

445 WILLETT, CHARLES

Printer, Publisher

Norfolk

Publisher of *The American Gazette, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser* (1792-94) with William Davis (127); then of *The Herald, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser* (1794-1804), eventually with James O'Connor (317), so employer of Daniel Baxter (027).

Willett was an English printer who found his fortune in Virginia as a newspaper publisher. Yet a wasting illness deprived him of the chance to enjoy that hard won success by taking his life before he had reached the age of forty.

Described as "a Native of London," Willett likely came from the city's West End, as in May 1784 he was registered as an apprentice in the office of Jessintour Rozea (1752-91), "printer and stationer, of Little Pulteney-street" – today Brewer Street, just east of Westminster's Golden Square and north of Piccadilly Circus. Rozea had also taken Willett's older brother Benjamin into training in June 1780, indicating that both were known to the master printer before Charles began his apprenticeship. The dating of Willett's term suggests he was born about 1770, with fourteen being an appropriate age for a printing apprentice.

Rozea died in the spring of 1791 and his office died with him. So Willet was either displaced then, or had left Rozea's employ in the last few years of his master's life. The latter option is more likely, as Willett later formed a partnership in Norfolk with James O'Connor, someone he had worked alongside in London before his departure for America in the winter of 1791-92; O'Connor's obituary in 1819 reported he had worked in the office that produced legal documents for the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings, the one-time Governor-General of India, between 1788 and 1795; that office was owned by John Stockdale (1750-1814), a major London publisher and bookseller with extensive trade contacts in the United States; so in all probability, Willett worked for Stockdale as well.

Despite such an exceptional pedigree, London did not then appear to Willett as a venue for his success in the print trade. The imperial capital was a problematic place for printers and publishers alike in the 1790s. Its numerous offices meant a continually intense competition for patrons and customers, alongside a growing effort by government officials to suppress the "radicalism" of the French Revolution in British press offices. Indeed, Stockdale himself had been prosecuted for libel for simply printing an account of Hasting's administration in 1789 that was unflattering to the governor's London superiors, though he was acquitted as it was clear he was not the author of that report. Hence Willet removed to Virginia instead, possibly with Stockdale's advice on an appropriate destination.

In the winter of 1791-92, Norfolk supported but one newspaper, the weekly *Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle*, produced by Virginians William Prentis (340) and Daniel Baxter, both Williamsburg-trained journeymen. The post-war recovery of the port generated an ever-growing demand for advertising space, and by that winter, the *Chronicle* was failing to satisfy that demand. As much of such demand came from Norfolk's maritime trade, the potential for a second advertiser – as well as the considerable job-printing that sustained that trade – was likely known on both sides of the Atlantic, so steering Willett to Virginia's

largest port. He soon found there a willing financier and editor for a new weekly in William Davis, a relative to Augustine Davis (119), then the state's public-printer in Richmond. So on July 18, 1792, the firm of Willett & Davis issued the first number of its *American Gazette, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser*, offering merchants an alternative to the *Chronicle*. The venture proved a prescient move, quickly gaining acceptance in the tidewater.

Initially, the *Gazette* was unique among Virginia's early newspapers as it was an eight-page quarto edition (two half-sheets) rather than the standard four-page folio format (one full-sheet), reflecting Willett's tradecraft and sensibilities; but with the enactment of the first federal postal laws that year – tying newspaper postage rates to the number of printed sheets – Willett & Davis were forced to adopt the single-sheet folio standard in early 1793, a move which likely changed both their supply and production practices. Still, the requisite change did not affect the journal's profitability, as at the start of their second year together, the partners were able to increase the paper's frequency to twice-weekly in response to a similar increase by the competing *Chronicle*.

However, Davis began moving the *Gazette* away from its original mercantile focus over the course of 1793. That year was when the partisan split between Federalists and Republicans fully emerged in the country and quickly deepened. Within the *Gazette* office, the partners became similarly estranged; as a result of his English-bred liberal attitudes, Willett found himself in the Republican camp, while Davis landed on the Federalist side because of his traditionalist associations. Eventually, the two parted ways. It appears that in late July 1794, at about the time of the completion of the *Gazette's* second volume, Davis forced Willett out of the firm, taking control of the office's tools and the *Gazette's* subscriber list.

Once so dispossessed, Willett decided that the only appropriate way to deal with Davis and his Federalist friends was to start a competing journal.

"The Subscriber having been Conductor of the Vehicle of Information — under the Patronage of the Public, for nearly 2 Years, and having by a misfortune, of which they are already informed, been deprived for a short Time, of the Means of continuing his Endeavors; and emulous still to deserve their future Encouragement, takes this Method of informing them, that notwithstanding the Hardship of the Circumstances under which he was oppressed, he has again procured a complete Set of Materials, with which he intends prosecuting the Printing Business as usual."

That competitor – *The Herald, and Norfolk & Portsmouth Advertiser* – appeared on August 13, 1794, less than a month after he had been pushed out of the *American Gazette* office.

The resultant competition between the two partisan papers brought about the death of the *Norfolk and Portsmouth Chronicle*; that paper attempted to follow a middle course between the combatants, so offering an alternative to both; but Willett's *Herald* soon found support among the area's larger advertisers, while Davis's *Gazette* secured the town government's patronage; hence the predecessor to both papers closed in December 1794. Yet that closing was also induced by the defection to the *Norfolk Herald* of one of the *Chronicle's* founders, Daniel Baxter; recognizing the ultimate futility of competing with the new *Herald* and the older *Gazette*, Baxter sold his interest in the *Chronicle* in late October 1794 and went to work for Willett as manger of his press office; he would remain there until shortly before his

death in 1836.

Baxter's defection was apparently an attempt to reinforce Willett's fiscal foundation, with the journeyman eventually becoming a partner in the *Norfolk Herald*. But the demise of the *Chronicle* just seven weeks later left Baxter's finances in shambles. But as luck would have it, Willett unexpectedly found an old friend standing at his doorstep shortly thereafter. James O'Connor (317) was an Irish émigré who had worked for some time with Willett in London; on his arrival in Norfolk in late 1794, he sought work in the town's press offices. That search began badly when the first office he visited, probably that of Davis, brought an assessment that he was an untrained amateur unworthy of consideration because his "appearance and address [was] that of a gentleman." But his next stop was at Willett's office, where the two recognized each other from their London days. After the *Herald's* successful start, Willett was then contemplating an increase in his paper's frequency from twice-weekly to thrice-weekly, so pressing Davis's *Gazette* further. He found that O'Connor was willing to invest his hard-earned savings in that effort. So in July 1795, their preliminary relationship as master and journeyman became an equal partnership; a month later, the *Herald* became a thrice-weekly production of the new firm of Willett & O'Connor.

Their press office quickly became the main printing business in town, even though the only non-newspaper imprints that they produced were almanacs. Instead, it was the catalysts for commerce they provided that fueled their successful partnership: a newspaper and blank forms. As Davis tended to neglect that part of the printing business – thinking his political perspective would keep the port's merchants advertising in his *Gazette* alone – it was not difficult for the *Herald* to press its circulation advantage to sustain a journal that offered partisan views differing from those of their advertisers; consequently, the *Gazette* was obliged to close in late 1797 when the Quasi-War with France caused a precipitous decline in maritime trade in the port, and so the available advertising funds. With the death of the Davis paper, Willett & O'Connor now offered Norfolk's only mercantile advertiser – clearly a case of turnabout being fair play.

The *Norfolk Herald* was, from its start, a publication clearly sympathetic to Jefferson and his Republican supporters. It openly opposed the election of John Adams as president in 1796, the Jay Treaty with Great Britain in 1797, and the Alien & Sedition Acts of 1798; they also reported regularly on British interference with maritime trade in the Atlantic, Norfolk's vital life-blood, particularly boardings of American-flagged vessels that ended in impressments. In doing so, Willett and O'Connor often drew the ire of the primary Federalist journalists in Philadelphia, the national capital: John Fenno (1751-98) of the *Gazette of the United States* and William Cobbett (1763-1835) of *Porcupine's Gazette*. At the root of their censures was the fact that neither Willett nor O'Connor were native-born Americans; they were both radical free-thinkers – "two kneaded clods" in Cobbett's words – who were fugitives from lawful authorities in England and Ireland; their immigrant status made them suspect, as were all foreign-born Republican journalists, seen as seditious threats to good order in the United States. In the end, however, the *Norfolk Herald* proved to be more mildly Republican in its outlook than were two competing papers that emerged after the death of the *Gazette*: the *Epitome of the Times* of Augustus C. Jordan (244) in 1798, and *The Commercial Register* of William W. Worsley (462) and Meriwether Jones (242) in 1802. Consequently, the *Herald*

became a trusted source nationally over its first decade for news about maritime activity in the Caribbean and South Atlantic, regions where the port's foreign commerce was then concentrated.

Yet 1804 brought the joint enterprise to an end. Over the course of that year, Willett slowly withdrew from the day-to-day operation of the office as his health began to fail; the wasting illness that set in then was not defined with any detail, but his level of activity in the *Herald* declined steadily over that year. So at the end of 1804, Willett decided to retire, selling his interest in the office to O'Connor, who became sole proprietor. By the end of 1806, he was confined to bed, possibly not even in the town; in late 1806, repeated legal notices for him to answer as a defendant in a suit against a Norfolk bank and its directors went unheeded, with the court declaring in March 1807 Willett was not a resident of the state anymore. But he was, and such was recorded in the notices of his death published in late August and early September. The brevity of those notices reflected the crush of information then pressing into Virginia's newspaper offices in the wake of the Chesapeake/Leopard affair and the Burr conspiracy trial, so depriving posterity of a fuller account of Willett's life.

His *Norfolk Herald*, though, would long survive Willett. Upon his death in 1819, O'Connor passed the journal on to Thomas G. Broughton (055), his partner after 1816; Broughton, in turn, passed it on to his sons Samuel and Thomas Jr. on his retirement in 1836; they passed it on to a grandson, Richard G. Broughton, in 1847, who was its owner when the occupation of Norfolk by federal troops in 1861 brought its sixty-seven-year existence to a close.

Personal Data

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| Born: | ca. | 1770 | London, England. |
| Married: | May 19 | 1796 | Charlotte Watson @ Norfolk, Virginia. |
| Died: | Aug. 27 | 1807 | Norfolk, Virginia. |

No record of children yet discovered.

Sources: Imprints; Brigham; Cappon; Tucker, *Norfolk Abstracts*, Forrest, *Sketches of Norfolk*, Wertenbaker, *Norfolk*, Exeter Working Papers in British Book Trade History (bookhistory.blogspot.com); London Metropolitan Archives online (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon); O'Connor's obituary in [Norfolk] *American Beacon* 6 July 6, 1819; and Willett's obituary in [Norfolk] *Publick Ledger*, Sept. 4, 1807.