

389 SMITH, JOHN

Publisher

Alexandria

Founding publisher of *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette* (1792-93) in conjunction with Ellis Price (342).

Smith was a founder of Alexandria's second newspaper in 1792, a venture that provided him considerable prominence there. Yet his origins and trade are unclear, given the number of like-named individuals then residing in that port town. The circumstances surrounding the beginning of his *Columbian Mirror* suggest that Smith was a local merchant who initially financed the journal in partnership with a journeyman printer named Ellis Price, then about twenty-two and ready to forge an independent course in the print trade.

In July 1792, the new firm of Smith & Price proposed publishing a twice-weekly mercantile advertiser in competition with the existing *Virginia Gazette and Alexandria Advertiser*, a weekly begun in 1786. The partners noted that their planned paper's essential utility lay in its ability to transmit news in a more timely fashion, though they also observed that "the advantages from an early insertion of Advertisements are too obvious to require a single remark." The journal's financial foundation would be set in its advertising, as Smith & Price were determined to start the paper once 200 subscribers had been obtained, fewer than was then the norm. But they also required payment of one-third of the \$3.00 subscription price before the paper even issued, in order to acquire the materials they would need to produce their advertiser. As a result, the process of engaging subscribers and buying equipment took fully four months; their *Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette* did not issue its first number until November 21, 1792.

The first year of the *Columbian Mirror* was evidently quite successful. The sheet-size of the new paper was approximately one-third larger than that of the *Advertiser*, and when issued twice each week, that scale represented an increase in page space of more than 250 per cent – space readily available to serve Alexandria's mercantile needs. The partners also had an unparalleled location in Alexandria, issuing their paper from an office "at the East End of the Market-House," the heart of the city's merchant community. Thus by September 1793, Price had accrued sufficient capital to purchase Smith's interest in their enterprise, and by December he had the wherewithal to increase the paper's frequency from twice-weekly to thrice-weekly, adding to his staff in doing so. The quick success of the *Columbian Mirror* compelled the relocation of the older *Advertiser* across the Potomac to Georgetown in November 1793, allowing the younger *Mirror* to serve as the city's only paper until 1797.

Smith evidently retired permanently from journalism with the sale of his share of the *Mirror* during the first weekend of September 1793, given his absence from the imprint record thereafter. His track also vanishes from the historic record, obscured by the many other men named John Smith who lived in early-Republic America.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; *Artisans & Merchants*; notices in *Columbian Mirror* (1792-94).