

414 THORNTON, THOMAS

Publisher

Dumfries

Publisher of *Republican Journal and Dumfries Weekly Advertiser* (1795-96), initially with James Kempe (247), and then independently.

Thornton was a physician with considerable social standing in Prince William County who joined an effort to publish a Republican-oriented weekly in the port town of Dumfries in the mid-1790s. As was the case in other eastern Virginia ports then, that effort was short-lived.

Born as the Revolutionary War dawned, Thornton was the son of the Rev. Thomas Thornton (1716-92), a respected Anglican cleric and friend of George Washington, and his wife Mary Ann Ewell (1742-1813). His early days and education have gone unreported, but he clearly studied medicine, setting up a practice in Dumfries in about 1794, earning the sobriquet of "Doctor Thornton" for the rest of his life. As was the case with many young physicians of his day, Thornton was well-versed in Enlightenment-era science, and so had an affinity for that era's political philosophy as well. So as the divide between Republicans and Federalists developed in the early 1790s, Thornton sided with Jefferson and his allies, just as his English-immigrant father had sided with Washington in 1775, leaving earlier familial political allegiances behind. That political inclination led him to into journalism in advance of the first presidential election pitting John Adams against Thomas Jefferson, providing financial support for a new partisan paper issued in the Prince William County seat.

Journalism in Dumfries was still an uncertain pursuit in May 1795 when James Kempe issued his inaugural *Republican Journal and Dumfries Weekly Advertiser*. At that moment, it had been eighteen months since the demise of the town's first weekly, *The Virginia Gazette and Agricultural Repository* of Charles Fierer (163), a result of the German-immigrant's financial difficulties and declining health; but it had then been only four months since the dispersal of his estate in January 1795. In that administrator's sale, Fierer's press office was bought by an influential Prince William County leader, Col. Willoughby Tebbs (526); a veteran of the Revolutionary War, Tebbs was a resolute advocate for local commercial development, particularly given the mercantile potential of the county's proximity to the Potomac River. So it seems that he acquired the orphaned press intending to engage a practical printer to produce a new mercantile advertiser in Dumfries; four months later, Kempe's journal made its initial appearance, issued from Fierer's old press.

Still, Dumfries was then a dying colonial-era tobacco port with a silting harbor and difficult overland access to the main north-south road in the western reaches of the county. As a result, the number of merchants there was in decline as commerce was drawn away to the more accessible ports of Alexandria and Fredericksburg – meaning that a weekly advertising sheet faced ever-diminishing revenues. If a weekly was to survive there, it needed to be a political paper with some form of partisan subsidy. This consideration was a part of the *Republican Journal* from its start. Its publisher was the firm of James Kempe & Co., not simply Kempe, clearly indicating at least one silent financial partner. Thus Kempe was his own man only as long as the backing continued, or the revenues sustained the venture, or

until the end of his agreement with his unnamed sponsors.

Kempe's ties to the *Republican Journal* were apparently limited to a one-year contract, for in March 1796 he transferred his interest in the *Republican Journal* to Thornton. The young physician seems to have invested in the newspaper the preceding November following the election of Federalist John Adams to the presidency; he brought with him not only an infusion of capital that sustained the marginal enterprise, but a more insistent Republican tone to the journal as well. Kempe likely remained with the office operating the press, as Thornton was not a trained printer, and he was not recorded in county records as being independent of that business until 1798; but after March 1796, Kempe's name no longer appeared on the paper's masthead. It was now the doctor's alone to manage.

Thornton struggled to keep the *Republican Journal* going until November of that year, likely dependent on transient skilled-labor once Kempe's contract ended. With local Federalists and Republicans alike having sympathetic journals in nearby Alexandria and Fredericksburg, his *Journal* did not offer a viable alternative, even with a well-known local personality at its helm. Eventually the effort overwhelmed Thornton and he closed the weekly permanently on November 3rd, eighteen months after it began. Dumfries would not again host a paper until after World War II.

Thornton returned to his medical practice and to managing his family's business pursuits as planters in Prince William County, never to be a part of the print trade again. After 1815, he developed a long and lingering illness that would eventually take his life. Anticipating his death, Thornton passed control of his affairs to his eldest son, also named Thomas, and asked in his will that his son be allowed to administer his estate without the assessment of fees, as he already managed the family's assets. So relieved of his earthly responsibilities, Thornton died "with grace" on Friday June 27, 1817.

NB: Nearly all genealogical sources assert that this Thornton's will, probated in July 1817, is that of his like-named father, so assign a death-date of 1817 for him; however, published obituary notices for the son reveal that those proceedings concerned the son's estate and not that of the father, whose death certainly preceded the passing of his mother in 1813, as he is not mentioned in her will or in the probating of that will; indeed, one source reports 1796 as his death date, based on a review of Prince William County records.

Personal Data

Born:	ca. 1764	Prince William County, Virginia
Married:	ca. 1789	Jane Carr Chapman @ Prince William County, VA
Died:	June 27 1817	Dumfries, Prince William County, Virginia
Children:	Rev. Thomas C. (1790-1860); James Bonnell Carr (b. 1792); and one unnamed daughter b. by 1810.	

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Federal Decennial Census (1810); probate record in Prince William County Will Books; death notice in [Fredericksburg] *Virginia Herald*.