

443 WHITWORTH, THOMAS

Publisher

Petersburg

Publisher of the *Petersburg Intelligencer* (1814-19) with Francis G. Yancey (463).

Whitworth was an entrepreneur who invested in the Virginia print trade early in a life that saw him conduct mills and grain farms near Petersburg. Yet he found financial misfortune in all those ventures, both from over-extended resources and war-time depredations.

Born in England, Whitworth arrived in Petersburg before the War of 1812, possibly as part of a trading voyage to that Appomattox River port. The young émigré would soon return to England, dispatched by the state government to obtain funds from English dissidents for the conduct of the war with Great Britain; for his service, he was bestowed the rank of Captain though never having served in the state militia.

Whitworth's return from England came shortly before the July 1814 death of John Dickson (134), publisher of the *Petersburg Intelligencer*. During his ten-year proprietorship of that Federalist journal, Dickson had been an advocate for domestic manufacturing, seeing such as a way for Petersburg to develop into something more than a trans-shipment point in the Atlantic maritime trade. Milling was of particular interest to Dickson, who saw the falls of the Appomattox just west of the town-center as an ideal locale for grain and paper mills that could provide profitable export products for city merchants. That perspective was one that Whitworth also embraced and now, being in the midst of a war that constrained the town's ability to import finished goods, he thought that building such a manufacturing base had become essential. So when Dickson's wife, Anna, offered the publisher's estate for sale in an auction in August 1814, just six weeks after his death, Whitworth decided to continue Dickson's campaign by acquiring the *Intelligencer*.

Not being a printer, Whitworth was aided in the project by forging a partnership with one: Francis Garland Yancey, the foreman in Dickson's office. The firm of Whitworth & Yancey conducted the profitable mercantile advertiser for the next five years, despite Yancey's divided loyalties in the early months of their association. Before Dickson's death, he had formed a partnership with John Wood (456), the Federalist editor who helped reveal the Aaron Burr Conspiracy in 1806, to publish Petersburg's first daily newspaper: the *Petersburg Daily Courier*. But once Whitworth acquired the newspaper from Dickson's estate, Yancey evidently thought the prospects for the proven *Intelligencer* were better than those for the unproven *Courier*, especially given Wood's reputed erratic behavior; yet having committed to the controversial editor, Yancey was forced to act as the tradesman-partner for both journals until Wood could find a new partner – as he did that November.

Yancey conducted the *Intelligencer* until 1833, continuing the smooth succession of master-to-journeyman transfers that saw just three principal proprietors of the paper over its first fifty years of publication. But Whitworth had goals in life other than journalism, primarily in building mills on the Appomattox and profiting from their products. So in September 1819, he sold his interest in the *Intelligencer* to Yancey and set out on that industrial path.

Initially, it appears that Whitworth leased at least one of the four grist mills owned by Mordecai Barbour (1763-1846) on northern bank of the river – so in Chesterfield County, not Dinwiddie; and by 1826, he leased all four mills. In 1833, Whitworth, along with seven other investors, formed the Providence Manufacturing Company, chartered by the General Assembly, for "manufacturing cotton, hemp, wool, or flax...on the Appomattox river, near Petersburg." Later known as the Matoaca Manufacturing Company, the eight directors were authorized to raise \$250,000 in capital and to acquire the site from Barbour with no more than 100 shares of company stock; in 1836, the Assembly raised their capital allowance to \$500,000, so facilitating construction of two new buildings with 4000 spinning spindles and 170 weaving looms – the largest such complex then operating in the South. By 1836, the site included a paper mill that supplied many of the press offices in the Virginia and North Carolina tidewater regions.

Clearly, milling was profitable for Whitworth, and it placed him in the forefront of the Whig circle that emerged in the late 1830s in Virginia. He was elected to several state conventions of that new party, and he unseated the Jacksonian representative for Dinwiddie County in the General Assembly in 1839, though losing that seat back to him in 1840. But Whitworth eventually outspent his dividend income and so fell out of the public arena as he dealt with the consequences of his over optimistic assessments of his financial standing. The largest blow seems to have been the forced sale of the real estate he had acquired in flush times. In 1823, he bought a 480-acre farm in Charlotte County that specialized in dairy and grain produce; but by 1843, he was so indebted by pledges of security for a variety of business ventures that he had to mortgage the profitable farm to pay his creditors; defaulting on that note in 1847, the farm was sold at auction.

By then, Whitworth had married the widowed Eliza Harrison Goodwyn (1793-1847), a daughter of the late Peterson Goodwyn (1745-1818), the Revolutionary War militia colonel who represented the Petersburg area in Congress for the last fifteen years of his life. That union brought with it the Goodwyn estate at Mayfield, three miles west of Petersburg and one mile south of the mill complex. With the 1847 retrenchment of his finances, Whitworth divided his time and energies between farming at Mayfield and a residence in Petersburg proper, pursuing more conventional ventures as a merchant-planter.

As a result, an aging Whitworth was economically devastated by the siege of Petersburg in 1864-65. While his house in town was damaged by the continuing bombardment, Mayfield was essentially destroyed at the end of the siege in April 1865; the property was the site of two outposts – one named Fort Whitworth in his honor – that were part of the inner ring of defensive fortifications surrounding Petersburg; on April 2nd, the day after the decisive battle at Five Forks that flanked the Confederate line, the Whitworth farm was the site of a desperate delaying action that allowed Robert E. Lee to escape Petersburg with most of his dwindling army intact. Over the following year, Mayfield was adjacent to the encampment of forces under Gen. Philip Sheridan, leading to the looting of his crops and livestock by the soldiers stationed there, despite Sheridan's orders to the contrary.

Whitworth's recovery from the war's effects was long and difficult, which embittered his only daughter, who passed on tales of supposed Northern atrocities for the remainder of her long life, so influencing a biography of Whitworth written by WPA researchers in 1936. He died at Mayfield in June 1874, after having "been for some months past confined to his house by a slow and painful illness, and his decease was not unexpected by his friends." His long residence in the Petersburg area had generated considerable admiration among his neighbors, as the successor to his old *Intelligencer* noted, saying "A good and venerable man [is] gone: one of the oldest and most respected citizens of this community." Yet the fortune he had hoped to build there when he arrived more than sixty years earlier escaped him, even as his industrial dreams for that place came to fruition in his lifetime.

Personal Data

Born: Jan. 4 1794 England.
Married: Jan. 10 1833 Eliza Harrison Goodwyn @ Dinwiddie County, VA.
Died: June 24 1874 Mayfield, Dinwiddie County, Virginia.
Children: One daughter: Eliza Peterson Whitworth (1835-1923).

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Wyatt, *Checklist for Petersburg*; WPA Historical Survey Biography, Library of Virginia; Wyatt, *Petersburg*; Seagrave, *Artisans & Mechanics*; Barnes, *Artisan Workers in the Upper South*; notices in *Petersburg Intelligencer* (1814-40).