

## 442 WHITE, T. W. – [THOMAS WILLIS WHITE]

**Printer, Publisher**

**Richmond, Norfolk**

Apprentice in office of William Alexander Rind (359) and John Stewart (401) at Richmond (1799-1800); printer in office of Augustine (119) and George (122) Davis at Richmond (1807-08); and of William Davis (127) at Norfolk (1808-10); contract printer to the Virginia Senate (1827-28); later publisher of *Southern Literary Messenger* (1834-43) at Richmond.

White is best known for publishing the *Southern Literary Messenger* and employing Edgar Allan Poe as the journal's editor in its early years. Yet that famed venture came near the end of his forty-year-long career as a printer and publisher who served conservative interests in Virginia, resulting in an unfamiliarity among modern literary scholars with the influence of his earlier experiences, in the years before 1820, in the founding of that magazine.

### **Beginnings**

The son of a tailor, White was a child of the artisan-trade networks of pre-Revolutionary Virginia as well. Like several of his later associates, he was born in Williamsburg and moved to Richmond at a very young age when those tradesmen relocated to the new state capital. He received his initial training as a printer there under the guidance of William Alexander Rind, the son of the Revolutionary-era printers William (358) and Clementina (356) Rind. His master had been trained by Thomas Nicholson (315), the son of a Williamsburg merchant and a partner then to John Dixon Sr. (140), the Williamsburg merchant turned publisher by virtue of his business alliance with Alexander Purdie (345) and marriage to Rosanna Hunter Royle, the widow of Joseph Royle (368) and younger sister of William Hunter (230); all three men were master printers who had conducted the only printing office in Virginia before the arrival of the Rinds in 1765. (Dixon's family would also forge marriage ties to the family of the Richmond merchant John Allan, the guardian of the young Edgar Allan Poe.) What is more, White was the son of Sarah Davis, the sister of Augustine Davis, successor to Purdie's business in 1779, who was later elected the state's public-printer in 1790. Consequently, White was the latest in a line of journeymen reaching back to the trade's origins in Virginia, and so had long acquaintances with contemporary figures in that line, such as John Dixon Jr. (141) and Daniel Baxter (027).

White's days as an apprentice were also ones that placed him directly in the middle of the ongoing Richmond newspaper war between Federalist and Jeffersonian publishers. When the eleven-year-old boy was bound out to Rind in 1799, the printer had just opened an office in the capital to produce the highly-partisan *Virginia Federalist* in alliance with John Stewart, then the Clerk of Virginia's House of Delegates. The journal they published was designed to counter the influence of *The Examiner* of Jeffersonian editor Meriwether Jones (242), the newly-appointed public-printer for the Commonwealth; their short-term goal was to regain Federalist control of the Assembly in that year's elections, and so deprive Jones of the sustenance of the public treasury. But the effort soon fell flat in the face of the rising number of prosecutions of Republican editors and writers under the Alien & Sedition Acts; those trials made support of the Virginia Resolution of 1798 a key issue among voters that

year, with the *Virginia Federalist* and its partisans on the losing side of that question. So the two proprietors turned to opposing the state's favorite son, Thomas Jefferson, in the 1800 presidential election, with a similarly ill-fated result.

Rind and Stewart were not deterred by these reversals however; indeed, they seem to have been re-energized by them. Believing themselves to be proper censors of a new Republican administration, the partners chose to relocate their paper to the national capital and claim a place on the larger political stage in the process. So in August 1800, the pair suspended publication of their fifteen-month-old journal in Richmond and moved their press office to the District of Columbia – taking their now twelve-year-old apprentice with them. Six weeks later, on September 25th, the *Washington Federalist* issued from its new Georgetown home with the Massachusetts essayist Charles Prentiss (341) as its editor in the place of Stewart. This early association with Prentiss brought White into contact with the circle of Boston-based Federalists who would later patronize the young printer there.

### **Independent Tradesman**

White remained in Rind's employ until about 1804 when he attained journeyman status. By then Rind was the sole proprietor of the *Washington Federalist*, having lost both Stewart (in 1801) and Prentiss (in 1802) to other ventures. (Prentiss eventually landed in Richmond in 1805 as editor of the *Virginia Gazette* of Augustine Davis, White's uncle.) But the auction sale of Rind's presses in an 1804 debt execution seems to have brought the five-year-long affiliation between master and apprentice to an end. White then labored as a hired hand in Washington's press offices until mid-1807 when he returned to Richmond, now nineteen.

That return was in the company of one John Wood (456), an English émigré schoolmaster with aspirations to fame as an American journalist. Wood was already a controversial figure then; shortly after his arrival in America, he had been engaged by a New York bookselling firm to write a satirical history of the administration of John Adams; the resulting work had undermined the political support there for Aaron Burr, the native son serving as Jefferson's vice president; Burr conspired with the fiscally-embarrassed Wood to suppress the finished book while composing a hagiographic biography of Burr; in the process, Wood alienated himself from Republicans generally and Burr specifically. The writer removed to Richmond in 1802 to edit the stagnating *Virginia Gazette* of Federalist Augustine Davis, which led, in turn, to an invitation in 1806 to start his own Federalist paper in Frankfort, Kentucky – *The Western World* – in an effort to hinder plans secretly advanced and supported by Burr to form an independent nation west of the Appalachians. Once Burr was revealed and indicted for treason, though not for the plot the editor reported, Wood came east to Washington hoping to conduct a new Federalist journal there – *The Atlantic World* – having a similar function in revealing the rumored faults of Jefferson's administration. Wood engaged White as his printer-partner in the new venture, as the firm of Wood & White, and the weekly's first number issued on January 19, 1807.

But the new paper was hamstrung by its editor's indiscretion. In the face of long-established and better-financed competitors of both political stripes, the journal struggled. And when Wood attempted to raise its visibility by reporting on supposed conspiracies against the

federal government in March, he was immediately charged with libel by one of the city's most powerful men: John Beckley, the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives and a personal friend of the sitting president, Thomas Jefferson. Wood fled to avoid prosecution, leaving White to deal with the aftermath; he announced the termination of the *Atlantic World* in September, and returned to employment with his uncle in Richmond. Wood had gone there as well, having "left the *beaten* path of venality and returned to Richmond to resume that of instruction," as a mid-century chronicler of the city reported.

White's return to Richmond came at just the moment that his uncle was restructuring his printing establishment. In 1806, Davis began an effort to increase the book and job printing his office produced, so lessening his family's dependence on his increasingly unpopular Federalist *Virginia Gazette*. In 1807, he made his sole surviving son, George Davis, a partner in the press and the two set about hiring additional trained hands to expand their business. With the dissolution of Wood & White, another reliable family member became available to assist in the planned expansion. Thus, White quickly found a place in the *Gazette* printing office, staying there for the ensuing year.

In 1808, White joined another Davis in Norfolk, one William Davis, publisher of the *Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger*. He appears to have been a relative of his mother and uncle, and had conducted the first avowedly-partisan paper in the port town between 1792 and 1797: *The American Gazette*. In 1804, maritime merchant John Cowper (110) began publishing a new partisan journal there in conjunction with the arch-Federalist editor George Lewis Gray (188), formerly of Baltimore. Davis had replaced Gray as Cowper's editorial partner in 1805, but the paper itself was produced by itinerant tradesmen – and the dependable White now became the key journeyman in that office. It proved to be a pivotal event in White's life, as during his Norfolk years he met and married Martha Ann Fergusson, the Norfolk native who would be his wife for thirty-two years.

Once married, White decided that his future success as a printer lay in the larger production centers of the early-Republic print-trade to the north of Virginia. So in November 1810, he moved his family to Philadelphia, where he found steady employment and good wages over the next two years. In the winter of 1812-13, White accepted an invitation from Federalist friends of Charles Prentiss to set up a printing shop in Boston, where he produced books for the city's booksellers, principally for the firm of West & Richardson – John West (1770-1827) and E.T.F. Richardson (1787-1829) – on Cornhill (today the city's Government Center).

White's years in Philadelphia and Boston were ones when he improved both his craft and his mind. Some scholars have suggested that White lacked the classical education needed to make his later *Southern Literary Messenger* a success without the assistance of editors so schooled. But the books that he produced during his northern residence were all a part of the literary canon of his day, ranging from old religious standards to the latest popular novels to steady-selling classics in literature and education. Moreover, his connections to the larger booksellers and publishers in those two cities provided an education in reading tastes and marketing practices that served him for the entirety of his career. So to suggest that White lacked the education needed to publish a literary periodical is implausible, an assessment that overlooks the materials known to be in his hands in these formative years

and their effect on his life and work. His was an informal education, not a formal one; and the handful of his letters that survive today reveal an erudite and well-read tradesman.

### **Southern Publisher**

In April 1817, White felt compelled to leave Boston, evidently the result of a financial crisis. The preceding June, White had been forced to sell four fonts of type for ready cash, so suggesting overdue promissory notes; then in November 1816, he was robbed of a large amount of cash in New York City while returning to Boston from a visit to Virginia. White would later say that he felt most comfortable intellectually in Boston, and so considered himself a Bostonian, even as he was born in Virginia and lived most of his life there. Still, his years in the North made White into a printer far more talented than most, if not all, then working in Richmond upon his return. Again, he was employed by his uncle, perhaps as a replacement for his cousin George, who seems to have retired from the family business in about 1816. The change in proprietors of the now renamed *Virginia Patriot* brought Charles Prentiss to Richmond again as its editor; but he planned to return to Massachusetts at the end of his agreement with Davis in July 1817. With yet another reorganization of the office looming, the way for White to return to the family business was opened; the move also extended, albeit briefly, the long-standing association between White and Prentiss.

White worked in relative obscurity in Richmond over the next few years, reappearing as an independent job printer only after his uncle's death in 1821 and the dissolution of the Davis press office in late 1822. By 1824, White was printing for the Richmond booksellers Joseph Martin and John H. Nash, both relative newcomers to the trade there, in an arrangement that echoed his Boston days. White had also found new anti-Jackson patrons (later Whigs) to replace his old Federalist ones and launched into publishing a series of works reflecting those patrons' interests – particularly in support of the "American System" of Henry Clay. His activities earned him the enmity of the Republican publisher and public-printer, Thomas Ritchie (360), just as Rind's activities had earned that of Jones and his circle in White's early days in the printing trade. In the winter of 1824-25, that hostility broke into public view with a dispute over ownership of a copyright for publishing the lectures on "female education" by a former Democratic-Republican congressman, James Mercer Garnett of Essex County; evidently Ritchie and his political friends proposed a new edition of that popular work in disregard of the copyright held by White; he vigorously asserted his rights in repeated newspaper notices that spring and summer, and then renewed the copyright in subsequent editions of Garnett's work, depriving Ritchie and company of the potential profits embodied in that popular imprint.

In this affair, White can be seen embracing an emerging *states' rights* ideology in Virginia built on the idea that the accumulated precedent of the common law, created by the state courts, weighed more heavily and legitimately upon the operations of the state and federal governments than did the body of laws created by popularly-elected legislators in response to short-term political pressures brought on those legislators by uneducated voters — the former was ordered, logical, and consistent; the latter chaotic, illogical, and inconsistent. This can also be seen in White's engagement in 1827 and 1828 by the Virginia Senate to reprint important legal works of the Revolutionary era that had all but disappeared by that

time from the Commonwealth's court-house libraries. He then began producing original and authoritative compilations of the profusion of legal decisions emanating from the state's courts — "reports" on the living body of the American common law.

In line with these legal works, White also published speeches and essays by those political figures in Virginia who held similar opinions to him, such as Benjamin Watkins Leigh (1781-1849), the future Whig U.S. Senator who was then the reporter for state's Court of Appeals (1829-41). In 1830, White published a new edition of the "Letters of Algernon Sidney" prepared by Leigh. Ritchie had published Leigh's text previously in his *Richmond Enquirer* in 1818 and 1819, with a scathing commentary on the relativistic principles of secretary of state John Quincy Adams in condoning Andrew Jackson's military exploits in the Floridas subjoined to his publication of Sidney's letters decrying "military despotism" in the time of the Stuart kings. White and Leigh now turned the tables on Ritchie and his support of that same "unqualified" military hero who could bring such despotism to the country now that he was president. Not surprisingly, Ritchie disputed White's recounting of his previous comments on Jackson and Adams until the editor was soundly refuted by reprintings of the text itself in several anti-Jackson papers, as well as in White's edition of Sidney.

This was not the only time that White employed journalistic tools to challenge the logical and evidentiary inconsistencies he found in Democratic-Republican journals like Ritchie's. Indeed he twice proposed starting a political newspaper of his own in Richmond, employing unnamed co-editors, to challenge the dismantling of common-law principles and individual property rights through electoral politics. The first was proposed in 1828 as a weekly paper primarily opposed to the election of Andrew Jackson, rather than one supporting incumbent president John Quincy Adams; the second was proposed in 1833 as a thrice-weekly vehicle to oppose the unconstitutional policies of both Jackson and those espousing "the heresy of Nullification" in opposition to the president. Both journals were to have been entitled *The Friend of the Union*, and both failed to find sufficient support to begin publishing in the polarized political climate of that day; Virginians simply would not embrace his decidedly intellectual critique of a system of governance that often deviated from "a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue" so avoiding "frequent recurrence to fundamental principles." Hence, the newspaper proposed in 1833 was intended to be an *Advocate of State Rights* as well, one "devoted to the cause of Education and Internal Improvement" as the way to inculcate the requisite virtues and unity of purpose in the polis of Virginia and America alike.

### **Literary Icon**

The failed launch of White's proposed political newspaper in 1833 appears to be tied to the first of two successful journals that issued shortly afterward from his Richmond press. Both were general interest periodicals that drew considerably more subscriber interest than had his proffered *Friend of the Union*. While the second of those journals, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, remains the most readily recognized one today, each was celebrated in its own time with comparably large distributions across the face of the country. However, the first that White issued has been mostly forgotten, a result of its relentless focus on antebellum scientific agriculture and its clear connection to Edmund Ruffin (1794-1865), the firebrand

secessionist leader of the 1850s.

Ruffin was owner of a large, though unproductive plantation in Prince George County; as a result he became an early agricultural scientist, as well as a widely-published reporter of his experimental results. In 1832, he published a well-received *Essay on Calcareous Manures* through the auspices of John Wilson Campbell (077), the long-lived Petersburg bookseller. The public response to that work suggested that a recurring journal on scientific agriculture could be sustained in Virginia, which encouraged Ruffin to propose publication of a monthly *Farmers' Register* that he would edit. Knowing White from his days in the Virginia Senate in the mid-1820s, Ruffin engaged the conservative printer to produce the journal for him. Subscription papers circulated in the winter of 1832-33, just before White circulated those for *The Friend of the Union*. The success of Ruffin's proposal required that he resupply his office with type and paper better suited to printing a magazine than a newspaper, so scuttling his planned political journal. Those materials were late in arriving, delaying the first number of the new *Farmers' Register* for about a month; but once the magazine appeared in June 1833, it was an immediate success.

White remained Ruffin's printer and publisher for the journal's first four volumes, though never having a very large hand in editing its content. Ruffin moved his serial's production to Petersburg in 1837 – apparently employing White's son-in-law, Peter Dudley Bernard (1805-89), as his new printer-publisher when Bernard moved there from Richmond. However, Ruffin began to turn away from science toward politics; he was radicalized by the banking controversies of the late 1830s and by Northern antislavery agitation in the early 1840s; so as he published his evolving opinions in his monthly, he narrowed its potential readership and distribution. In the end, he was forced to close his increasingly-unprofitable magazine in early 1843. From then on, Ruffin spread his controversial political views in essays for other southern magazines.

The sectional polarization exhibited in the demise of Ruffin's magazine was also a rationale for White undertaking the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1834. His journal was an early example of a movement in the southern states in the 1830s and 1840s to publish magazines that reflected and circulated southern views and values in response to the growing flood of northern periodicals brought in by the railroads. Among White's circle of supporters were not only individuals interested in displaying artistic and literary talents of Southern writers and poets, but also legal scholars and attorneys who wanted to disseminate their criticisms of the growing body of Northern-initiated statute law that undermined both common law precedent and the rights of the states in the existing federal system.

Key among those friends were two influential professors at the College of William & Mary: Thomas Roderick Dew (1802-46), then the professor of history, metaphysics, and political economy, and later its president, and Nathaniel Beverley Tucker (1784-1851), the newly-appointed professor of law there. Both men were drawn to White's periodical as a vehicle for their ideas, Dew for his developing "positive good" pro-slavery argument, and Tucker for his long-standing common-law defense of property-based civil rights. Dew had previously employed White to publish his commentaries on the anti-slavery debate that rocked the General Assembly during its 1831-32 session. The wide popularity of those tracts convinced

White that further legal and social commentaries from Dew and his colleague Tucker would suit many of his intended readers; so he made their articles a part of his magazine from the start, alongside the better remembered literary elements of his monthly. Indeed, Tucker himself contributed poetry and prose interspersed among his many legal essays over the course of the *Messenger's* life.

From the beginning, White reported that he was the co-editor of his *Messenger*, employing assistants, most often anonymously, to help him produce the journal. But for three periods of its life, White gave those assistants a prominence that helped legitimize his magazine. The first was James E. Heath (1792-1882), who remained both a friend and advisor to White following his brief nine-issue employment as the journal's editor when it commenced in August 1834; Heath is also the main source literary scholars draw on in their descriptions of White, based on Heath's later obituary of his employer – even as that memorial does not make any reference to White's labors before the *Messenger*.

The second named editor was Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49); his seventeen-month alliance with White began in August 1835 with Poe serving as yet another of his anonymous editorial assistants. But the popularity of his signed contributions to the monthly, coming on the heels of well-received pieces of poetry and prose in Northern magazines, prompted White to make him a named presence in the venture, thereby attaching Poe's growing literary reputation to his *Messenger*. However, the inconsistent work habits that Poe soon exhibited made for a tense relationship between the co-editors, with White finally terminating Poe's employment after a drinking binge in January 1837. Poe went on to larger literary fame in New York and Philadelphia, of course, but the foundation of that popularity was built in Richmond through White's *Messenger*.

The third and last named editor under White was Matthew Fontaine Maury (1806-73). Then an unknown lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, Maury is known today as the "Father of Modern Oceanography and Naval Meteorology" from his superintendence of the Naval Observatory from 1842 to 1861. In 1841, however, he was a rising figure in the scientific community, and White brought him into the *Messenger* to bolster its credibility in that community as well as to expand its intellectual offerings. Maury evidently remained in Washington, having been forced from sea duty by a leg injury in 1839, for the duration of his employment with White, travelling to Richmond as the production schedule dictated.

## **Endings**

Still, the *Southern Literary Messenger* was a periodical beset by cycles of want and plenty, so requiring White's constant attention. He employed distribution agents in the major cities of the country, and often travelled to those locales to settle financial accounts and find new subscribers, as well as cultivate potential contributors to the journal. His active involvement in the *Messenger* ended on one of those trips in September 1842; while dining with friends at a New York City hotel, White suffered a stroke which paralyzed him. By late October, he had recovered sufficiently to return to Richmond, though evidently still unable to walk as result of continued paralysis of his left side. The disability meant that the daily conduct of the office fell to his journeymen William Macfarlane and John W. Fergusson (a nephew of

his late wife) under the direction of son-in-law Bernard, while the content of his magazine fell to Maury with the help of Heath and others.

Unfortunately, that effort was in vain, as White suffered a second, larger stroke in January 1843 which ended his life. Yet the *Messenger* would continue without him as the published notices of his death all noted:

"The *Southern Literary Messenger* will neither be discontinued nor suspended, in consequence of the death of the late proprietor. The Representatives of Mr. White will either make speedy arrangements for the sale of the establishment, or the employment of an able editor to conduct it."

It appears that White's family wanted to continue the magazine, as Bernard now returned permanently to Richmond. But doing so would require an agreeable editor, and it seems that the potential candidates wanted an ownership stake in the monthly. As a result, the administrator of White's estate announced that both the office and the journal would be sold at public auction on June 29, 1843, even as its production continued. That sale was preempted by an offer from Benjamin Blake Minor (1818-1905), a Richmond attorney and contributor to White's magazine, who took control of the *Messenger* on July 15th.

Minor conducted the *Messenger* for the next four years and expanded its reach in 1845 by absorbing the *Southern and Western Magazine and Review* of Charleston, South Carolina, edited by William Gilmore Simms (1806-70), perhaps the best known Southern writer of the antebellum period. In November 1847, Minor retired to an academic life and transferred the magazine's ownership to John Reuben Thompson (1823-73), also a past contributor; but in Thompson's care, the *Messenger* became ever less relevant to the ongoing socio-political debate, favoring exotic travelogues and literary excursions over the intellectual and political essays White had deemed an integral part of Southern literature. On Thompson's departure in early 1860, the *Messenger* was conducted by a series of short-lived editors before finally expiring in the summer of 1864.

Meanwhile, White faded into the background. He had no sons to carry on the family name or business, with two dying in infancy and a third dying unmarried at nineteen; only one of his daughters, Eliza White Bernard, had children, and only one of them, William H. Bernard, embraced the trade that had sustained father and grandfather alike. His memorialists all knew White from his days at the *Southern Literary Messenger*, so leaving his early career as an active Federalist/Whig printer in the shadows. The result was a characterization of White as a mere instrument of others and not the shrewd tradesman that he was in reality.

### ***Personal Data***

Born: Mar. 28 1788 Williamsburg, Virginia.  
Married: Dec. 12 1809 Margaret Ann Fergusson @ Gates County, NC.  
Died: Jan. 19 1843 Richmond, Virginia.  
Children: Thomas H. (1813-32); Sarah Ann (b. 1814); Eliza (1815-88); Andrew (1822-24); William Alexander (1823-24); Willis Alston (1826-27).



Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Hubbard on Richmond; *Annals of Henrico Parish*; Mordecai, *Bye-Gone Days*; Minor, *Southern Literary Messenger*; Jackson, *Business of Letters*; Jackson, *Poe and the Southern Literary Messenger*; Faust, *A Sacred Circle*; Bondurant, *Poe's Richmond*; newspaper notices in Boston (1816-17), New York (1816-42), Richmond (1821-47), and Alexandria (1825-47). See also sources in entries for print-trade individuals noted here.

Thanks are due to Leon Jackson for the loan of his notes on White used in his *Business of Letters* (2008).