

380 SHIELDS, HAMILTON

Publisher

Norfolk

Publisher and editor of *The American Beacon and Commercial Diary* (1815-34) at Norfolk in partnerships with Samuel Shepherd (379), Henry Ashburn (015), Seymour P. Charlton (090), and William C. Shields (381), his brother; also a proprietor of the Steam-Boat Hotel Reading Room there (1820-23).

Shields was a Pennsylvania schoolmaster who became a Virginia journalist, a result, in part, of his sister's marriage into a prominent Revolutionary-era family in the Old Dominion. That transformation then made Shields into a civic and political leader in the Norfolk area.

Beginnings

Born and raised in the Philadelphia district of Auburn Seat, he relocated to Smithfield in about 1810 to teach history and literature at the Smithfield Academy, a school which was apparently conducted in collaboration with one operated in Richmond by Leroy Anderson (011); Anderson was the son of James Anderson, the Williamsburg gunsmith and blacksmith who became the state's Public Armourer during the Revolutionary War; he was educated in Philadelphia where he met and married Shields's eldest sister Nancy in 1798; after she died in 1808, Shields and his younger brother William moved to Virginia to pursue opportunities tied to Anderson – Hamilton as a schoolmaster in Smithfield and William as a journeyman in the Richmond offices that would print Anderson's new *Commercial Compiler* in 1813.

The Smithfield Academy gave Shields a social standing on the Southside that brought him civic responsibilities. His first such assignment was as a member of a three-man committee in Isle of Wight County charged with raising and distributing charitable contributions for the relief of victims in the Richmond Theater Fire (December 26, 1811), in which Anderson lost one of his two young daughters (Shields's niece Margaret) and six of his students. Shortly thereafter, with the outbreak of the War of 1812, he was named to command a "company of light infantry" from Isle of Wight that was part of the 115th Regiment (York County) of Virginia militia. Shields remodeled his command into a rifle company, which was then sent to defend Hampton in February 1813; that June, his unit played a pivotal role in repulsing a British raid on that town, making Shields into a military hero; indeed, Virginia's newspapers used the example of his performance at Hampton to critique that of Maryland militia units in the British assault on Washington in August 1814.

During the war, Anderson began publishing a daily paper in Richmond to report news of the war with Great Britain in a more timely and less opinionated fashion than could Richmond's three existing twice-weekly journals. At the end of 1814, he entered into a partnership with William C. Shields, his other brother in law, recently released as a prisoner of war by the British navy, to produce his new non-partisan *Compiler*. Their example proved the impetus for Hamilton Shields to publish a journal equivalent to the *Compiler* in Norfolk.

Newspaper Proprietor

Early in 1815, as the war came to an end, Shields induced Richmond journeyman-printer Samuel Shepherd (379) – who seems to have been a part of the *Compiler* office – to come to Norfolk as his partner in such a non-partisan paper there; in August 1815, the *American Beacon and Commercial Diary* issued its first number. The firm of Shields & Shepherd was a well-calculated union of interests; both men were veterans of the recent war, so holding patriotic reputations that gave a legitimacy to their venture that was unmatched by their competitors, particularly that of the fading Federalist journal of maritime merchant John Cowper (110), the *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger*; moreover, Shepherd's trade skills matched nicely with Shields's literary ones, producing a daily that fit well the temper of the times there. As the two partners wanted to concentrate on their paper, they brought in a practical printer, Henry Ashburn (015), to conduct an allied job-printing office to provide revenue while the *Beacon* found its footing; that press soon became the busiest such shop in the port city. In April 1816, this initial arrangement changed through an act of charity; that January, Ashburn's boarding-house room was burglarized and all of the profits he had realized from his ongoing association with Shields & Shepherd – a pile of bank certificates kept in a trunk – were stolen; so the two journalists made Ashburn their partner in the job-press as compensation for his loss and recognition of his contribution to their success.

The original alignment of the *Beacon* itself continued until August 1816 when changes in Richmond's press offices led to new arrangements in Norfolk. Leroy Anderson retired from the *Compiler* shortly after the *American Beacon* began publication in 1815; William Shields became partner to a new editor, Louis Hue Girardin (180), an Anderson friend and formerly professor of modern languages at the College of William & Mary who was then conducting a school in Richmond; in May 1816, the firm of Girardin & Shields sold the *Compiler* to a new firm headed by Philip DuVal (155) and Daniel Trueheart (420) and dissolved; William took his proceeds from the sale to Norfolk, where he acquired Shepherd's interest in the *Beacon* that August, joining older brother Hamilton as a partner in that now profitable venture; in turn, the sale of his share allowed Shepherd to return to Richmond, where he opened a new job-printing firm that continued until 1835 in conjunction with new public-printer Thomas Ritchie (360), in whose office DuVal and Trueheart had worked. The timing of the changes clearly indicates that this was a coordinated transition in both cities.

The brothers promptly brought in Seymour P. Charlton, a young Norfolk native trained as a printer in Richmond, in order to acquire Ashburn's share in the press office as well, so further aiding their young printer and maintaining the paper's daily schedule; that buy-out and the printer's subsequent wages conducting the press office of the new firm of Shields, Charlton, & Co. allowed Ashburn to accumulate enough wealth to then buy Charlton's share of the firm upon that partner's retirement at the end of 1819. Ashburn extended his ties to the Shields-Anderson family just two years later by marrying the sole surviving daughter of Leroy Anderson and Nancy Shields: Harriett Sophia. Thus the *American Beacon* became, in essence, a family-owned business in January 1820.

Ownership of the *Beacon* office remained essentially unchanged under this arrangement for the next three years, during which time their journal became the primary commercial voice

of the Norfolk region. Adding Charlton to the firm allowed the Shields brothers to offer a new thrice-weekly edition "for the country" in January 1816, so extending the newspaper's reach into nearby North Carolina – a geographic practice reflected in the alteration of the country edition's title to *American Beacon and Virginia and North-Carolina Gazette* in 1823. At the end of the journal's third volume (August 1818), the firm similarly altered the daily's name to include the city of Portsmouth (*American Beacon and Norfolk & Portsmouth Daily Advertiser*) as its overt marketing focus, while enlarging its page size to accommodate more advertising. These adjustments illustrate the partners' continuing intent to keep the journal as apolitical as was possible, and so draw to it the most potential advertising revenue, all while promoting the various businesses within their domain. That intent is also evident in the firm's acquisition in April 1820 of the Steam-Boat Hotel Reading Room that adjoined the Post Office, bringing in as partner in this venture the Mr. Martin (280) who conducted the concern for Matthew Glenn; such reading rooms were the life-blood of early-Republic-era ports, providing access to a variety of commercial intelligence from (via distant newspapers and periodicals) and necessary knowledge of (via books and pamphlets) those places that were part of the town's maritime trade; an association with such libraries by a local daily like the *American Beacon* was common then because it also provided content for those voracious papers.

As with press offices elsewhere, the *Beacon* office offered goods and services not directly related to its newspaper or job printing. In 1819, the business was hamstrung by the sale of lottery tickets. Earlier that year, the winning tickets in one lottery were ones that had been sold at the *Beacon* office; thereafter the ownership trio was forced to decline selling tickets for subsequent lotteries when their office was deluged by a flood of mail (both postage paid and not) from people seeking to buy lottery tickets from Shields & Ashburn, so interfering with the production of their more remunerative printing ventures.

This clearly harmonious relationship came to an end in June 1823, when William Shields withdrew from the firm to return to Richmond; his partners apparently bought him out as the business became simply Shields & Ashburn on July 1st – evincing the prosperity they had gained through their daily. Still, Hamilton Shields was now ever less of a presence in the *Beacon* office as he became a civic and political figure of some import in Norfolk; Ashburn was the firm's every-day manager. This remained the mode of operating the *Beacon* until September 1834, when Shields finally decided to retire from journalism, as his brother had, and pursue his other interest alone. He sold his one-half-share of the *Beacon* to Hugh Blair Grigsby (1806-1881), an essayist of note who represented Norfolk at the 1829/30 Virginia Convention. But just two years into the new Ashburn & Grigsby alliance, Ashburn fell ill and died unexpectedly in September 1836. His wife's uncle, Robert Anderson (1781-1859), the Williamsburg and Yorktown merchant, was left to sort out the disposition of his estate and the *American Beacon* office. The settlement Anderson crafted was put into effect at the end of 1837; Grigsby continued to conduct the business as Ashburn & Grigsby until December 30, 1837, with the estate accruing its share of the profits over that time; on January 1, 1838, Grigsby took full control of the *Beacon* after buying Ashburn's interest from his estate. The settlement ended any ties the elder Shields may have had to his journalistic venture.

Civic and Political Leader

Throughout his time with the *American Beacon*, Shields embraced a variety of roles as both a civic and political leader. In his earliest days in Norfolk, those roles reflected his previous experience. Once established in the port, Shields served as the Quartermaster of the 54th Regiment of Virginia Militia (of Norfolk borough) for several years, frequently advertising in the *Beacon* his commanded attempts to recover and refit the regiment's arms issued during the war. He was also a founding director of the Norfolk Humane Society in October 1816, a charitable society led by the town's Episcopal prelate Samuel Low.

Over time, these duties expanded to include politicized ones as well. Shields was evidently a manager of the Norfolk auxiliary of the American Colonization Society from its founding in 1820, serving as such into the 1830s. So it is not surprising that he was also a key figure in the vigilance committee formed in Norfolk in 1835 to "counteract and defeat the designs of the Northern Abolitionists" there, alongside Ashburn and other print-tradesmen such as Thomas G. Broughton (055) and Caleb Bonsal (040). Shields was also a part of the creation of Virginia's Whig party, starting with local efforts in 1824 to assure the election of John Quincy Adams to the presidency over Andrew Jackson. During the 1820s, Shields was elected as the borough's delegate in the General Assembly, and then as its representative in the Constitutional Convention of 1829-30. By the 1840s, Shields was the head of the Whig party organization in the tidewater reaches of the lower James and York River valleys; as the fall 1844 elections neared, he organized a major political rally on the Yorktown battlefield, aided by Robert Anderson, Leroy's youngest brother, as his secretary.

Still, charity seems to have been not far from his heart. In June 1831, Shields once again served on an *ad hoc* public committee, alongside Broughton and Bonsal, formed to provide relief for victims of a major fire; this time the task was far larger than that he undertook in 1812; the former North Carolina capital of Fayetteville was almost entirely consumed by a conflagration – more than 600 buildings in just over four hours – on Sunday May 29, 1831; Shields was among a dozen men who raised funds to support the recovery efforts there.

Yet, his editorial career was what marked Shields for the rest of his life, even after twenty years away from journalism. On his death in June 1853, the notices of his demise published in American newspapers noted simply that he was the founding editor of the *American Beacon* and had long served ably in that role; they did not mention either his political career or military exploits. That oversight may have been because Shields had now faded into the historical background, supplanted by a like-named nephew, Hamilton Leroy Shields (1824-89), eldest son of brother William, named for both him and Leroy Anderson; the younger Shields attended Virginia Military Institute and West Point before serving with distinction in the Mexican War, being awarded a commemorative sword by Virginia's General Assembly; he lived out his days in the North, first as a lawyer in upstate New York (after serving as a judge advocate in the post-war Army), then as a farmer near Bennington, Vermont.

Personal Data

Born: in 1787 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Married: Dec. 25 1818 Harriet Rogers @ Norfolk, Virginia.
Died: June 22 1853 Norfolk, Virginia.
Children: No record of children yet discovered; probably died without issue.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Hubbard on Richmond; Forrest, *Norfolk*; Tucker, *Norfolk Abstracts*; Butler, *Defending the Old Dominion*; notices in the [Norfolk] *American Beacon* (1815-37), the *Richmond Enquirer* (1812-35), and the *Richmond Whig* (1836-53); genealogical data from Anderson family charts in *William & Mary Quarterly* (1903).