

407 STRETCH, JOHN

Bookbinder, Publisher

Williamsburg

Bookbinder in the Williamsburg printing office, possibly under William Parks (321) before 1750, then under William Hunter (230) to 1759; publisher (1756-59) of first *Virginia Gazette*.

Stretch was a bookbinder who gained considerable social prominence in Virginia during his lifetime, but who has been largely forgotten since then, lost in the ensuing cascade of printers and publishing in the Revolutionary era that he had had a hand in starting.

Origins

Little is really known about Stretch, despite his contemporary standing. The most visible and enduring legacy he has left us is his catalogue of the extensive library of councilor William Byrd II (1674-1744) of Westover, perhaps the most substantial such bibliographic record made in colonial America, listing 2345 titles in 3512 volumes. Compiled sometime in the decade after Byrd's death, the register could have been made before or after the May 1750 death of William Parks, Williamsburg's first printer, so generating suggestions that Stretch worked initially for Parks. However, the first indication of Stretch residing in the old colonial capital comes from 1751 in the business records of William Hunter, the journeyman printer who managed the Williamsburg press for Parks and became his successor; Hunter's journals begin when he assumed control of the printing office on January 1, 1751, so it contains references to people and transactions made before his master's death, particularly those where Hunter was collecting monies still owed to Parks as an agent for his estate. So a clear understanding of when Stretch arrived in Williamsburg remains elusive.

After 1750, Stretch's professional life is easier to trace, but little about his private pursuits can be discerned. It is clear that he owned property in Williamsburg, with the most readily traceable being his ownership of two town lots on which the tavern of Christina Campbell would be built in 1774; he acquired the tract "on East Street whereon the Playhouse stands" in 1754 and built a dwelling there; Stretch then sold the property in 1757 to tavern-keeper Alexander Finnie for a £40 lifetime annuity that Finnie funded by immediately reselling the lots; this convoluted transaction suggests that Stretch had had some association with the theater company headed by Lewis Hallam, who had defaulted on a mortgage for the lots, so allowing the bookbinder to buy them at a discount. Stretch also owned an indenture for the services of one Sarah Benefield, "a white Servant Woman" then thirty years old who spoke "the Lancashire dialect very broad;" she ran away from his employ in September 1753, and likely escaped on a ship out of Yorktown, as she is not mentioned in court records after the notice that Stretch placed in Hunter's *Virginia Gazette*. Both events indicate that he had accumulated some capital by 1754, and so was a reputable figure in town. Yet, no other property transactions can be found in court records, or any family in surviving tax or church records, indicating he died a bachelor without children in need of a patrimony.

Rather, the legacy Stretch left to Virginia was in an initial broadening of published public discourse in the colony. From its start in summer 1736, the *Virginia Gazette* was a vehicle for distributing official information – "by Authority" – in conformance with the traditional

role of any periodical designated a "Gazette." But in the mid-1750s, this supposed voice of the colonial administration was appropriated by the House of Burgesses during an ongoing contest with the royal governor, Robert Dinwiddie, with Stretch's assistance. Such was the inadvertent result of a three-year-long English sojourn by his employer, William Hunter.

Proprietor

Hunter embarked on that journey in June 1756, after a lengthy struggle with illness that had left him weak and thin. He determined to travel to England to recover his health, where he stayed most frequently at the London abode of Benjamin Franklin, who was then there in the middle of a five-year-long residence as the agent for the assemblies of Pennsylvania, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Georgia; Hunter's problems had begun in July 1754 while he was on a tour of northern post offices with Franklin, his partner in administering the postal system of the British North American colonies. Now the two lived at a considerable distance from their responsibilities, which engendered problems for both men.

During that three-year absence, Stretch conducted Hunter's office and was soon enmeshed in the contest between Dinwiddie and the Burgesses. This period coincided with the peak of the French & Indian War in North America, a time when the printing office in Williamsburg was inundated by demands for the imprints needed to direct a colony at war; the war also created production problems that Stretch had difficulty meeting. Printing the treasury notes that the government needed to pay for men and provisions became a significant issue. From May 1755 to October 1760, the colony's treasury issued nearly £540,000 in paper currency, all of it printed in Williamsburg, almost all of it under Stretch's direction. By mid-1757, demand for new notes dominated the office's output, to the exclusion of most other work. Most telling were the recurring delays in printing the "session laws" recording the new legislation deemed necessary for the conduct of the war.

Gradually, hostility rose among Stretch, Dinwiddie, and the Burgesses over these conflicting priorities, all while Hunter was absent from his Virginia obligations. Dinwiddie had angered the Burgesses in controversies over the Pistole Fee and the Two Penny Act, which came shortly after London's attempts to alter the laws published in the most recent revival (i. e. compilation) of those laws in 1749. In his early days in command of Virginia's only printing office, Hunter understood that Dinwiddie's support was vital to his survival, and so he had not published anything harmful to the governor's policies in his *Gazette*. But now Stretch conducted that newspaper, and he apparently shifted its content toward the Burgesses, the ones who actually paid for the office's work. Indeed, the only political pamphlets issued from Hunter's office were ones published during his lengthy English sojourn; these were the gentry's justifications for the 1758 law allowing payment of clerical salaries in currency at a fixed rate, and not in tobacco at its inflated market price – one of the so-called Two Penny Acts – which led to the Parsons' Cause litigation of 1763. Likewise, the *Virginia Gazette* became a forum for dissenting views, leading Dinwiddie to complain of "the dastardly Spirit of our Common People." The governor's pleas to be relieved from a deteriorating situation were realized in January 1758. His final report in London that summer brought pressure on Hunter to return to Virginia and reassert control over his renegade printing office.

Meanwhile, tensions over the increasing cost of printing crested in Williamsburg following Dinwiddie's recall. By the winter of 1758-59, Stretch was clearly in financial distress. In April 1757, he had posted notices in the *Gazette* designed to force payments of arrearages by the printing office's customers, employing the common ruse that he too intended to leave the colony. Shortly after that, he sold his town lots near the Capitol. But his fiscal problems apparently continued into the following year. During the fall Assembly of 1758, Stretch presented a bill to the House of Burgesses for 217 books of treasury notes, work not normally part of the public printer's contract. The House found his bill to be "extravagant" and so they approved payment of only about one-third of the amount he had billed. Stretch protested the Burgesses' refusal to pay the bill's face value in a subsequent petition, which the House tabled without further action, so ignoring him.

This festering situation was resolved with Hunter's return to Virginia in July 1759, though not in Stretch's favor. The pressure on Hunter to go home and take control of the situation led him to seek reputable journeymen to replace those then working in Williamsburg, particularly Stretch, in London. Thus he returned to Virginia in the company of Joseph Royle (368) and Alexander Purdie (345), who would both succeed to ownership of Hunter's office. Within days of his return, if not hours, Hunter purged the office's personnel, supplanting them with Royle, Purdie, and likely others. And his *Gazette* slid back into the authoritative voice it had been before Hunter's departure: a loyal servant to governor and empire. More importantly, at least in the short term, Hunter effectively masked the role that the incoming resident governor, Francis Fauquier, had in reestablishing government's control over the office, thereby stifling any complaints among the Burgesses about Stretch's removal.

Dénouement

Now unemployed, Stretch quickly left the colony to ply his trade in nearby Maryland. It seems that he did so in both Annapolis and Baltimore, as his outstanding account with the Williamsburg printing office lists both locales as his residence; his account with Hunter was carried over to Royle when he took over the office on Hunter's death in August 1761, as Stretch occasionally bought supplies from both. Indeed, Royle's office journal provides the best indication of the timing of Stretch's death, as the transactions indicate a living binder in late December 1764 and a deceased one in early April 1765, suggesting that Stretch died in March in Annapolis.

Stretch's passing had repercussions in Virginia among the opponents to the new governor, Francis Fauquier. Deprived of an outlet for their opinions in the *Virginia Gazette* first by Hunter and then by Royle – at Fauquier's direction – the dissidents began an effort to bring a second press into Virginia for the well-known Stretch to use. Sometime before the end of 1764, such a press had been procured by Williamsburg merchant William Holt; he was a brother to Hunter's brother-in-law, John Holt (222), the one-time Williamsburg mayor who had removed to New York in 1756, one step ahead of a crippling debt execution. There, Benjamin Franklin, out of his continuing loyalty to Hunter's family, set Holt up in a printing-partnership with James Parker, his former apprentice and sometime business agent. By 1764, however, the Parker/Holt partnership was in deep trouble with each man operating a separate office: Parker in New Jersey and Holt in New York. Parker owned their two presses;

so for Holt to become independent of Parker, he would need a press of his own. William Holt stepped in, selling that new press to Royle, who then sent it to New York on loan. Thus the press intended to be the basis of a new Stretch office vanished in an accommodation between brothers. As a result, the newly-disappointed dissidents were once again seeking a press for Stretch's use in his former home when the journeyman died in early 1765.

A second printer would finally arrive in Williamsburg a year after Stretch's death, a result, in part, of Royle's subsequent suppression of the Burgesses' resolutions against the Stamp Act in May 1765. That printer, William Rind (358), has long been credited with breaking the hold on the press exercised by colonial governors in the standard story of printing in Virginia. But the reality is that Stretch was the first to open a newspaper-based public discourse in the colony a decade earlier and suffered the consequences for doing so. What is more the pity, Stretch's contemporaries understood that truth, but they did not mythologize his efforts in the way that they later made Rind into the hero of the Revolutionary press.

Personal Data

Born: Before 1731 Unknown.

Died: Early 1765 Annapolis, Maryland.

No other personal data yet discovered.

Sources: Entry adapted from Rawson, "Guardians," chap. 2, which draws on files for Stretch at Colonial Williamsburg in Research Dept. (York County Project) and Rockefeller Library (Williamsburg People File); "Virginia Gazette Journals," Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia; the *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*; Hayes, *Library of William Byrd*; Samford & Hemphill, *Bookbinding in Colonial Virginia*; and notices in Hunter's *Virginia Gazette* (1751-60).