

### 362 ROOTES, PHILIP

#### Publisher

#### Petersburg, Shepherdstown

Founder and publisher of *The Virginia Star* (1795) at Petersburg and *The Impartial Observer* (1797) at Shepherdstown with Charles Blagrove (036).

Rootes was proprietor of two very short-lived Republican journals in two disparate parts of the Old Dominion. In these roles, he was likely each paper's editor and conceivably their financier, as he was trained as a lawyer and not a printer. He was clearly a descendent of Major Philip Rootes of Rosewall in King & Queen County, the family's Virginia progenitor; but his specific identity is clouded by the presence of four like-named individuals among the grandsons of the Major, one issuing from each of his four sons.

This Philip Rootes was practicing law in Petersburg in early 1795, evidently focusing on real-estate and probate cases. In March of that year, he opened a job-printing office – Philip Rootes & Co. – on "Old Street" there, apparently employing unnamed hired tradesmen, and began soliciting subscriptions for a new weekly that would be

"conducted with that prudence, circumspection, and independent impartiality consistent with the true principles of civil liberty, and freedom of inquiry, as they flatter themselves will secure it a permanent establishment."

The project came to fruition on April 16, 1795 with the publication of the first number of *The Virginia Star and Petersburg Weekly Advertiser*. But Rootes promptly found the journal to be a problematic venture, contending with the well-established mercantile advertiser of William Prentis (340), the *Petersburg Intelligencer*. His newspaper's emergent Republican perspective seems to have limited his advertising patronage in that bastion of Federalism, so bringing the *Virginia Star* to a quick demise; the last known issue is that of July 16th, exactly three months from the paper's commencement.

Rootes would return to journalism two years later in Shepherdstown. In the interim, his activities are unknown, but in that time he clearly forged a bond with Charles Blagrove, an aspiring lawyer from Richmond who was a son of the Rev. Benjamin Blagrove (1746-93), an Anglican minister actively involved in the Revolutionary movement. The partners evidently shared an affinity for Jefferson's agrarian ideology and its requisite distribution of land to middling farmers. Consequently the Shepherdstown area, with its growing population and its proximity to the routes used by those migrating to the west, appeared to be a viable setting for a new weekly that supported such ideals. So in early 1797, the two established the firm of Rootes & Blagrove there and began issuing the *Impartial Observer or Shepherd's-town, Charles-town, & County Advertiser* that June.

The *Observer* was the second attempt at publishing a weekly paper in this small Potomac River port; but like its predecessor, this was a short-lived one, perhaps just six months. This one was eclipsed by the established mercantile advertiser at Martinsburg, the county seat, as would others attempted in the town before 1816. Still, the project is noteworthy, as West Virginia histories all note that the first "book" published in that future state was issued from their press: *The Christian Panoply, Containing an Apology for the Bible in a Series of*

*Letters Addressed to Thomas Paine*. That publication is also instructive; here two young, politically-inclined lawyers tried to counter the dominance of the state's established Federalist journals in an area they thought receptive to Republican ideals, while producing an imprint appealing to those there who might be skeptical of Jefferson's deistic tendencies. Blagrove may have had a legacy from his father's estate to fund the press, but it was not enough to offset a lack of local support, causing the enterprise to fail.

In the wake of the paper's demise, Rootes seems to have remained in the northern Valley, at least for the following few years, while Blagrove returned to Richmond. It appears that he moved his practice to nearby Winchester and married a daughter of the extensive Miller family of Frederick County in 1800. His life after that proves to be an unanswered question. Post-1800 obituary and marriage notices concerning one "Philip Rootes" suggest that our journalist-lawyer relocated first to Fredericksburg, and then to Georgia, where he died in 1804, leading to his widow's remarriage in Fredericksburg in 1807. But the plethora of like-named relatives makes such a suggestion speculative at best. All that the bibliographic and historical record can report conclusively is that with the passing of the *Impartial Observer*, Rootes left the American print-trade behind for other endeavors.

#### ***Personal Data***

Married: Aug. 28 1800 Sally Miller @ Frederick County, Virginia.

No other personal data yet recovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Norona & Shetler; Musser, *Shepherdstown*; Bushong, *Jefferson County*; advertising notices in *Richmond Chronicle* (1795) and [Halifax] *North-Carolina Journal* (1795); marriage notice in *Winchester Gazette* (Sept. 3, 1800); Rootes family data from Harris, *Old New Kent County*.