

## 401 STEWART, JOHN

**Editor & Publisher**

**Richmond**

Editorial partner of William Alexander Rind (359) in publishing his *Virginia Federalist* (1799-1800) at Richmond and his *Washington Federalist* (1800-01) in the District of Columbia.

Stewart was a major figure in the conflict between Federalist and Republican newspapers in Richmond in the late 1790s. Those labors made him a part of the initial wave of journalists moving to the national capital to oppose the new Jefferson administration. But the number of such dissidents there forced his retirement from journalism after just four years.

The future Virginia editor was not a native to the Old Dominion. Rather, he was born in Baltimore, the son of Alexander Stewart (d. 1769) and Sarah Lane Lux (d. 1817); his father was a descendant of the Stuart kings of Scotland and came to North America after serving in the Royalist army during the Jacobite Rising of 1745. The son was raised in the merchant trade, coming to Richmond in July 1782 as the resident partner of the Baltimore-based commission and exchange house of Stewart & Hopkins; that arrangement was dissolved in November 1783, with Stewart striking out on his own in Richmond; the following spring he was named the vendue master (i.e. primary auctioneer) for the city of Richmond.

Stewart pursued the mercantile life until late 1789. With the resignation of John Beckley as Clerk of the House of Delegates in the spring of 1789 – having been named the Clerk of the new U.S. House of Representatives – the General Assembly shuffled their clerical assistants when it met that October; they elected Charles Hay of Williamsburg as Beckley's successor, then Hay named Stewart as clerk to the standing committee on Religion and Claims. After Hays's death in July 1795, the Assembly undertook another reorganization with Stewart rising to Clerk of the House. In that position, he would become a key player in the contest between Federalist and Republican delegates over control of the Assembly and its agenda under Speaker John Wise (1767-1812).

That contest led eventually to an assessment of the performance of the state's public printer, Augustine Davis (119) in early 1798. Governor James Wood of Frederick County had risen to his position with a promise to scrutinize government expenditures; he assigned councilor of state Meriwether Jones (242) to conduct an audit of Davis and his particular office; Jones returned a report that was highly critical of both the scale of production of public imprints and their distribution that he had found there; when Wood demanded that Davis increase production, Davis balked, demanding an increased salary for the work; Wood promptly fired Davis with the Council's approval. Thus when the Assembly next met in December 1798, designating a new public-printer was among their first acts; they turned to Jones, then the most informed person in government on the subject, to assume the vacant post – initiating a continuing debate in the Assembly as to whether the post required a manager or a craftsman. Jones immediately formed a partnership with John Dixon Jr. (141), a practical printer, to handle the technical side of the assignment, while he managed the important distribution aspect; Jones also transformed Dixon's existing newspaper, the *Observatory*, into a new semi-official journal, *The Examiner*, which promptly became the

principal voice of the Republicans in the Assembly.

The first political controversy that the new *Examiner* chronicled was the ensuing debate in the House of Delegates over a resolution condemning the recent Alien & Sedition Acts passed by the U.S. Congress at the insistence of John Adams and his administration. On December 24, 1798, the Assembly passed the so-called "Virginia Resolution" over the objections of Federalist delegates led by Speaker Wise. Those same delegates now sought to counter the influence of the Republicans and Jones's *Examiner* by starting a new political journal of their own, and designated Stewart as editor and proprietor of that paper.

Stewart recruited William Alexander Rind as his practical printer; he was the eldest son of William (358) and Clementina (356) Rind, the Revolutionary-era printers of Williamsburg; he had just returned to Virginia from an eight-year-long tenure as "the King's printer" on the Island of St. John in maritime Canada (known today as Prince Edward Island); now Stewart asked him to print a paper opposing that of the newly-elected public printer. The pairing led to questioning of their loyalty to both Virginia and the United States, with Stewart the son of a Jacobite rebel and Rind seeming a closeted Loyalist. In May 1799, the firm of Stewart & Rind commenced publishing the *Virginia Federalist* and immediately engaged in editorial combat with the *Examiner*. The paper's short-term goal was to regain Federalist control of the Assembly in the elections that spring and summer; but the effort fell flat in the face of the growing number of prosecutions of Republican newspaper editors and writers under the Alien & Sedition Acts; those trials made support of the Virginia Resolution a key issue in those elections, with the *Virginia Federalist* and its partisans on the losing side of that issue. So when the new Assembly convened in November 1799, the Republican majority removed both Speaker Wise and Clerk Stewart from their official positions for their opposition to the will of Virginia's polis.

Stewart and Rind were not deterred by this reversal however; indeed, they seem to have been re-energized by it, being freed of any constraint from criticizing the state's Republican government and its policies in being now divorced from the Assembly. As 1800 was an election year, they found themselves in the position of being a key opponent in Virginia to the candidacy of the state's favorite son, Thomas Jefferson, for president. It was a sizable challenge, as they now faced a network of new Republican journals in Virginia organized in late 1799 and early 1800 under the tutelage of James Lyon (274), the son of the notorious Vermont congressman and publisher Matthew Lyon. But Stewart and Rind soon found their efforts thwarted by the larger number of writers gathered by Jefferson's stalwarts in the state, even as Rind brought his brother James (357), a rising young attorney in the capital, into his office as an added editorial hand. The *Virginia Federalist* became a particular target for the acidic pen of James Thomson Callender (075), the Republican polemicist then in exile in Virginia, whose essays drew heated responses from Stewart, the two Rinds, and their supporters. Moreover, the partner's recent pasts came to play ever larger roles in public perceptions of their journal and its partisan backers, deemed monarchists all.

Once it became clear that Jefferson would prevail over Adams in the 1800 election, Stewart and Rind recognized the futility of their situation in the home of the incoming president. Facing up to the prospect of a slow death by many small cuts for their *Virginia Federalist* in

Richmond, but also believing in their role as censors of the ascendant Republican majority, the pair chose to relocate the paper rather than closing it, and claim a place on the larger national stage in the process. So in August 1800, they suspended publication of the fifteen-month-old journal and moved their press office to the District of Columbia. On September 25th, just six weeks later, the *Washington Federalist* issued from their new Georgetown location, with the New Englander Charles Prentiss (341) prominently reported as its editor. Prentiss may have been a part of the project while it was still housed in Richmond, given the late 1799 closure of his foregoing *Political Focus* in Leominster, Massachusetts, although his overt connection was not recorded until the relocation; he proved more proficient at the task than had Stewart, which allowed the financially-strapped Virginian to sell his interest in the *Federalist* to Rind in May 1801 and retire to more profitable pursuits.

Stewart found those pursuits in his hometown of Baltimore, leaving his two-decade-long residence in Virginia behind, apparently with little regret. He retained some interest in partisan editorializing by contributing essays to both Rind's *Federalist* and the controversial *Federal Gazette* of Matthew Brown (057) in Baltimore, but by 1804 even those infrequent efforts had ceased. What his mercantile focus was there remains unclear, given the absence of any advertising notices, although blank forms issued under his imprimatur circulated in Baltimore in 1813, indicating at least a financial interest in a job-printing firm there – items representing his last entries to the bibliographic record.

Still, Stewart evidently continued as an active merchant presence in Baltimore for another decade. The sixty-three-year old businessman died "without estate" in February 1823, so suggesting either impoverishment or a distribution of his estate before his death; if the former, those final years were difficult ones; if the latter, those years were ones of physical decline ending in a long-anticipated death. More surprisingly, his passing was not noted in any Baltimore, Washington, or Virginia paper, showing just how far partisan journalism had moved on in the twenty years after his voluntary retirement.

### ***Personal Data***

Born: Dec. 31 1759 Baltimore, Maryland.  
Married: Feb. 24 1784 Catharine Hare @ Henrico County, Virginia.  
Died: February 1823 Baltimore, Maryland.  
No record of children yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Dodson, *Speakers and Clerks*; notices in Richmond newspapers (1789-1800) and the *Washington Federalist* (1800-02).