

381 SHIELDS, WILLIAM C.

Printer & Publisher

Richmond, Norfolk

Printer and publisher of Richmond's first successful daily paper, *The Commercial Compiler* (1814-16) with Louis Hue Girardin (180) and Leroy Anderson (011), his brother in law; then publisher of *The American Beacon and Commercial Diary* (1816-23) at Norfolk as partner to Henry Ashburn (015), Seymour P. Charlton (090), and Hamilton Shields (380), his brother; also a proprietor of the Steam-Boat Hotel Reading Room there (1820-23).

Shields was a Pennsylvania printer who became a Virginia journalist, a result, in part, of his sister's marriage into a prominent Revolutionary-era family in the Old Dominion. His life in Virginia proved to be a prosperous one, including both publishing and mercantile ventures, while raising a family of eight children after the early death of his wife.

Beginnings

Born and raised in the Philadelphia district of Auburn Seat, he relocated to Richmond in about 1810, apparently at the suggestion of schoolmaster and essayist 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 older brother Hamilton moved to Virginia to pursue opportunities tied to Anderson – Hamilton as a schoolmaster in Smithfield and William as a journeyman in the Richmond office that would print Anderson's new *Commercial Compiler* in 1813.

Even so, Shields's labors in Virginia's capital were interrupted by the outbreak of war in 1812; he promptly enlisted in the 19th Regiment of Virginia Militia (John Ambler's from Henrico County) but was captured by British forces in the summer of 1813 during the raids in Hampton Roads that brought fame to the Isle of Wight County rifle company commanded by his brother Hamilton. Released on the withdrawal of the British that fall, Shields returned to Richmond, and its press offices, awaiting a recall to service that never came.

Shortly before those engagements, Leroy Anderson had begun publishing a non-partisan daily paper in Richmond, *The Commercial Compiler*, intended to present news of the war with Great Britain in a more timely and less opinionated fashion than could the capital's three existing twice-weekly journals. He enlisted Philip DuVal (155) to produce the paper as his financial and printing partner; and its first number appeared May 1, 1813. But theirs was a problematic relationship, with DuVal leaving their daily by August; Anderson employed a variety of Richmond job-printing offices to print his daily for him over the ensuing year. But at the end of 1814, he entered into a new association with Shields, the Philadelphia-trained printer who was also a brother to his first wife. The marriage-relatives conducted the highly successful daily for the following year. Then in August 1815, Anderson retired, returning to his Richmond school, having tired of the editorial grind during the war. Shields became partner to a new editor, one Louis Hue Girardin (180), a friend of Anderson, formerly a professor at the College of William & Mary who was then conducting another school in the capital; their new arrangement lasted until May 1816, when the firm of Girardin & Shields

was dissolved as part of a reorganization of press offices in both Richmond and Norfolk, one that involved both Shields brothers.

Off to Norfolk

Early in 1815, as the war came to an end, Hamilton Shields decided to publish a journal in Norfolk equivalent to his brother's *Compiler*. He induced the 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 and in August 1815, their *American Beacon and Commercial Diary* issued its first number. The partners of Shields & Shepherd added Henry Ashburn (015) to the mix in April 1816; he was a practical printer they had hired to conduct an allied job-printing office and who had lost most of the wages he had earned in a burglary that January. The triumvirate continued until August 1816 when William C. Shields essentially traded places with Shepherd. That May, the firm of Girardin & Shields sold their *Compiler* to a new concern headed by Philip DuVal 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 in the *Beacon* allowed Shepherd to return to Richmond, where he opened a new job-printing firm that continued until 1835 in conjunction with Thomas Ritchie (360), in whose office DuVal and Trueheart had worked previously. The timing of the changes clearly indicates that this was a coordinated transition in both cities, likely negotiated by the reunited brothers.

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 C. 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.

Return to Norfolk

Conversely, the younger Shields eventually returned to the newspaper business. It appears that he came back to Norfolk in the late 1820s and opened a job-printing concern there about the time that his brother retired from the *Beacon* in 1834. In the ensuing years, he published a variety of small books and large quantities of blank forms, examples of which survive in several manuscript collections in Virginia. By January 1841, he was ready to begin issuing a new thrice-weekly paper entitled the *Norfolk & Portsmouth Phoenix*, so named out of apparent concern for the politicization of his old *Beacon* under Grigsby and his successor William E. Cunningham. After three successful years of publishing this new journal, Shields returned to the grind of a daily paper, converting his *Phoenix* to an evening paper he called *The Courier*; as before, he turned to family to assist in its production, adding his adolescent

sons George William (then 18) and John Emerson (then 16) as his partners; he eventually turned over daily operation of the paper to them in late 1850 or early 1851; the sons sold their family journal at the end of 1852 to one J. H. Finch, apparently a maternal relation.

Shields himself was occupied by other activities by then, both business and charitable. In January 1855, he was one of Norfolk's 76 representatives – evoking the "Spirit of '76" – to the last grand national convention of veterans of the War of 1812. Yet it was such strenuous travel that, ironically, brought an end to his life. Norfolk was struck by one of its recurring yellow-fever epidemic in the summer of 1855; Shields set out for Richmond to engage "in benevolent efforts in behalf of the suffering citizens" of his adopted home town; but while in the capital, he came down with the dread illness himself and expired within hours of his arrival there; he was quickly buried in the Shockoe Cemetery to prevent further contagion.

His children proved to be memorials to members of the extended Shields-Anderson family, carrying the names of respected relations, which were handed down, in turn, to their many children. The most distinctive was his eldest son, Hamilton Leroy Shields (1823-89), who was named for Shields's first familial business partners, older brother Hamilton and brother-in-law Leroy Anderson. Less obvious was his eldest daughter, Ann Camp (1824-1900), was given the name of Anderson's sister and partner in his Williamsburg and Richmond schools. The rest were similarly blessed, leading to a numerous, confusing, and contradictory entries in extant genealogical records.

NB: Sources vary on what was Shields's middle name, masked as it is by his use of just a "C." His mother's maiden name was Cannon, leading some to report that was also his middle name, as it was for a like-named nephew. But A. Paull Hubbard saw records in Richmond archives that report his middle name as being Charles, a common given name in his family. As both choices are reasonable, and as this researcher has not seen any primary sources indicating either option as the correct one, no claim is made here for either alternative.

Personal Data

Born: Feb. 11 1790 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
Married: Nov. 15 1818 Elizabeth Finch @ Norfolk, Virginia (d. 1844).
Died: Sept. 2 1855 Richmond, Virginia.
Children: Hamilton Leroy (1823-89); Ann Camp (1824-1900); Margaret (1825-1913); George William (1826-80); John Emerson (1829-89); Mary (1830-1916); and Virginia (1833=1910).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Hubbard on Richmond; Forrest, *Norfolk*; Tucker, *Norfolk Abstracts*; notices in the [Norfolk] *American Beacon* (1815-37), the *Richmond Enquirer* (1812-55), and the *Richmond Whig* (1836-55); genealogical data from Anderson family charts in *William & Mary Quarterly* (1903) and Shields family charts posted on Ancestry.com (March 2013).