

387 SIMMS, JOHN D. – [JOHN DOUGLASS SIMMS, SR.]

Publisher & Editor

Alexandria

Publisher and editor of the *Alexandria Gazette* (1812-15) with Samuel Snowden (393).

Simms was a civic leader in Alexandria in the years before the War of 1812 who was undone by his Federalist leanings during the war, especially through his ownership of the *Alexandria Gazette*, which opposed both the war and the Madison administration for its duration. After a decade-long retreat to private life, he returned to public service as a clerk in the Navy Department from 1827 to 1843.

Beginnings

The foundation for his civic and political prominence in northern Virginia came from his family; Simms was the middle son of Col. Charles Simms (1755-1819) of Stafford County and Anne "Nancy" Douglass (1760-1835), his New-Jersey-born wife. His father was a veteran of the Revolutionary War, who had served in the Southern campaigns in the Virginia line; after the war, he was a part of building the new state government and was elected to the 1788 ratification convention; trained as a lawyer, he established a thriving civil-law practice in Alexandria, building a close friendship with George Washington in the process; a leader of the local Masonic lodge there, he was one of the pall bearers at the president's funeral in 1799. His son thus received a private classical education that culminated in his graduation from the College of New Jersey – today known as Princeton University – in 1806, following in the footsteps of older brother William, Princeton class of 1801. After graduation, Simms studied the law in Alexandria, possibly under his father, with whom he went into a joint practice there in April 1809. And in September that year, he solidified his place among the social elite in northern Virginia by marrying Mary West, the young daughter of Roger West, a long-serving justice on the Fairfax County Court.

Simms swiftly became part of the governing elite in Alexandria, beginning with his selection by the city's Common Council as an election supervisor for the Third Ward in early 1811. The task was followed quickly by his election as the council's clerk and auditor that March. And when his father was elected mayor of Alexandria by the council in March 1812, Simms became his successor as the council's attorney. Hence father and son, ardent Federalists both, were key players in governing the city as the War of 1812 opened in June 1812.

The principal Federalist journal in northern Virginia at that time was the *Alexandria Gazette*. Originally known as the *Columbian Mirror*, that paper had been purchased in December 1800 by the partnership of Samuel Snowden, a transplanted journeyman printer from New Jersey, and Matthew Brown (057), the provocative editor of Baltimore's three-year-old *Federal Gazette*; their intent was to convert the dying thrice-weekly into a daily mercantile advertiser that would challenge the incoming Jefferson administration; Brown withdrew from the venture in June 1802 to focus on his Baltimore commitments, leaving Snowden to conduct the daily under his name, but with financing and content provided by unnamed local Federalists. So it is unsurprising that Snowden's office and person were threatened with violence in the days after the declaration of war for the "treasonous" comments found

in his paper; on June 22nd, he warned those reading his *Gazette* that force would be met with force should an attack be attempted; the threat was likely a real one, as that same day the office of the Baltimore *Federal Republican* was destroyed by a mob, initiating a summer-long war between editor Alexander Contee Hanson (and his merchant supporters) and the Republican working class there that resulted in at least two deaths in a July attack and his paper's ensuing relocation to Georgetown for the duration of the war.

As these events transpired, Simms was asked to speak at a Fourth of July celebration in Alexandria that Snowden dutifully promoted and reported in his *Gazette*. Drawing on the warnings pronounced in Washington's so-called "Farewell Address" – which was read aloud as part of the festivities – the orator implied that the Madison administration had entangled the country with a foreign power (i.e. France) in contravention to the wisdom of the late president. Within days, Snowden felt compelled to publish a revised and extended version of those remarks, explaining that Simms had been misunderstood, and that the additional comments he now published had been left out of his speech to shorten its duration.

Journalist

This episode, whether accurately reported or not, led to Simms joining Snowden's business. In early September, Snowden announced "that a gentleman of this town, whose abilities eminently qualify him for the superintendence of the press, has become jointly interests with him" in producing the *Gazette*, effective October 1st. Yet the addition of Simms to the *Gazette* office was more than a simple editorial enhancement; in mid-September, Snowden announced an increase in the price of his *Gazette*, the result of his increasing the sheet size of the paper by about one-fifth, in order to carry more "important intelligence" as the war and its discontents advanced. Both men intended to continue the paper's published assaults on the policies of the Republican government across the Potomac, but on a larger scale than before; moreover, the pairing assured the *Gazette's* subscribers that its content would be consistent with the views of the city's elected leaders, headed by Mayor Charles Simms; that approach allowed the partners to avoid the violence that had beset Hanson and his supporters in Baltimore.

The arrangement between Simms and Snowden apparently continued smoothly, even if not all Alexandrians accepted their paper's perspective; indeed, such dissenters had a partisan alternative in the *Alexandria Herald* of John Corse (106) and Nathaniel Rounsavell (367) to meet their needs. But their *Gazette's* reporting eventually led to Simms being forced to resign as the clerk and auditor for the Common Council in September 1813, though he was retained as city attorney, a non-decision-making role, until 1818. The change in the public's attitude toward the *Gazette* accelerated in the summer of 1814 with the British invasion of the capital region and the burning of Washington proper. Local Federalists pressed the city's government to negotiate a surrender of the port to the British and so avoid the devastation witnessed across the river; led by their mayor, a group of Alexandria's leading merchants, including Snowden, met with the British naval commander and obtained an agreement that the city would be spared; but the five-day occupation that followed resulted in a sacking of the port's warehouses and merchant ships that left Alexandria essentially unable to conduct any commerce for several months; Mayor Simms was reprimanded by the Common Council

and denied reelection in March 1815. With the war at an end by then, and with the family's reputation in tatters, the younger Simms sold his majority interest in the *Alexandria Gazette* shortly thereafter. While Snowden survived the ensuing reorganization of his business, and so published the *Gazette* until his death in 1831, Simms never again pursued journalism.

Administrator

The 1815 dissolution of the firm of Snowden & Simms meant that Simms returned to his legal practice, focusing on property and investment law. To that end, he became a founding director of the new Merchants Bank of Alexandria in May 1815, and apparently remained a pivotal figure in its management for the next three years. However, the *Alexandria Herald*, his former journalistic nemesis, published a story concerning the solvency, or lack thereof, of the bank in early 1818; in short order, a run on the bank ensued and it failed. Simms and his fellow directors brought suit against Corse & Rounsavell for publishing an "inaccurate" story that triggered the collapse of an otherwise "sound" bank. The suit went on until late 1825 when the plaintiff administrators finally gave up trying to recover their losses. That failure seems to have been a transformative event for Simms. In February 1816, he had married for a second time, his first wife having died in early 1812; Eleanor Carroll Brent was the daughter of a prominent Stafford County planter, Daniel Carroll Brent (1759-1814), and brought control of her late father's plantation and business interests with her. So that September, after the bank failure, Simms announced his relocation to the Brent homestead, Richland, near Aquia Church, taking up the direction of her family's affairs.

By 1822, however, Simms was back in the District of Columbia, though now in Georgetown and not Alexandria. While the relocation seems tied to his management of the assets of the Brent and Carroll families, it also put Simms in close contact with his wife's many politically-connected relatives there. As a result of those connections, he obtained an appointment in the Navy Department as the Registrar of Correspondence in 1827. While the post was one granted by the Adams administration, Simms survived the Democratic administrations that followed, being promoted to Assistant Chief Clerk in 1836 under Jackson and to Chief Clerk in 1839 under Van Buren. In 1841, Simms served twice as the acting Secretary of the Navy; first during the week-long interval between Van Buren's and Harrison's secretaries, and then for a month that fall following the mass resignations in Tyler's hold-over cabinet over his veto of a key Whig legislative initiative in mid-September. In both cases, Simms returned to his post as Chief Clerk once the new secretary took office, and so still held that position when he died unexpectedly, "in his 55th year," in March 1843.

In this subordinate role, Simms has become an obscure historical figure, to the point that the official public histories of the United States Navy do not list Simms as an acting secretary, though the facts of that service are reported in contemporaneous newspaper accounts. But those same records show that three of his children were figures related to both the Federal and Confederate navies. Eldest daughter Emily married French Forrest (1796-1866), a naval officer who served in the U.S. Navy during the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War; when Virginia seceded in 1861, he first joined the Virginia Navy and then the C.S. Navy as a senior commander and sometime Navy Secretary. Eldest son, John Douglass Jr., was a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and served as a commander of

Marine units in both the U.S. Navy and C.S. Navy from the Mexican War onward. Middle son Charles Carroll was also a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and served as a lieutenant in both American navies, remarkably on the same ship: the *CSS Virginia*, née *USS Merrimack*. All three children evince the tight bond that Simms forged to the naval service in the years after he abandoned journalism.

Personal Data

Born: In 1788 Stafford County, Virginia.
Married [1]: Sept. 7 1809 Mary West @ Fairfax County, Virginia (d. 1812).
Married [2]: Feb. 6 1816 Eleanor Carroll Brent @ Stafford County, Virginia.
Died: Mar. 2 1843 Washington, District of Columbia.
Children: By Mary: Emily Douglas (b. 1810).
By Eleanor: Ann Fenton Lee "Nancy" (b. 1818); Mary Eleanor (b. 1820); John Douglass Jr. (b. 1822); Charles Carroll (b. 1824); Richard Henry Lee (b. 1827).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; *Artisans & Merchants*; *Concise History of Alexandria*; Bryan, *National Capital*; notices in *Alexandria Gazette* (1809-43); genealogical data from Simms and Brent family charts posted on Ancestry.com (March 2013) and military academy biographies of graduates.