

425 WALKER, JAMES

Printer, Publisher

Fredericksburg

Printer of the *Genius of Liberty* (1800) at Fredericksburg for founder Robert Mercer (301); then publisher there of the succeeding *Courier* (1800-01) and *Apollo* (1803-04).

Walker was a trained printer who became a part of an effort by Democratic-Republicans in the Fredericksburg area to publish a partisan alternative to the Federalist-oriented *Virginia Herald* of Timothy Green (194). Yet his four-year-long association with that effort represents the only trace of his labors in the American print trade.

The Walker surname was a plentiful one in early Republic Virginia, making an identification of this particular Walker problematic. Given the political opinion in the papers he published, Walker may have been a part of a Madison County family that had extensive dealings with a Stafford County family that included Gerard Banks (019), the Republican editor and essayist, so explaining events in nearby Fredericksburg – but that prospect is speculative at best. Some sources claim that he was the James Walker who later published papers in Knoxville and Columbia, Tennessee; but that Walker was born in 1792 in Kentucky and so could not have been a newspaper owner in 1800 in Virginia.

This enigmatic Walker makes his first appearance in Fredericksburg in mid-1800 as a trained printer in the employ of Robert Mercer, then the Commonwealth Attorney for the state courts that met there. In 1796, Mercer had helped to fund the ill-fated *Republican Citizen* (1796-97) of Lancelot Mullin (307), and then bought that idle press to issue his *Genius of Liberty* in the place of the *Citizen* in late 1797, so sustaining local journalistic opposition to the Federalist *Herald*. Initially, Mercer partnered with George Carter (082), a wealthy cousin to his wife. From its start, their firm employed tradesmen from beyond Fredericksburg to produce the paper, while the family – in the person of Mercer – retained ownership of the office's tools, thus retaining local political control over its business affairs. Carter withdrew from the business at about the end of 1798, probably because of ill-health. The paper was then conducted briefly by the succeeding firm of Mercer & Pittman before publication of fell to the new concern of Mercer & Field about the end of March 1799, wherein each of Mercer's partners remain unidentified.

Walker continued this succession, as evinced by Mercer's unexpected death in September 1800. He evidently conducted the *Genius of Liberty* anonymously for the benefit of Mercer's estate over the following month. That role suggests that Walker was the next intended partner to Mercer, hired in anticipation of Field's scheduled exit, and that the planned succession was disrupted by Mercer's demise. At the end of that month-long conservancy, Mercer's office (two presses and their supplies) and his newspaper were sold outright to Walker alone. The printer now became the tradesman that local Republicans chose to entrust with their troubled journalistic effort.

Being in the midst of the heated rematch of Jefferson and Adams for the presidency, it was essential to Fredericksburg-area Republicans that this counter-weight to the *Virginia Herald* continue for the foreseeable future. Hence on October 14, 1800, the *Genius of Liberty* was

transformed into *The Courier* under the proprietorship of James Walker (425). It appears Walker was a trained printer in Mercer's employ at the time of his death; he acquired both the paper and press from Mercer's estate sometime during the ensuing month, likely with some assistance from Mercer's family, friends, and allies. That key support sustained Walker through that winter and into the following year. But Jefferson's election and inauguration proved to bring new competition to Fredericksburg and threatened Walker's *Courier*.

In May 1801, a third journal appeared in town, the *Fredericksburgh News-Letter*. Published by Philip Temple (409), a young Caroline County planter of some means, his paper drew on the moderating tone of Jefferson's inaugural address that March and his assessment that "We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists." For Temple, the peaceful transfer of power from Adams to Jefferson offered "the pleasing prospects of returning Unity" to the country, a prospect incompatible with Walker's strident partisanism. Conciliation would be the guiding principle for his *News-Letter*, even as it supported the new administration, and it evidently found an audience. By mid-November, Walker found it prudent to suspend publication of his *Courier*, indicating that Temple had drawn off a sizeable portion of his business, likely both in subscription and advertising revenue; the *News-Letter* thus became the town's Republican voice. Yet Temple could only sustain the effort for about a year; ill-health forced the *News-Letter's* closure in June 1802; he retired to his King William home, where he died in August, just twenty-two.

In spite of the void created by Temple's withdrawal, Walker deferred restarting his *Courier* until after another Republican newspaper appeared in Fredericksburg. In May 1803, Samuel Chiles (092), another Caroline County planter with political ambitions, and Isham Burch (062), a printer from the press offices in Richmond, began issuing the *Virginia Express* there. Their paper was apparently one that aligned with the views of Jefferson's critics within his own party, the *Tertium Quids*, later exemplified by John Taylor of Caroline, among others. So with two Fredericksburg papers challenging the president, Walker returned to journalism in September 1803 at the behest of local Jeffersonians, employing the tools used to publish the *Courier* to issue a restyled paper, *The Apollo*. Once again, the Republican audience in the Rappahannock River Valley was divided between the two papers, which made each one's survival problematic. Walker evidently recognized the futility of the situation first, closing his *Apollo* after just a six-month run in March 1804, probably as part of a compromise in which the *Virginia Express* continued alone, but now as an advocate for Jefferson.

Walker may have continued job-printing in Fredericksburg, but if he did, he did not produce anything substantial, as his name does not again appear in the bibliographic record. That disappearance suggests the end of an era in Fredericksburg. This avowedly-partisan paper, initiated by a respected Virginia family and its network of friends and associates, and twice continued by a resolute Walker, had lost any claim to legitimacy in that neighborhood – as evinced by the demise of the *Express* as well. As a result, there would not be a truly viable journal that could truly oppose the long-lived *Virginia Herald* until there was an alteration in the political landscape there – a change that did not emerge until the Jacksonian era, some twenty years later.

No Personal Data yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Will & Order Books, Fredericksburg Hustings Court; Howison, *Fredericksburg*; Quinn, *Fredericksburg*.