

378 SHELTON, WILLIAM

Publisher

Richmond

Proprietor of the short-lived *American Standard* (1811) in Richmond; also publisher of a collection of newspaper essays on civic improvements for Richmond issued from the press of Samuel Shepherd (379) and William Pollard (336) in 1817.

Shelton was a lawyer and legislator who, in the 1810s, embraced the democratization of the Old Dominion and public investment in internal improvements that would enhance the economic fortunes of the state's middling farmers.

His first appearance in the public record is with a circular letter that he issued in March 1808 addressed "To the Freeholders of Louisa County" soliciting their support in that year's election for General Assembly delegates. He focused on the inequalities of representation that were perpetrated by the state's 1776 constitution, violating the principle that

"the will of the majority should rule the whole.—All the lower counties are small, the upper counties are large and populous. Yet a lower county having one hundred voters, sends as many delegates to the assembly as an upper county does possessing a thousand. Whereby, one hundred citizens residing in one part of the state have such an influence in government as a thousand have in another."

His complaint was a common one, an issue that was still left unrectified by a constitutional convention two decades later. Shelton's appeal to the voters was unsuccessful, but a year later the county electorate chose him as one of their two delegates to the General Assembly of 1809-10; it proved to be his only term in that body.

Shelton apparently remained in Richmond after that Assembly ended, practicing law in the state capital. In July 1811, he published a nearly full-page prospectus for a new weekly to be called the *American Standard*, employing the motto: "United, We Stand; Divided, We Fall." While asserting that his *Standard* was not a party paper, Shelton clearly asserted the view that the then-ongoing interference with maritime commerce on the Atlantic, especially that exercised by Great Britain, should be the united focus of all true Americans:

"Entertaining the most sacred regard of the federal compact, and all of our republican institutions; looking upon the preservation of the union as the ark of our political salvation, we will contribute our *aid* in uniting all *honest* men in support of our violated rights against the machinations all those who have prevented the nation from vindicating her honor, stripped of her former glory and rendered us the scorn and contempt of our enemies."

His rhetoric here was reminiscent of that he employed in his 1808 circular, arguing that a conspiracy of private interests was undermining the liberties and unity of the country.

It seems that Shelton had difficulty selling his proposed journal to the public. His July prospectus promised a start date of October 15th; yet the *Standard* did not actually issue until November 20th. That first number is one of just two issues of the newspaper that have survived the intervening years, indicating a very short print run with few subscribers. The second survivor is also the better known iteration of the *Standard*, as it was an "extra" that

was issued on the morning of December 27, 1811, providing the first account – and so the most quoted version – of the Richmond Theater Fire of the evening before; later, longer stories of the catastrophe were reprinted as pamphlets, but Shelton's initial report was the one from which most Americans learned of the event. Yet that issue is also the last known for the *Standard*, indicating Shelton ended production shortly thereafter; its quick demise was likely the combined result of competition from long-established papers – the *Virginia Argus* of Samuel Pleasants (331), the *Virginia Gazette* of Augustine Davis (119), and the *Enquirer* of Thomas Ritchie (360) – and the political polarization he tried to constrain.

With the start of the War of 1812, Shelton apparently turned to teaching to supplement his income during the war years; he opened a "writing school" in Richmond that guaranteed improvements of penmanship in "three weeks, or eighteen lessons of two hours each." He also conducted a similar school in 1817 "on Shockoe Hill at the corner of Grace and Third."

His 1812 advertisement also announced his availability as an essay-writer for hire, which may have led to Shelton's final publishing effort in 1817. At that time, he published an essay collection entitled *The Means of Improving Richmond and the State of Virginia: consisting of various essays, written on this interesting subject by different persons: collected and published at the request of a number of gentlemen*. Drawn from some of those same papers that had lowered his *Standard*, and issued from a press (Shepherd & Pollard) with origins in the *Argus* office, the work may have included some of his own for-hire pieces. This time Shelton reprinted a variety of proposals for improving commerce within the state – through schools, warehouses, turnpikes, canals, navigational aids, among others – and so allow both farmers and merchants to better profit from their labors. It was a combination of Federalist and Republican schemes that seems to have reflected his continuing attempts at forging political unity in the state. However, it was his last effort at publishing, and by 1819 Shelton no longer lived in the capital, so leaving his fate unknown, the result of the many men named "William Shelton" then living in Virginia.

That multiplicity is what makes Shelton's specific identity uncertain; indeed there were several Louisa County residents named "William Shelton" in this period. The two most obvious candidates could also be both too old and too young to be this particular Shelton. This first is the student who left Hampden Sidney College in 1808, the date of the political circular letter; however, the student was the just eighteen-years-old (1790-1847) and his later memorialists described him as a farmer and religious figure at his death, and not a lawyer or legislator, even as they noted he served in the War of 1812. The second was a veteran of the Revolutionary War (1744-1828) who took land grants in Louisa in the 1780s with his military warrants; but being sixty-four in 1808, this Shelton would more likely have been a Federalist rather than the Jeffersonian seen in the Assembly and the *Standard*.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Meagher, *Education in Richmond*; Shelton, *To the freeholders of Louisa county* (1808); prospectus in *Virginia Argus*, July 29, 1811; notice in *Alexandria Herald*, Aug. 15, 1811; alternative identifications from Louisa County records online.