constitutional convention to consider changes in the suffrage and representation clauses; Gooch opposed any changes, while Ritchie advocated liberalizing both of them. So Gooch retired from the business, with Ritchie signing promissory notes in excess of \$10,000 to buy him out, encumbering the business as it never had been before.

This was perhaps the greatest crisis Ritchie faced with his *Enquirer*, with Gooch then being approached by some of Ritchie's oldest supporters to conduct a new paper to oppose both the *Enquirer* and the convention. Ritchie now turned to Cook for help again; the week after Gooch departed, Cook became Ritchie's equal partner, reinforcing his role as the production side of the business, allowing Ritchie free rein to editorialize in favor of the convention. The plan succeeded, at least in part, as a convention was called for the winter of 1829-30, one which did liberalize suffrage but did not alter elected representation in Virginia. Cook's loyal and steady hand on the press was something the editor never forgot. So when Cook died in

1836, Ritchie he was among the most bereft.

Ritchie and his *Enquirer* would support Jackson for the duration of his presidency, drawing enmity from conservatives supporting Calhoun and his nullification views and from Whigs advocating the designs of Henry Clay. Both sides termed Ritchie a spoils-man, even as he was never named to a federal post, forcing him to refute the accusations repeatedly:

"How frequently have we said and repeated in this paper, that we had no favors to ask of Andrew Jackson – that we would accept none – not a pin's fee for our family, or friends? – that we refused even to recommend the dearest friend we had for the slightest preferment? We have said this so often, that it is irksome for us to repeat it, or for others to read it."

Rather, Ritchie was more interested in boosting Virginia's fortunes than his own, though few beyond his circle of friends and allies understood his devotion to the Old Dominion. As a result, the regular rumors that Ritchie was about to start a new pro-administration paper in Washington after the 1828, 1832, and 1836 elections proved unfounded.

Such rumors reflected Ritchie's growing national influence as the 1830s progressed, even as his position within the state was weakened by the deaths of his most loyal supporters, such as Spencer Roane, and the resulting shift in political leadership to younger men. The decade was fluid politically with Calhoun conservatives, Whig liberals, and Jacksonian populists jockeying for control of the Assembly; and whenever the anti-Jackson factions defeated Ritchie's candidates, he felt his rivals' wrath. Between 1824 and 1840, he was subjected repeatedly to mocking "obituaries" penned by opposing editorialists, all of which proved premature celebrations of the end of his influence. And when the Assembly met in those years, there was a challenge to Ritchie's appointment as public printer; in 1833, supporters of Calhoun tried unsuccessfully to deprive him of the contract; but in 1835, the Whigs did succeed in their attempt, following Ritchie's opposition to the election of Benjamin Watkins Leigh as a U.S. Senator, but the editor was returned to the role a year later when the Whigs lost control of the Assembly. Ritchie survived these challenges by his ability to tap popular support until he gave up the post voluntarily in 1839 to his protégé Samuel Shepherd (379).

The rise and fall of the Van Buren administration marked the peak of Ritchie's influence. When his long-time friend was denied a second term in 1840 – in the face of a determined Whig newspaper campaign – the editor blamed the defeat on public ignorance, particularly in western Virginia. The former schoolmaster had always been an educational advocate, embracing the Lancastrian movement in the years after the War of 1812. Now he promoted efforts to build a public school system in the Commonwealth that would rival that being built in Massachusetts by Horace Mann (1796-1859); he sponsored and managed an "Educational Convention" in Richmond in November 1842, hoping to force the Assembly that year to act shortly afterwards; but the tidewater conservatives joined with the Whigs to defeat proposed legislation, based largely on its unprecedented cost – the same rationale that had defeated similar programs offered by Jefferson in 1788 and 1817. In attacking the proposal, opposing editors began using age-demeaning terms, such as "dotage," to describe "Father Ritchie;" in response, Ritchie brought two of his sons – William Foushee and Thomas Jr. – into partnership in early 1843 to introduce a younger face to the venerable

*Enquirer*. It proved a fateful decision, as the editorial war between the *Enquirer* and John Hampden Pleasants soon escalated, ending in a duel between Thomas Jr. and Pleasants in February 1846 that killed the Whig editor.

By that time however, Ritchie had yielded ownership of the *Enquirer* to his progeny. He had been a key figure in the 1844 election; the unexpected death of William Henry Harrison made John Tyler of Virginia an "accidental president;" his administration was one marked by Whig obstruction of Tyler's "Democratic" policies in anticipation of a subsequent Henry Clay administration. But when Texas sought annexation in 1844, and the Whigs openly opposed the idea, they handed the presidency to the Democrats in the person of an expansionist from Tennessee, James K. Polk. Despite having supported Lewis Cass, "a northern man with southern principles," Ritchie and his *Enquirer* were among Polk's earliest supporters once he became a compromise candidate among party loyalists; the turn made his *Enquirer* into an advocate for the westward expansion of slavery. But even in taking that course, Ritchie remained loyal to his ideal of forging and effecting compromise between competing state concerns in the interest of preserving the union; thus he became Polk's choice for editor of a new pro-administration journal that would promote such compromises.

### **The Washington Conciliator**

In May 1845, after refusing three offers in as many months, Ritchie removed to Washington to take up Polk's mandate. He severed his ties to the *Enquirer* on the forty-first anniversary of its founding, doing so

"with feelings similar to those with which the veteran soldier surrenders his arms, but I have the consolation of reflecting, that I not only leave my political associates in the proud possession of the field of battle, but that I transfer my sword to my own sons. I give to them in charge, to defend the post which their father has attempted to guard for forty-one years — to maintain your principles, and to uphold the character of Virginia."

In Washington, Ritchie formed a partnership with John P. Heiss (d. 1865), publisher of the *Nashville Union*, to acquire the Democratic journal of Francis Preston Blair (1791-1876) and John Cook Rives (1795-1864), *The Globe*, with funding provided by Polk's operatives. But in short order, their new *The Union* was entangled in the sectional rivalries left unresolved by Polk's election; North and South alike saw Ritchie's efforts in pressing for compromise as favoring the other, with Northern editors increasingly portraying *The Union* as a pro-slavery journal, given Ritchie's unwillingness to reject the peculiar institution. Meanwhile, Ritchie's advancing age became ever more an issue for Democratic leaders who blamed his flagging energies and archaic views for their inability to retain the presidency in 1848; in 1849, they forced Ritchie to take on a younger co-editor, Edmund Burke, to assist him, though that arrangement lasted barely a year as a result of their inability to agree on editorial policy.

The Virginian's last hurrah came with *The Union's* advocacy of the 1850 compromise drafted by Henry Clay over the admission of California to the union. Clay's concept fit Ritchie's sense of national interest, but sectional interest won out in the enabling legislation, leaving the rifts unhealed, even as the aging friends reconciled after a twenty-five-year estrangement.

In the wake of the controversy, Ritchie found himself deeply in debt; influential friends filed a bill in Congress to provide relief from the financial obligations he had assumed with the *Union*; the ensuing hearings revealed a web of questionable business practices that Ritchie had not known of and which had caused his fiscal problems; despite public sympathy, the supporters of John C. Calhoun in the House, long his foes both within and without Virginia, attempted to defeat the relief bill, but the editor was saved by the Senate. Yet Ritchie was left with no choice but to sell his interest in the *Union* to help pay the debts unpaid by the bill. So on April 15, 1851, "Father Ritchie" retired from journalism forever.

The "Napoleon of the Press," as he was often called, issued a valedictory address to the country in the *Union*, one in which he reiterated the principles that had guided his career, ideals that he commended to editors throughout the country as a way out of the developing sectional crisis.

"It is idle to talk about the Union alone. We must preserve all the three great pillars of our prosperity – the Liberty of the People, the Rights of the States, and the Union of the States."

Ritchie then withdrew into the private realm of his family, splitting his time between his large Washington home and Brandon, his former estate on the James outside Richmond, now owned by his daughter. In the spring of 1854, Ritchie developed a chronic illness that confined him to bed; Washington's newspapers reported his declining condition into that early summer; and on July 3rd, the Democratic journalist breathed his last. A well-attended funeral in the capital preceded the return of his body to Richmond; there he was feted with a massive public funeral at the Monumental Church, the edifice erected over the ruins of the Richmond Theater Fire of December 1811, a catastrophe which was investigated by a civil commission on which Ritchie had served.

### ***Personal Data***

Born: Nov. 5 1778 Tappahannock, Essex County, Virginia.  
Married: Jan. 31 1807 Isabella H. Foushee @ Richmond, Virginia.  
Died: July 3 1854 Washington, District of Columbia.  
Children: Isabella; Mary Roane; John; William Foushee; Robert Ruffin; Charlotte Carter; Margaret F.; Thomas Jr.; Frances Gantier; Anne Eliza; George Harrison; Virginia.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Hubbard on Richmond; US Newspaper Directory, Library of Congress; Ambler, *Thomas Ritchie*; Mordecai, *By-Gone Days*; Christian, *Richmond*; newspaper notices in Richmond (1802-54), Fredericksburg (1802-04), New York City (1802-51), Albany (1819-39), and Washington (1804-54); genealogical data from the *William & Mary Historical Quarterly* (1905).